The Rebellion of The Chicken
Self-making, reality (re)writing and lateral struggles in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea

By Adelaida Caballero

2015

MASTERUPPSATSER I KULTURANTROPOLOGI
Nr 56
ABSTRACT. Historical sources suggest that the bad reputation of Bioko island—a product of mixed exoticism, fear of death and allure for profit—might have started as early as the first European explorations of sub-Saharan Africa. Today, the same elements seem to have been reconfigured, producing a similar result in the Western imagination: cultural exoticization, fear of state-sponsored violence and allure for profit are as actual as ever in popular conceptions of Equatorial Guinea. A notion of ongoing terror keeps conditioning the study of the tiny African nation, resulting in media trends and academic discourses polarized by the grand themes of oil/money/corruption and human rights violations—which are highly counterproductive when trying to account for Equatoguineans’ everyday practices, mainly because the violence exerted by the state has shifted in nature. Deploying a triple theoretical framework made up by Michel de Certeau’s (1984) concepts of readers/writers/texts and strategies, Michael Jackson’s (2005) work on being, agency and intersubjectivity, as well as Bayart’s (1993) ‘politics of the belly’, this thesis explores some of the complex cultural and social-psychological strategies that urban populations in Malabo have developed in order to create, sustain and protect the integrity of their social selves while living in inherently oppressive environments. People’s means of personhood negotiation are observed through contemporary systems of beliefs, narratives and practices. I suggest that negotiations are products of, but also preconditions for, the existence of a social apparatus and the integrity of the selves moving within its discursive boundaries. Consequently, Equatoguineans’ strategies for self-making are seen as potentially responsible for reproducing a destructive status quo. This idea is further developed through the concept of lateral struggle, a form of social violence alternative to top-down flows which builds on sociality as culturally calibrated forms of symbolic interaction between selves constructed in a zero sum fashion. The dynamics of lateral struggles are illustrated through ethnographic data on what people phrase as el Guineano’s innate ‘rebelliousness’, which in turn visibilizes processes of collective self-making and the verbalization of negative national stereotypes. Possibilities for the rise of more positive types of personhood based on a habitual splitting of individual self from negative national other are explored. Finally, a brief assessment of how such splitting could be hindering people from collectively writing a ‘homeland’ is made.

KEYWORDS: self-making, lateral struggles, Equatorial Guinea, politics of the belly, the practice of everyday life, existential anthropology, creativity, agency, narrativity, display, enunciative procedures, Obiang Nguema, Macías Nguema, postcolonial states, suicides, Mamí Watá

✉️ Adelaida Caballero / elizadela@hotmail.com
to my chicken family
Acknowledgements

The research for this study was funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency through a Minor Field Studies grant, for which I’m grateful. My debts are with the people who showed me patience and support throughout its realization. I thank lovely Mattias Stålmark for feeding me and taking care of the dog during the many weeks I’ve been ‘somewhere else’, helplessly fused to my desk/bed. I thank Caitlin McEvoy and Jenna Garcia for coercing me every so often into leaving my apartment to join them at some pub: I owe you girls my sanity. Andrés Gómez, for having been an ear when I needed to be heard. I thank Tutu Alicante and Benita Sampedro for their invaluable help at the early stages of this project. Gustau Nerín, for his interest throughout. My infinite gratitude goes to Hannah Appel for her unwavering support from the start —when every step I took towards Guinea was a step that Guinea took away from me—, and during my time as Visiting Graduate Researcher at UCLA’s Department of Anthropology. Finally, my most sincere acknowledgement to Sverker Finnström, the best supervisor I could ever have gotten, for his time, comments and wise warnings, and for granting me the freedom to do what I love most. Any excesses, misreadings and flaws in content and/or structure are my own.
Contents

CHAPTER 1: Introduction

Objectives 2
Pre-fieldwork assumptions 3
Means and methods 4
Re-orientations 4
Self-making through display, narrativization and practice 5

CHAPTER 2: A little white spot

Overview 7
Locating Equatorial Guinea on the map and elsewhere 8
An Equatoguinean, a Mexican and a Spaniard walk into a bar 8
The peninsula, rightfully represented 9
Contested memories / The Franco years 12
On Hitler and the people from the Moon 14
The talk of town 16
“The most pestiferous land…”:
Equatorial Guinea in the global eye past and present 20
Human rights crisis 21
Lord of the minerals 22
Fetishism, kleptocracy and mercenaries 23
Camera ready 24

CHAPTER 3: Relational ways of knowing

The risks of being ‘objective’ 25
A mestiza/nepantlera perspective 26
Hanging out 28
Creative talking 30
Cross-referencing narratives 32
In vivo dissections / The art of coding 32
Reflections on method and ethical considerations 33
CHAPTER 4: A creative writing of reality
Victim dealerships
Writers, readers and texts
The rebellion of the chicken
Outlining the place of Self in the anthropological project

CHAPTER 5: Under “a sky with an aura of pure evil”
Politics of the belly
The postcolonial struggle
Dominant groups
A classless society
Networks
Blood Vs ideological affinity
Intersubjectivity and the self in the mesh of networks
The true value of the ethnic factor
Corruption
Practice in the Equatoguinean postcolonial

CHAPTER 6: From rotten yoghurts to mysterious deaths
Earn to show
Making discursive ends meet
The power of enunciation
Suicides: a foreigner’s overview
Suicides: political assassinations
Suicides: the outcome of depression
Suicides: cover-up for family feuds/broken alliances
Suicides: blood offerings
Creating/maintaining selves through enunciative procedures

CHAPTER 7: Narrated means for being
off the (c)age of myth-making
The new black man
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 8:</th>
<th>Somewhere between having and becoming: strategies to divert madness in the homeland of an I who no one is</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The liberating world of petty retaliation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Escaping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interaction transplants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Flying away</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Re-writing the nature of being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Would you treat me to a Fanta?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Who’s doing what</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>On rebelliousness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>El Guineano or the I who no one is</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conclusion</th>
<th>When the ship sinks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

| Appendix | 102 |
| Bibliography | 121 |
Introduction

A suffocating heat crawls down the gray raw concrete walls. Outside, a group of children play with what looks like a broken pipe sprouting a thick stream of water. A bunch of roosters, hens and chicks run around their ankles as the gang voices loudly ¡A-gua po-ta-ble! ¡A-gua be-bi-ble! in a tone that makes them sound more like a political demonstration than a playing crowd. Inside, as if breaking his way through the moist hot air, a shirtless young man walks back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, careful not to step on the piles of books and small sculptures he’s carefully placed, following a sharp sense of aesthetics, throughout the floor. “Are you listening?” he asks. “That’s what this is about.” The man rubs his hands on a piece of lively colored cloth he would otherwise use to protect the furniture from paint smudges. “And this, what you’re hearing, is everywhere. This can no longer be stopped.”

What the young man meant with “this” was precisely what I had been breathing ever since I arrived in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea’s capital, a few weeks earlier: a restlessness, the frantic rhythm of urban life caught up in the aesthetic vertigo of infrastructural change (see Appel, 2012b) along with its subsequent excitement, shiny façades shining back in pre-pubescent pupils. “This can no longer be stopped” was a motto I often heard among the enthusiasts, this is, the locals who were too young to have experienced la triste memoria, or among Bioko island’s newest African (re)settlers, the comebackees. In “this can no longer be stopped,” ‘this’ means a wave of renewal, of tangible and intangible change, a kind of hope that can’t be tampered with because it’s already out there, growing roots in children’s bodies, silently and invisibly, slowly and organically, safely away from those who might find the word still disturbing. “This” means ‘change’, the overcoming of social trauma by the invention of a new collective memory divided in a before (“when we had nothing”) and an after still undergoing definition through an existential battle between having and becoming.

Enthusiasm might seem endemic among the young and the newcomers, but something is pulling down the faces of a different generation. Some say it’s quite normal for people to go insane after a couple of years living in Malabo. That the adult population is collectively

---

1 Lit. ‘potable water, drinkable water’.
2 Lit. ‘the sad memory’. A body of collectively narrativized experiences suffered by the Equatoguinean people during the years of president Macías’ rule (1968-1979), which was characterized by social chaos, widespread violence and economic/infrastructural decay. The term was coined by the diaspora and is now a referent in the study of Equatoguinean literature written by exiles, who left the country during or shortly after this period.
3 Young Equatoguinean adults born and/or raised abroad who after experiencing the hardships of life in the West (often Madrid or London) have come back to Equatorial Guinea, equally eager to work for the betterment of their country than to explore the opportunities its emerging economy presents them with.
depressed. That pill-popping and alcoholism are rampant, and that people’s need for solace is what justifies the scandalous spread of churches all over Bioko Island. Most phrase their anxieties in terms of witchcraft and family curses. A very few are willing to acknowledge that what’s driving them mad is the overwhelming weight of social life in a place characterized by the impossibility of privacy, forceful kinship/political loyalties, economic self-interest, laboral uncertainty and a kind of ‘paranoia’ that perhaps for being rooted in history (according to some, in Macías’ doctrine of “accuse and you’ll be rewarded”) has to be constantly dealt with through a complex mix of social maneuvering, narrativization, and display. What is it, beyond the forms of political intimidation so widely denounced, that is breaking so many people down? What are the unbroken doing to hold themselves together?

Objectives
The purpose of this study is to account for some of the complex cultural and social-psychological strategies that urban populations in Malabo have developed in order to create, sustain and protect the integrity of their social selves while living in an inherently oppressive environment. I take ‘self’ to be a multilayered conglomerate of roles and identities. ‘Self-making’, then, refers to an individual and/or collective project of creative self-formation and maintenance through negotiated personhood. While it can be generally stated that identities and the selves they constitute make up for relative stable constructions, these tend to be susceptible to their contexts’ discursive parsimony. This means that in mass-conflict-free societies people’s personhood, roles and identities tend to be well rooted —though sometimes in a negative fashion— while in environments plagued by social unrest or hasty growth, these are constantly challenged and have to be (re)negotiated accordingly. People’s means of personhood negotiation can involve, but are not limited to, systems of beliefs, narratives and practices, which are not only a product of historical contingency and contemporary global discourses, but also serve as preconditions for the stability of the social order to which the selves must relate to if they’re to survive. In other words: negotiations are products of, but also preconditions for, the existence of a social apparatus and the integrity of the selves moving within its discursive boundaries. According to this rationale, people’s strategies for self-making, through guiding their highly individualistic trajectories in the social struggle, can actually be responsible for reproducing an ethos of conflict and/or an otherwise destructive status quo. Since scholars on the genesis of the postcolonial state have noted that “the strategies adopted by the great majority

---

4 My alternative to cognitive parsimony, which is defined as the sum of all cognitive classificatory mechanisms that make social life easier to internalize and make sense of.
of the population for survival are identical to the ones adopted by the leaders to accumulate wealth and power” (Bayart, 1993:237-238), a secondary objective of this thesis is to explore the possible existential roots of structural inequalities in the Equatoguinean postcolony. Lastly, it’s pertinent to note that even if there’s a causal relation between self-making and identity, this study focuses on strategies as creative means of self-formation, and not on identities as end results per se.

Pre-fieldwork assumptions

Putting together a project to study a country that has taken it to heart to elude ethnographic cartography often by violent means was hard, to say the least. Tales on researchers being denied access, placed under house arrest, having their research destroyed, and being held at gunpoint abounded (Sundiata, 1996:xi; Abad, 2009:328; personal conversations). Whatever reservations I might have felt regarding my own safety at the beginning, the task of connecting facts from often unconnected and strongly biased sources was infinitely more complicated. Words like ‘genocide’, ‘oil’, ‘dictatorship’, ‘paranoia’, ‘billions’, ‘literature’, ‘corruption’ and ‘diaspora’ kept popping up throughout my background research. The emerging picture was that of a lonely land soaked in blood and oil, inhabited by a homogeneously impoverished population, plagued by malaria and illiteracy, surviving with less than one dollar a day, and unquestionably robbed of all agency by the violent rule of a shameless family of kleptocrats. Even if I remained somewhat a skeptic regarding the national portraits created by global media (a Frankenstein monster of sorts, I chose to find whatever humanity might lie beneath its skin), the assumptions upon which I was to base my premises had to echo the data available: Equatoguinean subjects were to be treated, since the media, the diaspora and human rights activists fervently kept denouncing they were so, as a traumatized collective, a people being invariably killed or exiled, impoverished and harassed by their otherwise ‘own’.

Much to the dismay of my earliest contacts however, I refused to conclude that Equatoguineans, even if invariably masked as victims, were completely void of spaces for informal action. Seeing them as icons of helplessness meant to me depriving them of the most basic stances of the kind of dignity that makes survival —social and biological— possible. I knew from personal experience drawn from Mexico, where even amidst the bloodiest expressions of inter-cartel war people kept going to work, making hope and self-survival an everyday art, that individuals manage to cope with all kinds of violence in all kinds of manners.

So, in the Equatoguinean context, I made it my thing to look at the strategies that *la gente de a pie* or “people that go on foot” could be deploying to engage in self-making. As it often happens, things in Malabo weren’t really like they were portrayed, and my perception of the country changed completely after conducting fieldwork in situ. Hence some of the assumptions upon which my main research questions were based had to be thoroughly re-examined.

**Means and methods**

After the long, nerve-wracking process of obtaining an entry visa (which left me with anorexia nervosa, a duodenal ulcer, chronic insomnia and alopecia), I arrived in Malabo on late January 2014. I opened my research by carefully observing the flow of everyday life in the streets. It didn’t take me more than a couple of days to realize that people were actually eager to tell me everything I needed to know and way more about themselves and their country as they live it. After walking the streets for a week, once sure that the ice was thick enough, I started talking to people outdoors, mainly at Plaza de E’Waiso, on a daily basis and for hours at a time. Almost immediately our talks went from casual unstructured interviews on witchcraft and traditional beliefs to explicit, heated roundtable-like discussions about Africa, politics and tribalism. I never found myself having to deal with some guy sent to me by some ministry in order to feed me whatever data he thought appropriate, or worse, to threaten me or destroy my research. If something was clear it was that people weren’t exactly ‘afraid’ of talking. And when I say ‘people’, I mean everybody: street vendors, drunks, taxi drivers, office workers, school children. “Chico! These Guineanos like to talk!” said my landlord one night after I asked him about some of the stories on big cars and HIV I had heard at la plaza that day. Making good use of the privileges that being a non-European Spanish-speaking female granted me, I collected material through all kinds of interviews and participant observation, mainly performed through hanging out. Discussing gave my materials a very distinctive intimate nature, the result of the kind of exchanges that only a dialogue between equals promotes. Some of our discussions turned into what I call *creative talking*, this is, long conversations where participants think big, reflect and try to solve critical social problems. Such talks gave me an idea not only of the strategies Equatoguineans have developed to cope with social reality, but of the specific aspects of social reality that they are finding particularly hard to cope with.

**Re-orientations**

The people I had the chance to hang out with and speak to aren’t traumatized, or at least not in the manner they are advertised to be by the global media and human rights advocates. In this
sense, the topic of self-making as a precondition for social action is relevant given the need to balance an academic discourse polarized by oil/money/corruption and human rights violations. I’ve treated concepts like networks, inequality, display, gender dynamics and the individually empowering strategies of the collectively disempowered as peripheral constituents of everyday practices of self-making and maintenance amidst a rather corroding sociality not unknown in the postcolonial setting. With ‘corroding’ I mean that the whole sociocultural apparatus seems to conspire against the integrity of the individual. I can’t emphasize this enough because, again to the dismay of my earliest human rights-concerned contacts, my findings point towards something that lies beyond an explicit top-down oppressive flow stemming from Obiang Nguema’s regime and its institutions, which is contrary to what many would like to believe in order to simplify the subject, legitimize interventionist agendas and/or to continue the demonization of a state rich in resources but poor in influence. Or as one of my interviewees put it, a state “whose biggest weakness is actually caring about what the West has to say.”

Self-making through display, narrativization and practice

The first thing to consider when approaching Equatoguineans’ strategies of self-making was that of their many identities—a Pandora’s box from which concepts such as tribal organization and the postcolonial condition would swarm out and tangle up with others like gender and class. These tertiary concepts couldn’t even be used according to their common-place Western meaning. Class, for instance, was impossible to understand as a position resulting from the intersection of an individual’s economic and cultural capitals in the bourdieuan sense. Some have realized that class stratification isn’t a fruitful element of analysis when dealing with the historicity of the postcolonial state, a situation they’ve solved by thinking “rather in terms of the formation of the dominant class and the quest for hegemony” (Bayart, 1993:xxi), where ‘the formation of the dominant class’ implies the poietic factor in a structural feature. Although untangling Equatoguinean identities seemed complicated at best, accounting for the general configuration of individual and collective selves was key to understand why some fall victim to their own sociality. Factors such as the postcolony, an oil-based economy, ethnic fragmentation, social fluidity, status by proxy, alienation, negative national stereotypes and an unavoidable break from an old generation still embodying and thus carrying into practice the knowledge written in them by la triste memoria could be responsible for configuring increasingly fragmentary types of personhood, or their opposite: stronger, positive identities built on the splitting of self from negative/inadequate others. My hypothesis is that just as these conditions can account for the issues people fail to cope with, they can also be manipulated,
(re)ordered, and thus turned to one’s own advantage. Conducive to such strategic action is a social environment characterized not by peer-pressure but by peer-oppression, itself the product of culturally calibrated forms of symbolic interaction between selves constructed in a zero sum fashion. The ethnography on ‘rebelliousness’ points on this direction. And so does the tendency to narrativize, in terms of pacts with demon-like mermaids, social inequality and/or the moral dilemmas that personal ambition poses to people. Narrativization, as the structured verbalization of deeply personal, referentless situations expressed through analogous actions and symbols often part of a wider, meaningful system available to the collective to which the narrative is communicated, is thus considered a coping mechanism in the context of self-making and maintenance. A final way of coping to be observed is that of display, this is, the use/manipulation of symbols as means to non-verbally communicate one’s social standing. The ethnography will show that display is a common form of ‘insurance’, for symbols are deployed to protect the subject’s social integrity from potential threats just as much as they’re used to signal status and belonging. It will also illustrate the complexities display implies, because interpretation, even when culturally framed, becomes a tricky thing to manage as the context in which symbols dwell faces rapid social and material change; which in turn posits the question of hybridization through the (re)appropriation of exogenous discourses/values.

To make sense of my findings I deploy a triple theoretical compass: informal practices, as constitutive of humanity’s most basic sociopolitical toolbox, are understood following Michel de Certeau’s (1984) concepts of readers/writers/texts and strategies, while their existential stage is approached through Michael Jackson’s (2005) work on being, agency and intersubjectivity. Both perspectives are subsequently framed by the dynamics of the postcolonial state as elaborated by Bayart (1993) as the ‘politics of the belly’. While assessing how narratives that stem from individual enunciatory practices impact the wider social body, Spolsky’s (2010) general account of narrative theory is observed. Because this study focuses on strategies as creative means of self-formation, and not on identities as end results per se, accounting for scholarship on postcolonial identities has not been a theoretical priority.

Finally, I’d like to confess that, since this piece is an attempt to account for some of the neglected aspects of everyday life in Equatorial Guinea-related bibliography, it doesn’t have other ambition than that of being the kind of work I would have liked to read before deciding to undertake the herculean task of dealing with the country’s ground-level sociality. Given the need to balance global and academic discourses polarized by the topics of oil/money/corruption and human rights violations, I’m confident that the ethnography presented in this thesis will, in time, be read as a valuable contribution to future research on Equatoguineans’ everyday life.
A little white spot

December, 2013. A crunchy snow crust paves the wavy walk paths in northern Sweden. Minor Field Studies-grant awardees have been summoned by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) to attend a crash course on development policies. The highlight of the schedule: a personal meeting with somebody — anybody — who has had something to do — anything — with the country each student will visit. Everybody is excited. More than excited, I’m desperate. After three months of ghost embassies, unanswered phone calls and deactivated e-mail accounts, I’ve started to believe that the country I decided to study doesn’t really exist.

When the guy in charge hands out the list of students, the name of the person they’ll meet and their means of communication (face-to-face conversation, phone or skype) there are three kinds of faces: the happy ones, the content ones and the apprehensive ones. And then there’s me.

More than disappointed, I’m confused. “Do you expect me to believe that Sida doesn’t have one single contact, no exile, no NGO collaborator, nobody, that could have something to tell me, anything, about Equatorial Guinea?” I asked the man between laughing and daunted. “No, we don’t.” When I asked how that was even possible, his matter-of-fact demeanor didn’t change: “We just don’t. That’s how they are. We don’t really know much about them.” The day after, during health class, a guest lecturer projected a malaria-spread slide with a map of Africa toned in different shades of red: it didn’t surprise me to find a little white spot amidst the darkest red region. “What’s that little white spot over there?” I asked though I knew the answer. “Nothing” the lecturer said, “it means that we don’t have any data from that area.” I didn’t make a fuss. I had understood, by then, that Equatorial Guinea doesn’t exist. Not as most nations do anyway. My suspicions about the improbable existence of the country were further validated the afternoon I went to get my yellow fever shot at a local vaccine bureau in Uppsala. Moved by my experiences with the malaria slide at Sida’s Partnership Forum, I went straight to the map hanging on the wall of the waiting room. When I looked up the corner in which the continental region of Equatorial Guinea was supposed to be located, I found nothing but a perfectly contoured slice of ocean (see Figure 1, 2 & 3, p. 101).

Overview

Equatorial Guinea is a small country in central West Africa. It shares borders with Cameroon (North), Gabon (South and East) and the Atlantic Ocean (West). It has a total surface of 28,051 km² and a population of circa 700,000; of which 137,000 live in Malabo, the capital (UNSD-
DESA, 2012). Bata is the second largest city. The country is constituted by the islands of Bioko (former Fernando Po), Annobón, Corisco and the Elobeyes, as well as by a continental region, Río Muni. National territories are divided into seven provinces (Annobón, Bioko Norte, Bioko Sur, Centro Sur, Kie-Ntem, Litoral and Wele-Nzas). The Equatoguinean population is generally divided into five ethnic groups (Fang 85.7%, Bubi 6.5%, Ndowé 3.6%, Bisio 1.1% and Annobonés 1.6%) each of which speaks its own language, as well as the country’s official languages, Spanish, French and Portuguese. It has a literacy rate of 94.7%, and a GDP per capita (PPP) of $25,700, which makes it one of the wealthiest nations in the world. Despite the many centuries under European influence, there was little or no mestizaje, which kept the natives racially homogeneous and preserved the local sociocultural organization. First elected president after independence from Spain in 1968 was Francisco Macías Nguema, who after dismantling the economy and destroying civil society was overthrown in 1979 by Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, Equatorial Guinea’s current president. With 36 years in power, Obiang Nguema is today Africa’s longest serving ruler. His regime is infamous for its endemic corruption and systematic violation of human rights.

Locating Equatorial Guinea on the map and elsewhere
“So the sea swallowed us!” laughed Roberto, a Bubi male in his mid-30s, when I told him about the map hanging on the wall at the vaccine bureau. “No, let’s be serious. There are a lot of people, even among the Spanish, who don’t even know we exist.” “And if they do,” added Daniel, a friend of his, “they believe we’re still running around in loincloths.” Everybody laughed. Ridiculous as it sounded, we all knew it was true. That many Spaniards don’t know about their former African colony or provinces, as some prefer to call it, was no surprise to me. The little —although significant— interaction I had had with Spanish cultural workers living in Malabo proved that most had no deep understanding of the history their homeland has with, and the permanent scars it left on, the country they were sure they’d come to help.

An Equatoguinean, a Mexican and a Spaniard walk into a bar
Five weeks into my fieldwork I met Elo (a Fang male, 25) and Isabel (a Spanish girl, 28) to plan a poetry reading. As Isabel commented on the work the cultural centers do in Malabo, Elo explained to me that one of them is located a stone throw from a school he knew I had seen before, Colegio Claret, close to Plaza de E’Waiso. “Is Claret a last name?” I asked. “No, the

---

claretians are missionaries” he said. I didn’t want to dig a lot into the country’s history prior to my fieldwork, but I knew that a few missionary orders had arrived in the 1850s: they either died due to the tropical weather or went back to Spain after seeing their attempts at mimicking civilization violently crushed by the native Bubi. “Do you mean ‘a missionary order’ like those that came early on?” I asked. “Yes, I think they’re the oldest order here. Some nuns are still around too. They just won’t die out!” Elo laughed, “Some used to beat the crap out of the kids.”

Elo’s last remark had an unexpected impact on Isabel. She was scandalized by the thought of kids being beaten at school, let alone by nuns, let alone by Spanish nuns, relatively well-educated women trying to redeem the locals “from their dark destiny” (see Mañé & Bayre, 2009:258). In a rather playful manner, Elo went on talking about the beatings everybody knew were a regular occurrence in catholic schools still not that long ago. Half to tease Isabel, half to elaborate on Elo’s case, I told them about the cases of exoticization of young Africans I had encountered while researching early modern European portraiture.8 Studying inventories from the Spanish royal house of the Austrias I had found that among la gente de placer (jokers, dancers, crazies and dwarves) they kept in court for their amusement, they had had a few black children and what seemed to be, given the gifts and privileges bestowed upon him, a very precious royal commodity: a black dwarf that was also insane. Elo shook his head, but didn’t seem too surprised or affected by the story. Isabel was appalled. As Elo and I went on talking about Cameroonian food and mariachi music, I realized that Isabel, who had always been personable towards me in a foreign-girl-to-foreign-girl manner, had changed her demeanor completely. When it seemed like things couldn’t get any more awkward, four people approached us. “Thank god you guys came!” Isabel said, “I need more people in my team! Now the peninsula is rightfully represented.” The newcomers were three Spanish cultural workers. The fourth one was a girl from Portugal.

The peninsula, rightfully represented

It was the Portuguese who first laid claims on the islands of Fernando Po (present-day Bioko) and Sao Tome in 1471. The earliest attempts at colonization by would-be planters were frustrated by the Bubi, Bioko island’s native population. By the time Fernando Po and Annobón were transferred to Spain by the Tratado del Pardo in 1777, islanders and territories had

---

7 As it turned out, Claret was in fact a last name. The Order of the Sacred Heart of Maria was also known as the claretians because of the order’s founder, father Antonio Claret.
8 Keeping African children as secondary household help seems to have become so ‘fashionable’ throughout Europe after the economic boom produced by the Atlantic slave trade, that it was aestheticized finding expression in Portuguese, Dutch, English and French portraiture between 1550 and 1789. The portraits’ main feature is that of European noble females accompanied by their black servant children.
witnessed the rampant slave trade which had taken and would continue to take place in the Bight of Biafra. Memories of waterborne invaders and the violence they exerted through sporadic night hunts are still imprinted on the collective memory today, having survived as narratives of encounters with demon-like creatures, white long-haired “mermaids” the natives refer to as Mami Watá. Towards the end of the 1700s a Spanish expedition tried to take possession of Fernando Po but succumbed to heat, malaria and the Bubi. On the decades that followed, the area continued to be preyed upon, most notably by Dutch and French slavers.

A British anti-slaving base was founded in Fernando Po in the 1830s, but the issue of slavery and forced labor was to remain a long shadow on Equatorial Guinea’s modern history. Further colonial encounters during the second half of the 1800s resulted on high Bubi mortality due to alcoholism and venereal diseases (Sundiata, 1983:87-88) which crippled the Spanish project of a plantation-based economy in the colony during the first decades of the 1900s. Allegations of slaving treaties between the Spanish colonial regime and the Liberian government denounced by the US as late as the 1930s testify to the territory’s long history of human resource scarcity and struggle for economic diversification. Indeed, perhaps in sight of the more lively accounts of present-day state corruption and human rights violations, not everybody is willing to concede that many conditions Equatorial Guinea presents today are rooted in ±150 years of direct sabotage by Spain who made it literally its misión to tamper with the development of local small-scale capitalist initiatives and black African —settler as well as native— education and political empowerment (Sandinot, 1967; Ndongo, 1977; Mitogo, 1977; Sundiata, 1996). African scholars not unfamiliar with patterns of violence inherent to the colonial enterprise recognize that while “merciless subjugation was the dominant colonialist ethos across the length and breadth of Africa… in the very case of Equatorial Guinea an entirely revolutionary trajectory of dehumanization was mapped” (Obadare, 2003:581). After having lost its colonies in the Americas, Spain didn’t seem to have nor the means nor the will to embark on a new project of full-colonization. The metropole’s lack of engagement resulted in the 1904 proclamation of Spanish Guinea as “a colony for economic exploitation” (Ndongo, 1977:35). Colonial policy was characterized by maximizing profits out of state-protected private foreign investments (Nart, 1976:10) in large-scale plantation projects carried out by migrant forced

---

9 The settlement the base gave rise to was baptized ‘Clarence’ by British officials. Years later, a Spanish officer would change its name to Santa Isabel as to restore the hispanicity of the territory. In 1972, president Macias Nguema reclaimed its African identity and changed it again to Malabo in honor of one of the last Bubi kings.

10 As Spanish Guinea was deemed a Spanish territory, Guineanos were supposed to be Spanish citizens. Its economy was run by private actors protected by the State. The ambiguity of the colony’s ‘Spanishness’ became clear when in 1963 the territories were declared ‘provinces’, yet no national nor native could travel between them and the metropole without a passport and a special visa-like permit (see Sandinot, 1967:67; Ndongo, 1977:99).
labor, a policy materially enforced by the military, and ideologically fomented by the Catholic church through lessons on frugality and the promotion of passive virtues (Mitogo, 1977:14). There was an obvious lack of investment in public infrastructure, and a general program of direct economic violence aimed towards the Bubi, who disliked plantation work and favored small-scale trade and palm oil harvesting; colonialists answered by making it illegal to harvest palm oil from land owned by the crown, and since most unclaimed land was considered ‘crown land’, the Bubi were left with no means for economic self-sufficiency (see Sundiata, 1996:171).

By the 1930s corruption was rampant and the regime’s ideal of large-scale plantation agriculture brought along the diminution of small-scale black farming and the need to secure labor, local or foreign. This last factor impacted other areas of policy, such as education. By 1950 it was taken for granted that “the negroes were badly doted for abstract thought and logic operations” and that therefore, “it would be greatly useful that, after a shallow education, they were oriented towards learning a trade” (Ibarrola, 1957). Among non-Europeans, only the Fernandinos wouldn’t let go of the idea of being properly taught. Families sent their youths to study abroad thus adding the element of Western education to the process of dominant class formation in the would-be postcolonial State (see Bayart, 1993:57-58, 75). The practice of sponsoring native youths’ studies in the metropole was later adopted by Franco with the purpose of turning them into colonial propagandists (Sundiata, 1990:131). A cultural rush seemed imminent in the 1950s after the creation of more liberal laws for local education but these were sabotaged by some Spaniards arguing that the officers responsible were “subverting the negroes” by “not only teaching them more than what they should know” but by inculcating in them “a consciousness of being a people ‘apart’ from Spain” finally accusing them of preparing the blacks for independence (Ndongo, 1977:71). This throwback in policy, the many decades of inefficient education, and an increasingly racist discourse from the colonizers fearing the nationalist wave that had started sweeping across the continent and closer to home, in Gabon, in the form of the Bwiti movement (see Fernandez, 1982) left an indelible mark in the collective memory of both colonizer and colonized. As late as the 1960s, Spanish politicians manifested dislike towards university-educated Guineanos, especially if these were natives of Río Muni (Mitogo, 1977:18). Educated natives, emancipados, and their descendants,

---

11 A community whose origins went back to the first slaves who settled in Fernando Po after being freed by British officers in the mid-1800s. They saw themselves as British, and some worked with transient Baptist missionaries and/or traders. During the early 1900s they were relatively influential small-scale agriculturalists, and together with the Bubi, later became a black bourgeoisie given their close economic ties with European planters.

12 It’s said colonialists were purposely keeping Río Muni underdeveloped in order to emphasize the difference between it and Fernando Po, and thus legitimize pre-independence secessionist claims.

13 An emancipado was a native who earned a certain (rather high) amount of money per year, and was able to conduct businesses with Europeans in a more peer-to-peer fashion. Since business opportunities for the locals
developed in turn a double complex of inferiority in relation to whites and superiority in relation to other blacks, a feature that has become an inherent part of the social psychological makeup of the politically dominant groups in Equatorial Guinea to this day (ibid, pp. 13, 42).

Contested memories / The Franco years

Tavo, a male in his late 50s who identified himself as Fang “but as in Fan(g) of Julio Iglesias” left Equatorial Guinea in the early 1970s, when the schizoid government of Francisco Macías Nguema, the country’s first elected president after independence in 1968, had become too violent to cope with. “There are people who think that life was better in colonial times, that their way of life was more comfortable. I remember when I was little, I’d ride the car with my father and there was [electric] light everywhere.” Sone, a 23 year-old student who regularly visited Tavo, check-mated his nostalgia in one sentence: “I’m sure there was light everywhere in a time when ‘everywhere’ was in fact the three streets of Little Spain.”

Tavo’s and Sone’s attitudes are iconic of their generations. While young adults don’t hide their critical views on Spain, France, the US and whatever they may perceive as (neo)colonialism in general, +50 year-olds from Bioko (especially among the Bubi), seem to keep warm memories of the last two decades of colonial rule. Members of the same generation but native of Rio Muni (especially among the Fang), appear to have a different take on the matter. Largely isolated and neglected by administrators, the natives of Rio Muni never ripped the benefits of Francisco Franco’s paternalist colonial policies (Fegley, 1989:20-28; Sundiata, 1983:83-88). During the Spanish Civil War, Fernando Po (Bioko) declared itself for Franco while Rio Muni supported the Republic and had to be subdued in 1936.

Even if they had been introduced to Fernando Po as plantation labor more than forty years prior, by the 1950s colonialists were spreading fear among the Bubi by portraying the Fang as a large violent tribe that had pushed its way down from Cameroon to Gabon and Spanish Guinea with the purpose of creating a large Fang empire that would ultimately crush the island’s native minority. A few self-proclaimed Bubi leaders teamed up with their masters to plead for Spanish protection: whites were there to guarantee the survival (and the privileges) of the non-Fang (Ndongo, 1977:74-75). Such narrative would be extensively used by the Bubi, Fernandinos and colonialists pushing for secession, granting independence to Rio Muni but keeping Fernando Po under Spanish rule, during the years prior to independence. Five decades were scarce, the title of emancipado is said to have served merely as a license to buy olive oil, meat and alcohol, for their consumption was prohibited to the rest of the non-European population. In the mid-1950s, out of 100,000 Equatoguineans, approximately 100 were emancipados (in Sundiata, 1990:33; see also Fegley, 1989:31-32).

14 “La pequeña España”, a small residential area where Spaniards in Malabo lived during the colonial period.
later, Bubi separatism lives on, and so do traces of the construct of a Fang imperialist agenda: it lies at the heart of the most discursively significant tribal rivalry in Bioko island (Bubi, the native minority, Vs. Fang, the foreign majority), and consequently, has become a commonplace explanation for the political and economic dominance of the Fang today as well as everybody else’s disadvantaged position in relation to them. The narrative is, however, an oversimplification, since it fails to account for the fact that most Fang are just as poor as are the poor from any other ethnic group (Rondo Igambo, 2000:93; Laurel, 2009:442).

The bibliography backs up that Fang migrations to Fernando Po were motivated by labor (Obadare, 2003; Sundiata, 1996; Mitogo, 1977) and the dire living conditions they faced in Río Muni. Their lack of influence despite their numbers has also been acknowledged (Mitogo, 1977:14-15, 41). Fang workers didn’t enjoy any of the privileges given to the Bubi, whom had been socialized in the ways of the colonizer throughout years of coercion and economic violence. As to the Bubi, there are those who still resent the servilism that they expressed towards their Spanish masters. “The Bubi are very weak, they were the first who learned Spanish” I was told by Mauricio, a 14 year-old boy who didn’t identify himself as Guineano nor as Bubi despite being a Spanish-speaking black African born in Equatorial Guinea in a Bubi family. “The Bubi! The first traitors!” his grandma said. “They are treacherous, even amongst their own! They’ve always been weak.”

Towards the end of the Franco years, in the early 1960s, school enrollment is said to have stood at 90% (Sundiata, 1996:162) but native authors debunk the statistic revealing that primary education was the only there was, that more than half of the students were in fact white, and that teachers, being their skills merely how to read/write, perform the four basic algebraic operations and speak a more or less coherent Spanish, were limited to teaching students little else than these same things (Ndongo, 1977:65-69). In 1964 the colony was given limited autonomy but the Gobierno Autónomo proved a puppet regime. Tensions between Río Muni and Fernando Po increased: Río Muni demanded independence, which after a lot of international pressure and Spanish politicians’ concerns about the “economic maturity of the Guineos [sic]” (Sandinot, 1967:91), was finally granted by Spain on the 12th of October 1968.

15 The MAIB or Movimiento de Autodeterminación de la Isla de Bioko, a separatist movement, is known for its involvement in the 1998 attacks in Luba (see “Alerta en Bioko por el resurgimiento del MAIB.” Diario Rombe. 30/03/2015. From: http://www.diariorombe.es/alerta-en-bioko-por-el-resurgimiento-del-maib/ 16 The kids laughed at their grandma; she was a Bubi herself. 17 In the school year 1958-1959, 60% of all students were white (Ndongo, 1977:65) but two years later, in 1960, there was a total population of only 6,000 Europeans vs. 248,000 black Africans in Spanish Guinea (Sundiata, 1996:162). The 90% school enrollment statistic would only make sense if the census data was limited to a specific region or sector of the urban population, which given the substantial differences between life in Fernando Po and in Río Muni, couldn’t be considered representative of any national demographics.
On Hitler and the people from the Moon

On the 3rd of November 1967, a Fang male in his late 40s gave a speech at a Constitutional Conference held by the Spanish government and Equatoguinean representatives at the United Nations headquarters in New York. He condemned colonialism, but said that he didn’t blame Spain for the suffering endured by his people: Hitler had caused World War II and yet Germany was being embraced again by all nations. Moreover, the man explained how

Hitler has freed Africa… General Rommel went to Africa, to the desert, where battles were being fought, and Englishmen and Africans were together. One African officer seats next to an English officer, and the latter says to the former: ‘We’re going to destroy Germany because she wants to rule over all peoples.’ And the African asks him: ‘Is Hitler evil?’ And the English officer answers: ‘No, but a German should rule over a German, an Italian over an Italian, a Spanish over a Spanish, a French over a French…’ And the English officer doesn’t dare to say that the English should rule over the English, because the United Kingdom kept a colonial empire all across the world. Then, the African officer realized what just happened. After fighting and destroying Germany, England was being asked for the total independence of the African countries but kept a strong position against it… And then, the African said: ‘England doesn’t want to give us independence; you used to say that an English should rule over an English, and now, why don’t you want Africans to rule in Africa?’ That’s why I say that Hitler saved Africa. What he wanted was to abolish colonialism and work together.

Approaching the end of his speech, the man acknowledged he couldn’t attack colonial politics because “now that men aspire to go to the Moon, who knows if it will be [Equatorial] Guinea the one that will colonize the people from the Moon.” He shared that nobody liked him and confessed that he attacked journalists “because they never tell the truth” (all fragments in Mitogo, 1977:31-35, my translation). Our speaker, who also denounced how thousands of Guineanos had fled the country due to ill-treatment from Spanish planters, is Francisco Macías Nguema. Less than a year after his speech in New York, he would have become Equatorial Guinea’s first democratically elected president. Less than three years after that, he would have derogated the national constitution and proclaimed himself president for life. By the end of his 11-year rule, up to one third of the population will have been either killed or driven into exile (Artucio, 1979:2; Fegley, 1989:159; Sundiata, 1990:2).18

The miracle’s madness

Commonly regarded as a “primitive man” (Mitogo, 1977:42), a “cruel paranoid” (Martínez Alcázar, 2001:18-19), “Satan’s send, son of Lucifer and president of the witches” (in Liniger-}

---

18 That up to “one third of the population was either killed or driven into exile” is perhaps the most widely reproduced statement in scholarly and non-scholarly works touching upon the history of Equatorial Guinea but a careful examination of the sources shows that such statement might be misleading. First, the Spanish colonial administration was not known for carrying out accurate censuses, so the size of the population at the dawn of the Macias regime seems largely unknown. Second, despite the thousands of nationals living abroad at the end of his rule, not all of them can be considered refugees or political exiles. For details on the nature of Equatoguinean migration during this period and the problems it poses, see Fegley, 1989:125-130.
Goumaz, 1996:61), Francisco Masie Nguema Biyogo took the missionary-taught primary education, was appointed a small position within colonial administration and climbed the ranks until becoming Major of his town. The honors bestowed upon him by the colonial regime (Mitogo, 1979:37) speak of the mentalities that were being created and rewarded: a product of a culture of ‘all you need to know is obedience’, he himself would later put it into practice by appointing anybody to government positions after having accumulated enough merits (Artucio, 1979:7) translated in practice as ‘proofs of loyalty’. Why “Equatorial Guinea’s sole miracle” actually happened is debatable. People today are rather forgiving as they contend that Macías had any number of mental conditions. His deeds are also understood as social produces: some say it was an awareness of his own lack of education what made him develop a complex of *incultura* that manifested as extreme revulsion against anything Western: books were destroyed during his rule, teachers were killed, the word ‘intellectual’ became synonymous of ‘imperialism’s lackey’ (PUN, 1972:30). His view on Catholic religion as politically biased and thus morally tainted drove him to persecute the clergy. Going to church was punishable by a fine, the punished being forced to declare that “God doesn’t exist” (Ndongo, 1977:222).

Native authors argue that Macías’ ‘madness’ was the result of an emotional decay that started only a few months after being elected president, when he discovered that the country was essentially bankrupt.19 His moral downs were emphasized by anger and paranoia following a failed coup headed by one of his ministers and sponsored by the Spanish ministry of foreign affairs (Loboč, 2009:452). After this incident, president Macias seemed to have become increasingly distrusting. In order to spot political threats, he launched a campaign of peer-to-peer espionage offering *cargos* or positions within the government as reward to those who would tell on real or make-believe dissidents. Children were encouraged to denounce family members, which tore apart the close family structure of the Fang (Fegley, 1989:100). As families broke, a new sort of loyalty arose: the political loyalty, which, having nothing to do with ideology and very little with kinship, was no more than proved obedience in the name of personal gain at a time when nobody had anything to cling to and build a social persona. The scarring left in the collective psyche by this culture of denunciation and its socioeconomic benefits is now narrativized in the form of *lazos de sangre* or ‘ties of blood’, gang-like pacts of murdering/sacrificing fellow kinsmen as proofs of loyalty in exchange for power positions. Another antecedent for this practice/belief stems from Macías’ personality cult: it was rumored he had sacrificed a relative in his own quest for mystical power (ibid, pp. 49, 161).

---

19 There was no money in the banks. All capitals and revenues, as they had been controlled by a few trustees in the metropole, were gone at the time of independence fearing expropriation (see i.e. Nart, 1976:13).
Macías was in business with Russia, China, and Cuba,\(^{20}\) and this remains one of the most enduring aspects of his legacy (Loboch, 2009:452). It all started with the country’s need for military support after a diplomatic crisis with Nigeria, its Western-friendly big neighbor. At the height of Macías’ schizopolitics, in 1976, a group of Nigerian laborers took refuge in the Nigerian embassy in Malabo to escape harassment on the cocoa plantations. Reportedly acting on Macías’ orders, the national guard breached the precinct’s extraterritoriality and attacked the men leaving eleven dead and a trail of diplomatic mess behind them. While many Nigerians criticize their government’s decision not to take military action, others criticize it for not having dealt with the crisis in a manner that would have stopped Equatorial Guinea from making such reputable friends (Obadare, 2003). After the discovery of oil in the 1990s, such friendships translated into extracting contracts and political presence in an effort to counterbalance the heavy weight of Western interests driven to the country in the name of profit. Neutralizing the US’s public cries for democracy through permissive contracts was to become a significant move for Obiang Nguema, who overthrew Macías after heading a coup on August 3\(^{rd}\) 1979.

The talk of town

“Chico! These Guineanos like to talk!” said my landlord after I asked him about the stories on HIV and big cars I had heard at la Plaza one afternoon. Every person I spoke to had a lot of stories to tell, their favorite topic of all being president Teodoro Obiang Nguema. They would refer to him “el jefe,” “este señor” or “el de la foto” (lit. ‘the boss’, ‘this mister’ or ‘the one from the picture’) but had no reservations whatsoever as to what they would say about him. People particularly enjoyed talking about all kinds of witchcraft they were sure the president was involved in. Second to that was his family life, which was commented throughout Malabo much in the style of celebrity gossip. Generally, condemnation of the man was done in a religious framework: if he had lost his soul, he’d have to answer to a higher power once he was dead. Apart from that, people’s attitudes towards him were somehow forgiving, which was extremely surprising to me given the bulk of bad press the head of state has gotten throughout the years courtesy of the world’s foremost NGOs, the global media and a generation of politically engaged scholars. Obiang Nguema also was, perhaps naturally, the ultimate discussion topic of the many round-table-like discussions I was able to observe.

\(^{20}\) Scholarships were funded for Equatoguineans in the USSR (naval personnel, mechanics and administrators). Cubans served as educators, forestry experts and military advisors. The Chinese provided arms and trainers, loans for telecommunications. Qaddafi’s Libya also aided Macías with a gift of $1 million (Fegley, 1989:112-114, 120).
“My Ade doesn’t get it!” said Nékora, an Ndowé female in her mid-20’s, making fun of my astonishment when someone at the table expressed he wouldn’t like Obiang to leave office. “It’s what I was telling my husband the other day: vale, imagine that now Obiang Nguema says he’s tired and tells this man, Nancy’s father,21 ‘come to power’. What is he going to do? After a whole life in poverty, the first thing he’ll do is to pack his pockets!” “That one would be even worse!” said Tavo, who used to ride his father’s car through a well-lit colonial Malabo. “That’s why we love Obiang Nguema very much, because we say, the man for better or worse is now at a moment in which he says ‘look, I’ve done it all, now what I want is to fix’.” “It’s NOT that we ‘love him’ very much,” Tavo rushed to say, skeptical of Nékora’s deliberate bootlicking. “It’s just that among all the [bad] things the man has done, at least he’s a person that has opened his hands to all the people he has grown up with, regardless of if they are family or friends or acquaintances. No, no, no, [he has helped] all his people he has grown up with! He has recognized all the children he’s had in the street, and has seated them in [political] positions! Logically they aren’t all kept in the same consideration…” “Which is normal” Nékora interrupted, but Tavo kept going:

Childhood friends, they’re also there. And I can tell you that this man she is talking about [Severo Moto] and even other people that right now are powerful in here, they would eliminate everybody they’d have to eliminate in order to eat by themselves. So if anyone would come, let’s suppose there’s a rotatory power and all that, the person that would come, I can tell you, he will be way, way worse [than Obiang Nguema], he will annihilate everything there was before him, he will dismantle all the structures there were before him, and he will suck as much [money] as he can suck as long as he can suck it, and if he finds it possible to remain whenever it’s somebody else’s turn to take over, if he can perpetuate himself in power, he will do it, because this is how Africa works.

Haunted by what I felt tempted to discard as two people’s pessimistic views rooted in historical trauma (the dismantling of colonial structures and institutions was a patent fact of Macías rule), I followed up the question at a later occasion with different individuals in a different setting. When confronted with the perspective of a rotatory power and a ‘democratically elected’ new head of state, a male in his early 20s expressed being sure that everything will remain the same, or could get even worse, because the new one will want to get higher [on power]. The one that’s there now [Obiang Nguema], he already has it all, and what he’s doing, or trying to do, is to fix a little bit the [political? economic?] system of the country and its face, of course, so that it starts looking better for the outside world and so on, but if there comes a new one, everything will free-fall again, and that’s what they [NGOs, media and scholars pressing for liberal democratization] don’t understand.

21 ‘Nancy’ is a pseudonym. Nékora was referring to Severo Moto, who founded the Progress Party (Partido del Progreso de Guinea Ecuatorial) in early 1983 while on exile in Spain. Talking about him as ‘Nancy’s father’ testifies to how tight social relations are in the country and within the diaspora, since members of the same generation freely intermingle with one another despite place and their parents’/elders’ political orientations.
Clearly, young Equatoguinean adults had a rather controversial standpoint regarding their nation’s present political priorities and future possibilities. If to ‘sit’ one’s own children and childhood friends in power positions (or, as Westies call it, to openly engage in nepotism) is commonly regarded by the average Equatoguinean citizen as an obvious moral asset, what else can be getting lost in translation while profiling “the one from the picture”?

El de la foto
Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo was born in Acoakam, district of Mongomo. A fang of the Esangui clan, he’s traditionally considered Macías’ nephew although recent scholarship argues against this (Appel, 2011:22). In 1975 he was named vice-minister of Defense and military governor of Bioko, which turned him into the “viceroy of the capital and Blackbich jail” (Liniger-Goumaz, 1996:52). In 1979, he headed a coup —a.k.a. Operación León— following the murder of his brother and four other officials at the hands of Macías’ bodyguards. The coup, known as El golpe de Libertad (lit. ‘The Coup of Freedom’) was successfully made on August 3rd 1979. Macías was tried at Cine Marfil, a building which today serves, to many of my interviewees’ irritation, as a branch of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God.

According to some authors, “the transition from Macías to Obiang” did not imply “the disappearance of Maciasm” as the two appeared to have differed only in degree (in Obadare, 2003:583). For the less forgiving, the only difference between the two is that Macías’ guard was composed by Cubans, while Obiang’s is composed by Moroccans (Liniger-Goumaz, 1996:54). The arguments behind the notion of continuity is that the August 3rd 1979 coup was just a palace revolution (Fegley, 1989:169), and that the many executions that took place at Black Beach jail were observed by Obiang Nguema as he was Security Commandant (ibid, p. 105), even if years later he tried to distance himself from that fact by stating that “the Army never shared the ideals of the [Macías] dictatorship” (in Liniger-Goumaz, 1996:58).

Despite it all, as early as 1989 people were noticing that the regimes were not that similar. Some found Obiang to be “infinitely more capable of clear, decisive judgement than his predecessor” as well as “a much better diplomat,” being due to “this combination of caution and diplomacy that he could become the great restorer to his country or an even greater tyrant than his infamous uncle” (Fegley, 1989:225-226). Almost thirty years later, reality has settled in, although reality itself has become deeply ambivalent. For many actors living abroad, Obiang is, without a doubt, a greater tyrant than Macías. For the locals, there is not even a point of comparison. Besides universal allegations on state-sponsored violence, criticism towards the
leader is usually grounded on his ‘political monolitism’ or one-party rule. There is, however, local bibliography to contextualize it. The argument goes that in Western democracies political parties act as groups representing ideological positions, while in Equatorial Guinea there couldn’t exist a true commitment to ideology because of the preponderance of kinship:

Actual socioeconomic conditions don’t admit ideological alternatives, for these would be empty... As far as people are concerned, nobody wants to hear about a revolution. What exists, however, is a certain diversity of thought within the administrative class, the logical consequence of a mentality acquired during the 11-year crisis, a period in which the idea of well-being and family and personal freedom was associated with the conception of public power as patrimonial goods and privileges accessible through family ties. The belief and sentiment that individuals’ civil protection, the gain of public benefits, freedom, social well-being guarantees, etc., depend or are conditioned by kinship ties between the citizen and the ruling class, is a consequence of the deterioration of the Public Administration during the 11-year crisis, and it is also the reason why kinship still has a great influence capable of endangering big democratic national decisions. So being, civilian responsibility [of anti-democratic practices] remains questionable, since the criteria of kin-sympathy comes first than the criteria of political objectivity. From this moment, democracy loses its partidist interest (Ocha’a Mve, 1985:38-40).

Much of the ethnography I collected verifies the actuality of Ocha’a Mve’s words: people’s strategies for self-making and maintenance tend to take place within the realm of kin relations and/or networks. So the widely denounced social inmovilismo many see as the main trait of Obiang Nguema’s rule would turn out to be a good excuse to keep undemocratic practices going. If outsiders were willing to grant him some praise by acknowledging that people’s mentality in particular and social conditions in general have indeed changed in the last three decades, claims on the need for ‘political monolitism’ would lose legitimacy and a whole new generation of claims for the organic need of a liberal democracy could be made without undermining Equatoguineans’ experientially framed political possibilities.

Bad reputation
If Obiang Nguema’s government once seemed “a pauper taking help from whomever will give it” (Sundiata, 1990:87), things have dramatically changed since the discovery of oil in the mid-1990s. The government can now afford not to ask for aid and not to allow any NGO activity because it doesn’t need to appear likeable to any donors. While in theory this might translate into a greater sovereignty, in practice it implies a higher risk of resulting dislikable for actors and stakeholders playing by the rules of aid/development-mediated power politics. Not observing foreign standards might mean not acknowledging them and thus more often than not, actually acting against them. Lauro, a male in his late 20s, thinks that his country’s ‘bad reputation’ is the natural outcome of an oil-thirsty international community reacting, almost xenophobically, against Equatorial Guinea’s political “personality,” which is itself the product
of imposed Western (i.e. colonial) institutions crashing with local values and forms of social organization. He believes that an obvious reaction to such “aggressions” is the need for increased control within one’s borders. As he explains it, in tiny and rumor-riddled Equatorial Guinea, badly administered means of control rooted in haphazardly appointed human resources result in arbitrary arrests, incarcerations, injustice, intrigue—a LOT of intrigue—and assassinations, the motives of which can be personal, ritual, or political. Because these three spheres tend to overlap, it’s almost impossible to pin them on one individual or a definite set of interests. Unaware of this fact or unwilling to see it, international actors turn such happenings into weapons to be discharged against the country’s public face, Obiang Nguema. According to Marianela, a woman in her late 20s, “the poor man” finds himself then trapped in a paradox: he is forced to take responsibility when accused and humiliated abroad in order to appear in control of that of which he’s not: “those stupidities that all these ministers do, have nothing to do with this mister… It must be very annoying having to be chopping heads all day long.”

Most young adults, just as they do with regards to Macías (Appel, 2011:22), refuse to hold Obiang Nguema individually accountable for abuses committed by foot-soldiers and incompetent bureaucrats. An exception is the case of what they believe to be his complicity with foreign companies’ exploitative practices and labor conditions for native workers.

“The most pestiferous land which the universe is known to contain”:
Equatorial Guinea in the global eye past and present

Given its lack of big informative media, Equatorial Guinea has been the victim of an ill-willed exterior propaganda aimed at confusing international public opinion: other purpose cannot be contained in the effort to spread an aberrant and out-of-focus picture of its reality.
Constantino Ocha’a Mve, 1985:7-8

Around 1600 a Dutch navigator warned ships that “if one happens to fall behind the island of Fernando Po, one is in danger of staying there all one’s life without escaping” (in Sundiata, 1996:13). Two-hundred and fifty years later, in 1848, the London Times called Fernando Po “the most pestiferous land which the universe is known to contain” (ibid, p. 37). The bad reputation of Bioko island—a product of mixed exoticism, fear of death and allure for profit—might have started as early as the first European explorations of sub-Saharan Africa. Today, the same elements seem to have been recalibrated, producing a similar result in the Western

22 By “chopping heads” she meant ‘firing people’ after they had done something “stupid.” Both Lauro and Marianela knew that the root of the problem was how these people had been appointed in the first place: they had arrived by “the finger”, and so they would go by “the finger” (arbitrarily appointed, arbitrarily fired).
imagination: cultural exoticization, fear of state-sponsored violence and allure for profit seem
to be as actual as ever in popular conceptions of Equatorial Guinea. Macías legacy is still
shaping popular culture outside, and constituting a living pathos in the collective memory
within its borders. The extent to which it makes itself felt today remains open to discussion.
What’s evident is that a conception of ongoing terror keeps conditioning the study of the tiny
African nation. In my opinion, such rhetoric results increasingly counterproductive when trying
to observe the everyday experiences of Equatoguineans, mainly because the kind of violence
exerted by the state has changed in nature. Even if allegations of torture, arrests and killings are
still being put forward by NGOs and exiles, the focus of the country’s reputation has shifted.
Since the 1990s, Spain considers Equatorial Guinea “the most corrupt, disastrous and
inefficient country imaginable” (in Liniger-Goumaz, 1996:73), while international workers
have contented with referring to it as “the armpit of the world” (Klitgaard, 1990:15).

The country’s dark aura can also be read in terms of the news-momentum it’s going
through, a possible consequence of the many years its dramas lied beyond the world’s
awareness since Spain declared them *materia reservada* in 1971. The lack of reliable national
data goes back to the same period, for it was Macías who killed or exiled practically all native
professionals resulting in that not one government statistic can be found after 1970 (Fegley,
1989:72). If the situation has improved, international actors don’t seem aware of it, the proof
being that little white spot in the malaria-spread slide displayed in northern Sweden forty-
something years later. One more contributor to the fog is foreign governments’ and
corporations’ reluctance to release data on local affairs since public scrutiny might reveal
reprehensible practices that could jeopardize their ‘national interests’, investments and profits.

**Human rights crisis**

Obiang’s regime is widely known for its systematic violation of human rights: torture to extract
confessions, beatings by the police, suspicious deaths, kidnappings, unjustified detentions of
However strong the human rights question remains abroad, some locals have a more pragmatic
take on the matter. “These things happen everywhere” said Manolo, a taxi driver in his 40s.
“Do you believe that Americans do not torture? They *do* torture. They torture prisoners abroad
and at home the police kills blacks just because they aren’t white. Are you going to tell me that
the police don’t beat the people in Mexico?” They *do* beat people, and worse. Manolo was

---

23 All information regarding Equatorial Guinea was deemed confidential and was banned from the press in an
attempt to protect whatever Spanish citizens and interests were still in the country.
pleased to prove to me that torture and authority abuses are not exclusive to his country, and that those unwilling to smell their own dirty laundry while campaigning against the smell of others’ were acting out of what he considered “pure hypocrisy.”

As absolutely factual as cases of torture, coercion, threats and beatings are, they’re also known to be often the work of low-ranking officers due to the pressure they face for obtaining confessions since these constitute ‘evidence’ to be used as the basis of convictions (see UNHRC, 2010:16, 28-29). According to one interviewee, allegations should also be taken with a grain of salt as they tend to be amplified by the exiles. If this is the locals’ take on human rights violations, why are they so loud abroad? Drawing on a presumably guilty-conscious, there are those who see the international community’s concern with human rights as an attempt to make up for the conspiracy-like silence it kept throughout the country’s first dictatorship (Fegley, 1989:123). Also, as Manolo pointed out, today’s accusations on human rights violations might be diverting attention from the accusers themselves.24 On this line, others have problematized the disproportionate attention that black/African ‘evils’ have received in comparison with their white/Western homologues, denouncing the structural racism that the so-called international rule of law has made patent through neoliberal fictions of justice and the tribunalization of African violence (see Clarke, 2009:36). Another aspect to keep in mind is retaliation: accusations as weapons in power politics. Take, for instance, that while the Spanish press “used to give and keeps giving sensationalism to everything,” the US press wasn’t spilling the beans on Obiang’s ‘horror’ until 1991, when a severe denunciation of human rights violations was published by the US State Department following Equatorial Guinea’s refusal to receive new toxic waste from the power (Liniger-Goumaz, 1996:25).25

Lord of the minerals

The discovery of oil in the early 1990s attracted many Texas-based companies and put the US in close dealings with Obiang Nguema. By 1995, Equatorial Guinea was exporting approximately 5,000 barrels per day (bbl/d) of low-sulfur distillate-rich crude oil (in Appel, 2011:6) and by 2012, the country exported roughly 319,100 bbl/d of crude, with proven remaining reserves of 1.1 billion barrels as of January 2013. Hydrocarbons accounted for 99.3% of the nation’s $14.5 billion in exports, and 98% of government revenues in 2008 (IMF, 2010;
Kraus, 2010). Since the country’s debut as an oil and gas exporter, revenue from the hydrocarbon sector has comprised well over 90% of government income. The oil industry is thus the only large employer other than public administration (Appel, 2011:3).

Despite the riches the oil boom has brought to the nation, most sources agree that it has in fact aggravated the living conditions of most Equatoguineans who “live in desperate poverty, with over 60% struggling to survive on less than $1 a day” (OSJI, 2010:3). “The northern democracies’ interests weigh more than the well-being of the Equatoguinean people,” writes Liniger-Goumaz (1996:110-111), “the good luck of the dictatorship and the Equatoguinean dictator comes from the indifference of the so-called ‘democratic’ world.” The ways in which the oil industry disentangles itself from a deeply problematic national reality has been studied in detail by Appel (2011; 2012a, 2012b). Other sources are also critical, feeling for or against the myth of the oil curse (Campos, 2010; Donner, 2009). Many projects of cooperation in education that have become a part of the industry’s agreements are disqualified by some as contributors to the ethnification of power (Laurel, 2009:442). Others argue that oil riches will be used in benefit of the people only after they can be administered in with transparency and accountability (Rondo Igambo, 2000) which doesn’t seem likely to happen anytime soon, given the application and suspension, after a lot of pressure from human rights activists, of the country’s candidature to join the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) in 2012.

**Fetishism, kleptocracy and mercenaries**

As damaging as allegations on drug trafficking (see Liniger-Goumaz, 1996:27-28, 95) brought against the head of state and his extended family in the mid-1990s were, nothing has put the country in the spotlight as the ridiculous spending of the president’s eldest son. Money laundering charges were met with international arrest warrants filled by French and US governments after Teodoro Nguema Obiang Mangue’s acquisition of properties in the Malibu bay (Williams, 2011) and central Paris.²⁶ A more recent scandal was sparked after the presumed heir’s order of a $380 million yacht which given the man’s reported ministerial salary of $6,799 per month, it would take him some 4,600 years to pay (Global Witness, 2011).

The obvious and unregulated flows of cash stemming from the extractive industry have called the attention of colorful international characters making Equatorial Guinea’s recent history one so “replete with coup attempts, heavyhanded threats against diplomats and journalists [and] high-level intrigue,” that it “reads like a political thriller that invokes a few

---

²⁶ According to diasporic lore, Obiang Nguema ordered the Equatoguinean ambassador to France to claim the building as the country’s new embassy. I had the chance to visit it while applying for a visa in January 2014.
too many clichés of the genre” (Williams, 2011:622).27 The most recent coup attempt took place in 2004: an attempt to overthrow Obiang Nguema and replace him with Severo Moto in exchange of preferential oil contracts, it was headed by British citizen Simon Mann and involved a number of South African mercenaries, a Lebanese oil billionaire, and British financers which included Mark Thatcher, Margaret Thatcher’s son (see Blaisse, 2011).

Camera ready
Teodoro Obiang Nguema might have candidly declared enjoying the title of “dictator” because according to him, it literally means “he who dictates the laws.”28 He might be the sole survivor of a generation of African despots, a name worthy of a prize which could only be given, and only to him, by North Korea.29 But to say that he doesn’t care about Equatorial Guinea’s image in the global eye would be a lie. An early proof of his concern was given in 1989, when he studied with a Soviet delegation how to make “democratically credible” a unique party, defining his political process as “perestroika” (Liniger-Goumaz, 1996:42, 77). Although commonly regarded as indifferent or obstructive, the regime has cooperated with UNHRC missions and other foreign observers to no avail. In 2010, a British Members of Parliament delegation visited the country to search for ways “of improving the daily lives of EG citizens in addition to identifying opportunities for British business,” but after witnessing inequality, nepotism and corruption explained away as “cultural differences,”30 left cared of “the strange and evil world of Equatorial Guinea” (Birrell, 2011). The much-talked about Unesco-Obiang prize was widely seen as a “shameful” means “to polish the sullied image of Obiang.”31 High investments in infrastructure, diplomatic visits, general amnesties, massive pardons, hosting internationally scrutinized events (African Union summits, the African Cup of Nations), engaging the opposition in dialogue… Obiang is camera ready, the haphazard apparatus of the state is doing its best to show, if not to prove, openness and good intentions. Needless to say, such intentions have yet to translate into tangible initiatives for structural change.

27 Williams argues that “close parallels between the March 2004 coup attempt led by Simon Mann and Frederick Forsyth’s novel The Dogs of War have been noted”, but doesn’t mention that Forsyth’s novel was in fact inspired by a very real coup attempt which the author himself financed and master-minded, also in Equatorial Guinea, to overthrow Macías Nguema in support of the Biafran cause back in 1972-1973 (see Fegley, 1989:143-146).
Relational ways of knowing

It’s more or less common knowledge that researchers should choose their methods depending on the nature of the objects they study. Such methods have, in turn, to be fine-tuned, carefully adapted to time and context. In the case of this thesis, it wasn’t until I started the process of data coding that its actual topic(s) emerged. Since what I had read about life in Equatorial Guinea didn’t ring truth with what I was observing in situ, my methods had to be, at least at the beginning, consistent with an exploratory form of research, this is, a practical analogy of a ‘grand tour question’. “How will you get to the bottom of whatever is going on? Be there, be honest, get to know people, listen carefully to whatever they talk about, all the time, and not only with you,” I wrote in my journal. Judging by the material I was able to collect, this constant ‘just being’ turned out to be the best method I could have chosen. It was, perhaps, a bit too effective for my own good, because as ridiculous as it sounds given the mere 10 weeks I spent ‘out there’, it took me as close as you can get to going native. Speaking the same language and consistently sharing worldviews helped me establish relationships which quickly turned into friendships that bounced back changing me in the process. But there was a problem. Not only was the sociality I successfully immersed myself in ‘corroding’ to say the least, but I lacked the resources the locals can count on to cope with it (i.e. large networks and kin loyalties). On the one hand, I truly believe I got to experience in vivo the lateral forms of violence I now know are eating people away in Malabo. On the other, ‘being eaten’ by the field is not an easy thing to recover from. You need to re-learn how to be. And you need to reconfigure your take on your discipline together with its core assumptions.

The risks of being ‘objective’

In 1979, the same year president Macías was overthrown by Obiang, a United Nations Human Rights Commission’s rapporteur was sent to Equatorial Guinea after severe allegations were made by exiles. An account of the mission offered by one of the most quoted authors on the subject emphasizes the incompetence of national officers, the foreigners’ resentment after not being treated with the consideration they believed they deserved, a sloppy bureaucratic apparatus (i.e. incapable of issuing ‘proper credentials’), experiences of gossip as third-party intimidation, bad roads, and all kinds of stuff that “caused numerous other minor difficulties and tensions for the investigators” (Fegley, 1989:177). However inconvenient, these instances
speak more of a crash between cultures —political, institutional, and of cooperation— than of an obvious sabotage or an information cover up. The head of mission, who remained “cool and objective” throughout the process of writing his report, was harshly “criticized by some, particularly by those who had waited for action so many years, for what was perceived to be his generosity to a government which had created restrictions and offered minimal assistance” (Fegley, 1989:180-181, my italics). A precious lesson to be learned from this account of the UNHRC 1979 mission is that when it’s about Equatorial Guinea, actual objectivity might irritate those who are/have been waiting for political action so many years. And even worse, that sticking to ‘the rules of evidence’ can be interpreted as ‘generosity’ towards a regime openly and continuously discredited. The message is clear: whoever is willing to study the country in a “cool and objective” manner, sticking to ‘the rules of evidence’, might be exposing himself to the same criticism that those who choose to part ways with more customary demonizing discourses have endured. One might be suspected of being too ‘generous’ towards a government towards which one ought to be ‘ruthless’ to stay tuned with the international consensus. If one chooses to look beyond the democratizing human rights-mediated agenda, chances are one would automatically be accused of deliberately siding with the bad guys. An otherwise constraining positionality, however, is backing up my ‘right’ to not comply.

A mestiza/neptantlera perspective

According to the *Random House Learner's Dictionary of American English*, “mestiza” is the female noun form of “mestizo,” which is “a person of different races, esp., of mixed American Indian and European ancestry.”32 As far as the dictionary is concerned, I’m a mestiza. Three generations ago an *indígena* came down from the Coahuila mountains in northern Mexico, married a Spanish merchant and they became my mom’s grandparents. An American once called me ‘brownie’, but my skin is actually greenish. Me and my brother were raised by a *nahuatl* speaking teenager who, like her sisters and cousins before her, had left her tiny village in search for a better life in the big city. Like most people in urban Mexico, I’m largely acquainted with crime: drug and organ trafficking, kidnappings, corruption, political assassinations. More than acquainted, I have insider knowledge. My mother’s side of the family is small and influential while my father’s side is large and poor. The eldest daughter of a Catholic family in the ultimate macho country, I know everything about double standards and more importantly, how to get around them. In 1999, at age 13, I found myself collecting money

in the streets to help my friend’s family pay for his funeral. Three years later, in 2002, I was having dinner with Mexican president Vicente Fox in his house of Los Pinos. By then I had published a book of poems, and my ultimate goal in life was to leave my parents’ house without having to marry. What these little bits of myself will hopefully show is that being a “mestiza” goes beyond being “a person of different races.” Or as Anzaldúa (1999) puts it,

the new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance of ambiguity. (…) She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good, the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns ambivalence into something else (Anzaldúa, 1999:101).

A “mestiza” is then a hybrid born out of contrasts, a queer consciousness made out of contingent fragments, struggling (or not) to make sense of herself in a context of borrowed symbols and values which never fit reality as she lives it. You’re the signature flower of the Third World gardens. You’re used to see raw misery hold hands with obscene power. You know corruption means tipping. You learn to cope with the feeling of life being a permanent rehearsal. “Real life,” you tell yourself, “is happening to other people, somewhere else.” A mestiza is thus a study on liminality as a privileged space for action. The mestiza consciousness, in its poetic vision of inclusivity, strives “to deconstruct the dominant power of the white/Eurocentric speaking subject to create an altogether different place from which to speak” (Koegeler-Abdi, 2013:75). This place is the ‘in-between’, a concept theorized by some as “a space of enormous growth, a space of power and creativity” (Stoller, 2009:4). Anzaldúa’s later developments of the mestiza consciousness no longer approach liminality as a place, but as a condition inherent to the self. The subjectivity encouraged by the mestiza consciousness is called nepantlera, a term coined after the náhuatl word nepantla, which literally means ‘in-between’. The nepantlera epistemology puts forward “a relational way of knowing that bases its holistic knowledge on similarities and connections across differences, instead of Enlightenment rationality that categorizes based on exclusions” (in Koegeler-Abdi, 2013:79). A nepantlera, then, is a subjectivity that alters its mode of interaction to make it more inclusive:

In a to-and-from motion [nepantleras] shift from their customary positions to the reality of first one group and the other…. las nepantleras know their work lies in positioning themselves—exposed and raw—in the crack between these worlds, and in revealing current categories as unworkable (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002:567).

Because of their permanently shifting modes of interaction, nepantleras are able to “help each other and the people around them to de/reconstruct their selves or see through other opinions and positions” (Koegeler-Abdi, 2013:82). This ability perfectly captures the essence
and purpose of my interactions with the Equatoguinean people I worked with. My foremost method then, was purposely turning myself into a *nepantlera*. The objective of doing it was not simply to collect data, but to stimulate its production while insuring its richness and validity: as a *nepantlera* I was there to encourage reflection and debate. So far so good with the mestiza consciousness and the *nepantlera subjectivity*. Here, however, a little side note has to be made. Even though I eventually became a full member in what someone referred to as a “chicken family,” I couldn’t escape being an object of prejudice myself. Early on I wrote in my journal:

> The white girl. They call me the white girl. ‘Hey you, white girl!’ the men call me out in the street, as if it were a compliment. I get all pissed and tell them that I’m not ‘white’, that I’m an ‘indian’. They look at each other, confused. Now everybody thinks I come from India.

However funny it reads now, the despair I was feeling is evident. It didn’t matter how hard I tried to make people aware of *what* I was, for many I was nothing but “the long haired white chick” who had “come to Guinea to steal men and resources away from the [local] women.” People’s attitudes started changing only slowly. I noted, for example, a substantial shift in one man’s attitudes after I told him how annoying I found it to travel between Mexico and Europe, because the airport security would invariably pick me out of the crowd and make me open all my suitcases as if I had stolen something from them. “That’s what they do to us blacks” the man said, and as if he finally had ‘figured me out’ just to discover that I was an object of commiseration: “So you’re just out there, *in the gray.*”

**Hanging out**

As the nature of my method of choice has suggested, my research is based on the premise that “it is the study itself which is marginal with respect to the phenomena studied” (de Certeau, 1984:41). Consequently, “human sociality is thus no longer simply the object of our understanding, but the very method whereby we achieve it” (Jackson, 2005:31-32). The use of a *nepantlera* perspective suggests an approach inspired on an existential phenomenology: it aims at looking at people’s lived experiences not only through verbal communication, but through the creation and sharing of an intersubjective ground which could make otherwise foreign everyday practices intelligible. And here I speak both ways, because as the real ‘other’ amidst quotidian happenings, my ways were as puzzling to some as some of theirs were to me.

The point with being a *nepantlera*, with positioning oneself “exposed and raw, in the crack between these worlds” (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002:567) was to embark in a sociality which, although messy and disparate, could generate mutual understandings not based on
discourse but on practice. Hanging out thus became my second method of choice because it builds trust, “and trust results in ordinary conversation and ordinary behavior in your presence” (Bernard, 2006:368-369). Since being a nepantlera implied the dissolution of status positions, and since the whole scientific/academic tradition from the Enlightenment and on is built on Cartesian dualism, this is, on irreducible opposites (object/subject, objective/subjective) which serve to justify the need of boundary maintenance and status differentiation often in the name of ‘objectivity’, I had troubles finding an accurate way to refer to the people I worked with. I didn’t want to call them “informants” because they weren’t ‘feeding me’ information —it was more like I was reproducing it within myself by mimicking their actions. Calling them “subjects” felt like literally ‘subjecting’ them to the exploitative purposes implicit in any academic endeavor. The word “natives” still resounded in me as a remnant of an anthropological tradition grounded on colonial othering. The individuals I worked with became to me more than “subjects,” but with two exceptions, less than “friends.” Because we were hanging out pretty much all the time, I decided to simply refer to them as hangies.

While hanging out I’d move around throughout the city (‘walk’ as sensory experience was also to become one of my methods, though only experimentally), but my main dwelling site was Plaza de E’Waiso Ipola. Located hardly one kilometer away from the presidential palace near el Puerto Viejo in central Malabo, the plaza is a mere 50 meter-span concrete-paved polygon. A permanent scenery for quotidian community life, one of its most prominent features is its court-like space to which children from the schools near by come to play ball and climb the tall thin poles of what once were mercurial lights. Another feature are the establishments located on its longline: an outdoor low-end pub where people from the surrounding neighborhoods gather to drink and watch football matches projected on the wall; a tiny cafeteria; a second-hand clothing store; and the only privately owned bookstore in Malabo. Several square tables with four chairs each stand outside the establishments. There, customers can sit and have a San Miguel or a Fanta while cooling the day off after siesta time, which is when the plaza starts coming to life. It was at one of these tables that I would sit, Monday to Saturday from four to nine, invariably writing on a huge notebook, with a water bottle, a pack of courtesy cigarettes and my voice recorder. Hanging out at la plaza had many advantages. Its node-like nature granted me access to all kinds of people, from school children and teenagers to transient homeless and drunks via well-known artists and everyday passing-by workers. Consequently, my hangies were a highly heterogeneous group made of 10-15 people: street vendors, taxi drivers, students, low-ranking bureaucrats, foreign companies’ employees, artists. They all lived in central Malabo or its close periphery (i.e. the neighborhoods of Semu and Ela.
A couple of them lived in chabolas, informal complexes improvised between buildings of central/urban areas, but most shared small apartments with their partners and kids, or houses with cousins and/or senior family members. Some of my hangies had spent all their lives in Malabo. Some had been born in Río Muni and arrived in Bioko as teenagers. Some were comebackees, young adults who were back after being born and/or raised abroad in Equatoguinean communities. Even if they constituted my main source of data, they weren’t the only one. I also had the chance to interview relatively high-ranking public servants, and to engage in discussions with practically everybody I met. I held long conversations with French, Spanish and Moroccan ex-pats, as well as with Cameroonian, Malinese and Senegalese immigrants. While I find it impossible to count the people I talked to and learned from, I consistently discussed with and interviewed 25-30 individuals, hangies included.

“Hanging out is a skill,” writes Bernard (2006:368), “and until you learn it you can’t do your best work as a participant observer.” Given the mere ten weeks I had on me, I tried my best. The easy going rhythm of life in Malabo, my language skills, and a culture of outdoor-sitting and courtesy beer drinking facilitated interaction enormously. Hanging out soon became participant observation, and participant observation quickly turned into informal interviews, all with incredible naturality. At one point I even felt I didn’t really need to ask any questions: all I needed to do was to make a comment formulated in the first person (“I,” “me”) regarding whatever I wanted to know, to get people started elaborating on it from their own points of view. “You talk about yourself, people talk about themselves, everybody learns from everybody else, and the trust keeps on building,” I wrote in my journal. Because there was so much rapport, nobody ever made a fuss about my voice recorder. Sometimes, if a cool conversation started to turn into a discussion and I hadn’t taken the thing out myself, people would tell me “you should be recording this.” It was more or less the same with photographs: the first night I spent in Malabo I was told by my landlord that I should never bring my camera out, but eventually I started doing it only to have a whole bunch of people wanting to have their picture taken for the mere pleasure of posing.

Informal interviewing is “the method of choice at the beginning of participant observation fieldwork,” but it is also used “to uncover new topics of interest that might have been overlooked” (ibid, p. 211). So during my first two weeks of research I kept hanging out, listening to all kinds of stories about ‘blood offerings’ (ritual killings) made by political personalities to their Mami Watá (demon-like mermaids) as tributes for whatever money, cars and powers they had granted them. The merging subjects of witchcraft and politics brought our conversations further into ethnic conflicts, kinship and loyalties (against the background of
money and influence, of course) and so the complexity of the whole Equatoguinean social picture became self-evident. “How are people supposed to keep state and family apart, when the state seems so tangled and everybody is family?” I wrote one night. It was from hanging out that I learned *what it was* that I wanted to learn.

**Creative talking**

Truth be told, although I consistently interviewed at least eight individuals in the privacy of their homes, I found informal group discussions to be more fruitful than properly scheduled interviews. Carried out both in private and public spaces such as la plaza, grills, and bars, people’s engagement in group discussions was just natural, and a lot of times, after my interventions, actual analysis was performed as a collective activity. I was careful to always bring up my own theories and interpretations right there, so that people could validate them, refute them, or complete them. Given the sometimes off-the-roof arguments my hangies would come up with in the form of jokes, modern myths and other elaborated metaphors, I started to think about these discussions as a means to engage them in what I call *creative talking*.

Generally speaking, I would define *creative talking* as a method that, through the active promotion of long conversations/discussions, allows two or more people to think big, reflect and solve critical social problems as they experience them. It can best take place between equals. First, because in order to communicate with each other participants need to share a code (not only linguistic but also idiomatic); and second, because in order to speak/think freely each person has to be granted a symmetrical position, equal discursive authority and control over *what* is being said and *how* it’s being said. A way to diagnose whether *creative talking* is possible is to make a quick assessment of the kind of elements conditioning symbolic interaction between participants in the very context were the discussion is to take place. Any asymmetric positions could hinder the establishment of peer-to-peer dialogue resulting in partial arguments and/or silenced opinions. Such exchanges presupposed the dissolution of my own status as a foreign researcher, which was made possible through the exercise of the *nepantlera* subjectivity previously described. Acting as such, I made sure people knew that I wasn’t thrusting anything out, “the good, the bad and ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned,” and allowed myself as a participant observer to sustain contradictions in order to turn ambivalence “into something else” (Anzaldúa, 1999:101). It was while engaging in *creative talking* that my *nepantlera* mode of interaction became the most useful, because such discussions allowed me to assist my interlocutors in the process of “de/reconstructing their selves” while making them join me in the process of seeing through alternative positions.
The value of *creative talking* as a workable method lies beyond the fact that it actively fights asymmetrical power relations between researcher and ‘subjects’ which even if discursively formulated, have been internalized and thus are continuously brought into practice. The method’s value lies in its (literally) telling properties: by listening to whatever people has to say about reality as they experience it, you learn not only about the creative strategies they use to cope with it, but about specific aspects of that reality that they find particularly troubling. The kind of dialogue *creative talking* promotes tends to result in a seamless, nuanced, metaphorically rich long account of already complex phenomena, so in order to get the juice out of it, it is necessary to combine it with method grounded in the analysis of data and no longer only in ensuring its as-unbiased-as-possible production.

**Cross-referencing narratives**

The point in which the *nepantlera* subjectivity, the skill of hanging out, and the potential of *creative talking* all converge, is in that they push for a form of data production that doesn’t privilege the researcher’s point of view over that of the people she works with. Consequently, a coherent method of analysis would have to imply finding “something in one’s own experience that is analogous to, or approximates, the experience of the other, and may thereby bridge the gap between the two” (Jackson, 2005:31). What I refer to as *cross-referencing narratives* is a comparative method inspired partially in the structural analysis of texts, partially in a social hermeneutics, both over a canvas pre-arranged through grounded-theory (see next section). Much in line with a phenomenological method, *cross-referencing narratives* should be seen as a way of shedding light on the ways in which intersubjectivity reveals itself in the ways we arrange and play with objects, images, ideas, words and others, as well as the reasons and justifications we give, in the form of stories and ethical statements, for making such arrangements (Jackson, 2005:37).

These stories and statements are taken as narrative constructions that regardless of being full of implicit meanings, can only be understood explicitly through scholarly exegesis (de Certeau, 1984:160). Here it is important to point out the epistemological question. This is, that people don’t care so much about whether something is right or wrong, rational or irrational, because what matters for them is “what they gain from a belief, and the social issue of whether their belief is recognized and shared” (Jackson, 2005:173). This should be taken as axiomatic when dealing with narratives on witchcraft, which I’ve strived to keep under this light.
In vivo dissections / The art of coding

The kind of analysis to be performed is a combination of hermeneutic, narrative and discourse analysis. Briefly put, hermeneutic analysis consists in “the search for meanings and their interconnection in the expression of culture” (Bernard, 2006:475), while the goal in narrative analysis is “to discover regularities in how people tell stories or give speeches” (ibid). Discourse analysis takes into account people’s ways of speaking and interacting as markers of culture, this is, of internalized discourses and their expression in practices. A careful transcription of +30 hours of recorded interviews resulted in +250 pages of raw text, which turned ‘floating’ data into a fixed material that I could work ‘hands on’ with. Then, there came up the printing, highlighting, cutting, and regrouping of clips, quotes and file names in order to create a thematic index. Due to the volume of data collected and the months that had passed since its collection, working ‘hands on’ became crucial to get re-acquainted with the materials. “Thou shall know thy ethnography,” I used to repeat like a mantra whenever I felt like throwing my laptop out the window. Creating a thematic index was also a means to order chaos and thus discover node-like themes that would later become my thesis topics. I did it intuitively, pushed by need, much like new students do when they’re lost in Uppsala and turn everywhere to look for the needles of its cathedral. The steps I followed turned out to be those recommended by grounded-theory: I identified categories and key concepts that emerged from the transcripts, grouped them together, compared them, and linked them as clusters to wider phenomena described by the theorists I was reading, all through in vivo coding, this is, using people’s own words, often metaphors, to name themes (i. e. “God is asleep” and “the mermaid eats you” to refer to “feelings of collective abandonment” and “the destructive quality of power”). Much of the analysis was, in this sense, developed from the start through painstakingly dissecting the materials however preserving their original symbolic potency.

Reflections on method and ethical considerations

Effectively becoming a nepantlera was by far the most difficult task I faced throughout my research. “To pass over the bridge to something else,” write Anzaldúa and Keating (2002:557), “you’ll have to give up partial organizations of self, erroneous bits of knowledge, outmoded beliefs of who you are, your comfortable identities... You’ll have to leave parts of your self behind.” In my personal experience, the transition from a mestiza consciousness to a nepantlera subjectivity started when I moved to Sweden and became an immigrant in 2008. Because of this ‘initiation’ and the pains it conveyed, I was aware of the risks of entering the nepantla, that ‘in-between’ feature of the self that makes it grow roots in its unescapable rootlessness. Such
self is only meaningful as long as it acts as a messenger and mediator between groups whose very existence as separate entities she’s trying to break. One year on, I try to stick with liminality as a source of creativity and not of alienation.

Leaving the difficulties associated with having to break down oneself in order to fit in the experience of others, there is also a lesson to be learned on language. A classical anthropological debate, the consensus has it that being fluent in a language is more or less a guarantee for successful field immersion. Wrong. You might believe you’re communicating, but these little ‘obvious’ things you assume are getting across the way you intend them may actually be understood with totally different meanings. And with ‘things’ I mean everything, from simple familial terms (brother, son) to material (car, suit) and immaterial institutions (loyalty, friendship). Even more than not speaking a language, speaking a language with native proficiency during cross-cultural communication can turn into a play of smoke and mirrors. You might believe you understand what people tell you, but you realize you don’t the moment they show up at your door to arrange your marriage. Such things happen especially when you strive to conduct yourself not as “a civilized man among savages,” but as a “foreigner at home, a ‘savage’ in the midst of ordinary culture” (de Certeau, 1984:13-14). People can capitalize in your social incompetence because your language proficiency makes it invisible to you.

One more aspect to reflect upon was my constant struggle to not let the spirit of cynicism take over my writing. One short example should suffice. In early 2015, I spent a couple of months in Monterrey, northern Mexico. One afternoon, while going through a book I wasn’t familiar with, I read that Equatorial Guinea has “a society and an economy in decadence,” that it’s the victim of “a terror that reaches foreigners: Nigerian and Cameroonian laborers,” a place where people suffer “all kinds of humiliations, arbitrary detentions, torture, murders, corruption, drug trafficking, fixed elections, censorship, etc.” (Liniger-Goumaz, 1996:9). Right at the end of the paragraph, I couldn’t hold it and broke into a loud laughter. “Are you describing Mexico or what?! Well I have something to tell you. As true as I’m sitting right here eating Cheetos, life in Equatorial Guinea, as it does in Mexico, goes on.” A couple of weeks prior to reading the fragments cited above, it had broken the news of the arrest of one of the men responsible for the deaths of 72 central and South American immigrants found in a mass grave back in 2010, not very far from where my parents live. Outsiders might or might not know it, but people in ‘democratic’ Mexico, especially the families of the disappeared, phrase the violence they experience as the product of an ongoing war. It was at those instances

---

33 On the Masacre de San Fernando, see “Zetas ejecutaron por la espalda a los 72 migrantes; no pudieron pagar rescate.” La Jornada. In http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2010/08/26/politica/002n1pol [accessed 11/07/2015]
that I held to my memories of a music-filled Malabo and to my hangies’ words as they said to me that “here, whether thanks to this mister or to God, we’re in peace.”

You are your only tool: coming to terms with it all
Bernard (2006:344) argues that “when it’s done right, participant observation turns fieldworkers into instruments of data collection and data analysis.” The word “instrument” is key here. That’s perhaps the biggest lesson to be learned regarding method as it developed throughout my fieldwork in Spanish-speaking Africa. Much despite tradition, technology and positivist remnants still bugging the discipline, whether you like it or not, as an anthropologist you are your only tool. So after every ravaging fieldwork experience, you pick yourself up and realize you’re not broken: it’s just the self making room for the stuff it has learned.
One night after dinner at their little flat in central Malabo, my hosts, a couple in their mid-30s, told me that “nothing in this country makes sense.” I understood what they meant. Throughout my time in the capital, people had referred to me all kinds of surreal experiences they’ve had while interacting with anything from infrastructure to authorities. Of all, those relating to speech practices, perhaps because of their otherwise expected objectivity, seemed to be the most unsettling. I was often told how public figures would spin and twist terms and ideas to the point of tailoring/wearing the equivalent to a verbal new-clothes-of-the-emperor: among the audience, nobody seemed to know what it was they were supposed to understand, yet everybody pretended not only that they did, but that they shared pretty much whatever opinion was being put forward. Such dynamics allowed public figures to give political speeches void of all coherence, which in turn granted the audience the secret conviction that, because whatever they were about to hear would probably not make any sense, they could as well stop listening altogether. Between the one who spoke nonsense and the one who didn’t listen there was the meaningful abyss of grey noise: intersubjective room for creative and thus rebellious (re)interpretation. Such poetical freedom to make mean 34 appeared to be often overwritten, however, by the more cognitively affordable response of automatic repetition. The streets bear witness as to how passers-by used to go around reproducing 35 ‘obviously’ important sentences, verbal new-clothes-of-the-emperor, especially when these happened to be embedded in the semiosphere of an actual public event, as it was the case of Women’s Day 2014, when in an attempt to stop women from neglecting household duties to get drunk with their girlfriends, the maxima in the air was that “women mistake equality of opportunities with equality of equality.” 36 If people felt the least confused, that didn’t stop them from spreading the phrase not only as officially endorsed knowledge on the matter, but as proof of their own unequivocal awareness of the problem that women’s misbehaving on the 8th of March represented for their husbands, children, and society.

34 In the active voice, as if freely and deliberately creating meanings, and after re-appropriating figures and speeches, even new discursive vehicles for them.
35 Citation “is the means by which the ‘real’ is instituted.” To cite is thus “to give reality to the simulacrum produced by a power, by making people believe that others believe in it, but without providing any believable object” (de Certeau, 1984:188, 189).
36 Given men’s condemnatory attitudes regarding women’s neglect of household duties that day, I interpreted it as that women mistake equality of opportunities (rights) for gender equality (roles), but its ‘true’ meaning, if there was one, nobody could really explain it to me.
The tendency to twist concepts and ideas partly for the purpose of originality, partly to secure one’s own position in relation to the other by deepening the gray noise, partly because of true conviction mixed with epistemological complexity, temporal orders and a struggle between native and foreign values, seems to have been part of the Equatoguinean national ‘rhetoric habitus’ (to be conceptually mischievous) for at least the past 50 years. No doubt some of its features could be traced longer back in time, but it was around the 1960s that the world got to hear it in voce as it was embodied in the speeches of Equatoguinean nationalist politicians which were as loud as the colonial ones that had previously dominated the discursive landscape. Take, for instance, Macias Nguema praising Hitler’s fight for Africa’s right to self-determination. Indeed, parallel to the threefold process of internalization-objectification-externalization postulated by a sociology of knowledge and its social construction of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1991 [1966]), the tendency of individuals to re-appropriate that which has been forced upon them together with its subsequent re-formulation and spreading through ‘informal’ channels is of course not exclusive to Equatorial Guinea. Such tendency is not a tendency, it’s a fact of social survival and political action rooted deep in the heart of the postcolonial state (Mbembe, 2001:40), where even if the language of power is often ‘indigestible’, individuals find themselves having to master it in order to legitimize personal claims in wider struggles for influence (Bayart, 1993:173, 250). The key point here is that mastery works both ways, and languages have double lives: that which is praised and respected, can also be mocked and ridiculed. Such re-appropriations of figures, speeches and tales also extend to places, objects, images, symbols and practices. Between the one who spoke nonsense and the one who didn’t listen there was the meaningful abyss of grey noise: spaces for people reconfiguring truths, challenging speeches through practices. The very men who incessantly preached that “women mistake equality of opportunities with equality of equality” and condemned their neglect of household duties on Women’s Day, ended up being the same men throwing thousands of CFA francs for expensive champagne to their girlfriends and lovers, who were, of course, somebody else’s wives.

This chapter aims to look at the practices of enunciation and re-appropriation that people deploy in order to reconcile social reality with personal experience. I take it as axiomatic that social reality is discursively constructed and that enunciation, due to its intersubjective character, transcends the long problematized dichotomy of individual and society. Furthermore, I take enunciation to be the product and the means of all kinds of strategies for reality construction and maintenance both at the collective and individual level —levels that are, as I have already suggested, to be taken as interconnected and synergic. I propose that the creative
nature of this triple process (internalization…) stems from the self and bounces back to it once it is re-internalized as experience through social practices, thus making it not only a social reality changer, but a Self-poietic booster. In other words, if individuals have the innate talent to challenge and push for changes in their social reality through the strategies for social survival that they develop, they themselves are constantly created along with it. Self-poiesis or self-making is, in this context, the endless creative production of individual selves in relation to their strategies of social reality construction. Their apparent fixity takes place after such selves evolve first into notions of personhood and later into complex identities. While it is through identity that selves are collectively organized, it is by no means their only mode of action. Between selves, personhoods and identities lie multiple roles, contexts and networks. This potential number of interstices for social engagement makes the amount, kinds and levels of, for example, political action, overwhelmingly explicit. This is exactly why it would be naive to keep polarizing the global discourse on Equatorial Guinea in terms of oppressors and oppressed, victimizers and victims: research on the genesis of the postcolonial state and its processes of social stratification has shown how politics in Africa (and thus social change) actually takes place bottom-up (ibid, p. 208). But agency too is, pragmatically and theoretically, a double-edged sword: acknowledging that passive victims are in fact active agents would mean acknowledging that their practices not only have the potential to push for social change, but also to create and maintain the very power structures that are supposed to constrain their actions in the first place. My aim is to show how such practices are complex negotiations, tactics and strategies developed by individuals after contextualized need, in order to help themselves and their groups manage their way through a tangled net of symbols, affiliations, objects and discourses —a world they’ve internalized as everyday reality. The study of enunciation and practices are therefore fundamental to understand Self-poiesis and personhood maintenance in the ‘oppressive’ context of contemporary Malabo.

Victim dealerships

While preparing for my fieldwork, I was asked by the president of an NGO to send him an e-mail with my research topic in order for him to forward it to others active in Equatorial Guinea-related matters. I did as he asked, specifying that the purpose of my project was “to study the strategies that Equatoguineans develop in order to sustain a sense of self and carry on living with dignity in socially oppressive environments.” When I later received the massive e-mail from him, I realized he had edited my document, eliminating the words “with dignity.” It would be a lie to say that it didn’t bothered me, but I wasn’t that surprised. I knew ‘victims’ aren’t
supposed to live dignified lives, and his business, though carried with courage and surely the best of intentions, was like all other NGO businesses—a victim dealership.

Between a polarized narrative presented by the diaspora in which Equatoguineans are the desperate victims of a genocidal regime, and the complicit silence these victims endure from powerful extracting actors, the locals are left alone with the NGO discourse on human rights, which isn’t always concerned with those instances of human dignity which, because of their cultural specificity, might lie beyond the values (i.e. private property) it has built a whole moral and legal corpus around (see Englund, 2006; Clarke, 2009). One of the most traditional critiques on the topic relates to the paradoxical nature of NGOs pursuit of justice and democracy: in consolidating themselves as (de)legitimators in the international political arena, organizations tend to lean towards political alignments while simultaneously leaving aside the very object of their concern. As a result, “the discourse of human rights is rarely the discourse of those without rights… it is a discourse, not of the powerless, but of the powerful on behalf of the powerless, who all too often assume some kind of ‘moral ownership’ of Third World suffering as a license to intervene in the administration of Third World societies,” undermining in the process “people’s existential quest for greater autonomy” (Jackson, 2005:166-167, 177). Another critique phrases the oversimplification of NGO claims, which are often presented in thin reports and press releases which don’t leave room for further contextualization. A third critique goes that it’s “easier to attack institutionalized wrongs rather than deal with “the more ‘generic’ issues of human greed, suspicion, power lust and brutality on a comprehensive basis” (Fegley, 1989:252-253). The bottom line is that without a local “victim”, international justice instances would lose legitimacy and international interventions could be deprived of a moral/humanitarian dimension, becoming exposed for what most of them actually are: tools in a scramble for resources and influence at the cost of those whose vulnerability forces them to enter all kinds of asymmetrical partnerships.

As argued before, I part ways with human rights-mediated discourses not only to problematize them, but to create discursive room for people’s taken-for-granted role as passive victims to be (re)evaluated, because more often than not, ‘victims’ refuse to play their part but are seldom given the chance to speak against their self-proclaimed advocates. Victims’ attitudes present NGOs with a difficult issue: to rectify would imply calling into question the legitimacy of their universalistic claims. The common produce is the treatment of victims as quasi infantile beings incapable of knowing what is best for them. Whatever likeness to (neo)colonial paternalism is certainly not coincidental.
I find it necessary to touch upon the subject of victimization through discourse because even though that was the image I was fed by the materials I encountered during my pre-fieldwork research, the people I met throughout my time in the country were definitely no victims in the helpless, bare-presence sense. Most of them were big-mouthed, openly critical individuals doing the best they could with whatever resources they had at hand. Children and youths have no memory of the social trauma their parents and/or grandparents endured, and seem carefully hopeful for the future. I say ‘carefully’ because, as postcolonial subjects, they’ve been socialized in forms of otherness that still have the potential to alienate them from the global world, its aesthetics, and its values (reappropriation is a topic we’ll go back to later on).

A good closing to our argument on the re-phrasing of victims is given by Mauricio and Esteban, two 14 year-old cousins attending the 7th grade who help their grandma to sell food outside their house in central Malabo. Esteban’s favorite subject is maths, “because he likes [counting] money.” He’d like to go to the university, and to become “a doctor, or a football player,” although “more a football player than a doctor.” Mauricio’s favorite subject is social sciences, but he’d like to go to the university to study “the mine,” this is, soils and metals:

ESTEBAN: —This country is wrong.
GRANNE: —This house.
ESTEBAN: —This house is right. But outside, the city, is all wrong. Because in this country there’s nothing for the children.
ADELAIDA:—What do you want there to be?
ESTEBAN: —Places to play, parks. Good things. Can I tell you something? If I become somebody when I’m old, like a football player, and they ask me to come back to this country, I’ll tell them to give me one billion.
ADELAIDA:—One billion? A million millions?
ESTEBAN: —Or one hundred millions. If they don’t want to, they can forget about it. Because this country has a whole lot of money.

The fact that Esteban goes from one billion to a hundred million suggests that his going back to Equatorial Guinea as a famous football player is not a question of money per se, but of being properly invited to take this rightful share of the ‘national cake’. He has to get a lot of money from his country because the country has a lot of money to offer him. It’s also noteworthy the fact that our conversation started with him making an open critique of it (“This country is wrong”), as if it were an automatic reaction, a reflect-like response, which will, however, slowly change to a rather optimistic view later on. For Esteban’s cousin, Mauricio, an ideal future seems more a matter of family, although the boy realizes the importance of money for the realization of his projects:

MAURICIO: —I’d come back to renovate our business, which we started when we were little, I’d make it a big restaurant, and have my grandma’s name on it. This, if I go to study abroad [in order to get a good job
and have the money to pay for the renovations]. And well, here, in Equatorial Guinea, we [the family] have a lot of lost lands, so we’d try to get them back when we’re older. And then, I think it’d be good to start a company in here, so that I can come on vacation.

ESTEBAN: —I won’t lie to you. In this country, we’re now taking care of things. Before it was worse. Now the places are clean, everything goes well because now there’s money in the country. Before, we didn’t have all these things. Now, I like my country a little bit. They’re renovating everything. It’s better than before.

ADELAIDA: —There’s a lot of building going on.

ESTEBAN: —They’re building houses, fixing up the old [military] camps…

GRANNIE: —…stealing our lands!

The kids’ grandma had been sitting somewhere else, far from us. A reaction to her sudden intervention, Esteban rolls his eyes. I realize this is not the first time he’s heard his grandma complaining about ‘lost lands’, but the boy doesn’t seem to be deeply moved by the woman’s indignation. More or less in a dragging tone, as if more out of consideration towards her than to please himself, he continues:

ESTEBAN: —Yes, they’re stealing land from us, that’s also true, they steal other people’s lands.

GRANNIE: —El Guineano doesn’t steal, he just takes! [she yells from afar].

MAURICIO: —And regarding the president, he has a dream for Equatorial Guinea. He’s always saying on TV that by Horizonte2020 Guinea will change and it’s true. Guinea is changing, little by little.

ESTEBAN: —But I don’t think it’s going to change completely.

ADELAIDA: —What is it that won’t change?

ESTEBAN: —How people are. Guineanos, well, some are good, others are more like… Well, to me, the bad ones are the Kombe, and the Fang. The Bubi too.

MAURICIO: —They discriminate among themselves.

GRANNIE: —Among ourselves.

MAURICIO: —Among themselves.

GRANNIE: —OURSELVES.

This time it’s Mauricio who rolls his eyes after his grandma’s repeated interventions. As if to avoid a confrontation between the two, Esteban takes the word:

ESTEBAN: —Vale. I won’t lie to you. What I see is that in this country, the only ones who have money are the Fang. Because only they get to occupy [high] positions. If a Bubi gets promoted, they kill him. This country is like that. They just want those of their own blood having something within the government. If you’re not of their blood, they kill you once you’ve been promoted.

As any receptive reader would see, there are more than a few interesting elements in the kids’ conversation. Beside those already noted (i.e. the condemnatory fashion in which the exchange is started just to give pass to optimism as it develops), we can emphasize their early awareness of a discrepancy in the rhythm in which change is taking place in two different
spheres, the social and the infrastructural: the country might look prettier, but its people will remain the same. In line with the boys’ enunciative procedure (the formulation of ‘people’ as ‘Guineanos’ who discriminate among ‘themselves’, not ‘ourselves’) it is obvious that their discourse on the national ethos implies a disjunction between their individually experienced selves and an imagined national identity. As it will be shown later on, such disjunction is a recurrent feature in people’s enunciative practices. What becomes salient in this specific example is how the boys identify ‘the bad’ Guineanos with the Kombe (Ndowé), the Fang and the Bubi: while the ethnic tag becomes a means to phrase negative difference, the three groups are said to be equally ‘bad’ and thus no different from one another. Interestingly enough, these three groups combined make up for the absolute majority of the Equatoguinean population, leaving only the quantitatively unrepresentative Annobonés group out.37 This points toward a rather revealing aspect of the boys’ self and collective awareness: el Guineano, as an ethnified self, is ‘bad’, but however generalized this badness is, ‘I’/‘we’ (as ‘we’ don’t identify with ‘them’) are definitely not a part of it. A final aspect to be noted about the kids’ conversation is their acute awareness on political violence. While the image of two African 14 year-old boys discussing ethnically motivated political assassinations in an open everyday manner would scandalize the conveniently white conscious of the ‘more developed’ fellows, the fact remains that these kids have been socialized in ways and systems where one’s means of struggle make Western values somewhat redundant. One doesn’t need to condone murder in order to urge for the need to stop focusing on our own values/feelings/reactions as if they were the axis of everybody else’s worlds. These don’t have to be, and are not, the blueprint to which everybody else’s life ought to be based upon. I’ve chosen to focus on Esteban and Mauricio, and to prioritize their own values/feelings/reactions: their highly impersonal descriptions were indicative of a common knowledge of political violence as a de-personalized means to control resources (‘high positions’) by limiting access to them (only those of ‘their own blood’). It is in this light that their words have to be seen, and no through the yellow lens of ethnocentric sensationalism.

Jackson (2005:xxx-xxxi) argues that “a person’s capacity to speak and to act must not be conflated with the bourgeois notion of agency as individual will” because “notions of agency as a withholding of the ego… are no less modes of agency than willful striving.” This citation

37 Perhaps due to its distant location and low demographics, the island of Annobón doesn’t seem to have any direct material impact on life in Malabo. However, the island and its people remain major figures in popular culture: Annobón is often romanticized as a place of authenticity and innocence, a primordial paradise of-sorts, where people still live according to tradition, ‘clean’ from the influences of urban life. See i. e. Ávila Laurel, J. T. “La Isla de Annobón: El refugio de las musas.” Afro-Hispanic Review. No. 28, Vol. 2, 2009. pp. 331-334.
would be enough to contend that ‘victims’ are indeed actors despite their assumed silence and powerlessness, but my conversation with Mauricio and Esteban proves that in Malabo passivity and silence are not even acceptable attributes to be endowing people with. This is true especially of the younger generations, who are bold and hopeful, and their attitudes are, of course, substantially different than those of their elders. The attitudes of the two cousins are obviously different from their grandma’s. Her grudges are not theirs, even though a sense of legitimacy of her claims on ‘stolen land’ is being handed down to them, by her, in the name of family history and identity. While it remains to be seen, a fair prediction is that when the kids grow older and enter the messy network system of social life in Malabo, they will re-appropriate their grandma’s claims and transform them into whatever is suitable according to the circumstances: the right to get a job, a means to broker studies abroad, a convenient marriage. This is, of course, all a matter of discursive resourcefulness. In practice, as Mauricio said, it’s possible he’ll go on with the family business. This is because in Malabo, despite appearances and extreme forms of display, people not always are in function of what they have. Family, identity and history are of as much worth as are cars, money and properties. For example, I got to hear about an old lady living in a small apartment on a second floor, above a home hardware store, close to plaza de E’Waiso. She was the widow of Eulogio Oyó Riqueza, a powerful Bubi leader who together with Obiang Nguema had planned the coup that overthrew president Macías. The woman was said to be living a rather quiet life, and could be seen selling macará (battered deep fried banana bits) in the streets, not because she lacked the means or the networks to feed herself in a ‘better’ way, but because like many others, she had lived through “the time in which there was nothing” and thus had kept “doing what they used to do when there was nothing.” According to my hangies, to find young people engaging in those kinds of ‘low’ activities was really hard. However, when such ‘low’ activities are performed by children or the elderly they tend to be praised, suggesting a dimension of proud traditionality at play in the collective imaginary. And just as the engagement in ‘low’ activities when one is a ‘somebody’ is praised, so is the engagement in ‘high’ activities when one is a ‘nobody’. Personal connections to history icons through extended kin relations is constantly deployed as a powerful means to boost a person’s self, in spite, for example, of poverty, given that such connections, beyond their value as symbolic capital, also carry along the possibility of climbing relations and thus obtaining material gains in the future. When praised for his strong social commitment, a not so well-off comebackee was told that he was “proving to be a worthy descendant of the late Acacio Mañé,” Equatorial Guinea’s foremost national hero.
What this acts of ‘making mean’ suggest is that respect, admiration and oddity are a different kind of assets, which given their symbolic quality, might be translatable into material goods through the manipulation of their ‘objective’ social value. In other words, people elevate material or immaterial values depending on the circumstances but always with the same purpose: to promote self-esteem through the expansion of one’s self. This double disposition to meaning and the ways and settings in which people choose to prioritize one set of values or the other talks about the freedom they have to write, according to need after context, the social texts they want to read, regardless of these being about people, discourses or material objects.

Writers, readers and texts
Before any anthropological brows start to rise, let’s make one thing clear: this thesis is no literary analysis. It is as analogies that the concepts of writers, readers and texts are to be understood. Writers are producers, readers are consumers, and texts are productions, constructions: objects, discourses, social realities. I argue, however, against the historical identification of reading with the passive consumption of texts, merely because the efficiency of production depends on the inertia of consumption, a “legend” that is necessary for the system that distinguishes and privileges authors, educators, revolutionaries, in a word, “producers,” in contrast with those who do not produce. By challenging “consumption” as it is conceived and (of course) confirmed by these “authorial” enterprises, we may be able to discover creative activity where it has been denied that any exists (de Certeau, 1984:167, 169).

In other words: the incontestability of a discourse rests on the assumption that those upon whom it is forced will receive it without reformulating it, a belief that has resulted from class ideology and centuries of Other construction, and that is fundamental in order to justify distinguishing those who produce the discourse (i.e. writers, ‘the first world’) from those who don’t (i.e. readers, ‘the third world’). Much in line with our critique of the figure of the victim, the key point is the need to challenge consumption (i.e. reading, receiving exogenous discourse/values/meanings) as a passive enterprise. Only then will it be possible to discover freedom and agency where it has been denied that any exist.

38 ‘Reality as text’ might remit the reader to a classical anthropological tradition of ‘culture as text’ (see Schneider, 1987). However, between the Geertzian enterprise and the present piece there are substantial differences in theory, focus and method. First, I’m not concerned with building interpretive authority –whatever meanings I suggest people express are their own; I have, as much, tried to encourage reflection. Second, my methodology is dialogic, not scriptural: I’m not concerned so much with the possibilities of my own ethnographic writing as with finding, through peer-to-peer conviviality, ways to explore people’s acts of social text reappropriation and remaking. The focus lies not in the anthropologist as ethnographic writer, but on people who as active readers are in fact the writers of social texts we might or might not have access to, let alone interpret and transcribe ‘accurately’.
Writing, then, consists in constructing “a text that has power over the exteriority from which it has first been isolated” (ibid, p. 134). In *reading*, what comes in is something ‘received’. In *writing*, what comes out is a ‘product’. The scriptural enterprise thus “transforms or retains within itself what it receives from its outside and creates internally the instruments for an appropriation of the external space” (ibid, p. 135). In this context, the goal of *meaning* is “social efficacy,” the manipulation of an exteriority, control over one’s reality.

The concept of reader/consumer as writer/producer is crucial not only to rephrase victims as agents, but to acknowledge that there is a creative act taking place. The reader invents in texts stuff they don’t necessarily state, combines fragments and creates something new, introducing “plurality and difference into the written system of a society and a text…, [the reader thus] deterritorializes himself, oscillating in a nowhere between what he invents and what changes him” (ibid, p. 173). The practice of social-text reading is then not only a practice, but a creative practice. The fact that is ‘creative’ means that it encompasses creativity and inventiveness, capacities at work (rather automatically, consciously or unconsciously) while problem-solving, figuring out how to satisfy a need and/or to fulfill one’s wishes. The fact that is a practice renders it not only doable, but masterable. People who are constantly exposed to challenging circumstances therefore become masters at resource manipulation and opportunity spotting. However, when challenging circumstances become too overwhelming, the creative practice of reading/writing reality can also become a means to escape, since “to read is to be elsewhere, where they are not, in another world… to create dark corners,” private spaces for freedom of action and enunciation when we find ourselves living in “the hell of social alienation” (ibid). Being so, creativity is one of these weapons the alienated can well afford and use in order to feel themselves in control of whatever they experience.

**The rebellion of the chicken**

I got to witness how people’s creativity is put at work to fight social alienation one night, as I recovered from a heavy dose of intravenous antimalarial meds. Miguel, one my closest hangies, had been bringing me food, making sure I was eating well after each treatment. That night we sat on the raw concrete floor of his room together with two other people, each chewing on a chicken thigh soaked in a mix of Maggi juice, mayonnaise and red hot chili paste. Chicken had been the first food I had eaten when I arrived in the city, and, together with canned sardines and squid, had remained the main ingredient in my diet throughout the months I spent there. Chicken wings roasted on improvised grills fed with firewood on the sidewalk was Malabo’s street food per excellence, and everybody I knew was eating them pretty much all the time,
except for my landlord, a very reclusive middle aged man raised in Cameroon, who was grossed out every time I’d come home with my little chicken-wing aluminum foil bundle. According to him, chicken wings were leftovers that should be deemed unfit for human consumption: he thought of them as dog food, which made me wonder whether his refusal to eat them was deep down a strategy of self-differentiation. Besides pepesup, a thin spicy fish soup people eat on early weekend mornings to cure “body and soul” after a night of heavy drinking (see Appendix, Photo 22), chicken served with banana was the ultimate popular food. The historical lack of a livestock industry makes the custom traceable a long time back. It’s documented how a colonial officer stationed in the island of Annobón “had the luck that his predecessor left him his hen hut, thanks to which he could eat chicken all year-round,” and that “he was practically eating nothing else” (Abad, 2009:313). For Miguel, my closest hangie, the hyperconsumption of chicken in the country was beyond meaningful, and so it was for his friend Andrés:

MIGUEL:— The black man and the chicken are married. There’s a contract between them.

ANDRÉS:— I say if there’s an animal which in case of rebelling against humanity would make us go through a terrifying time, it is the chicken. The chicken is one of the most consumed birds in the whole world.

MIGUEL:— The chicken is not consumed, it is abused. This is an abuse. There are more chicken farms than farms. Chicken is everywhere.

ADELAIDA:— That’s an awesome argument for a story. The rebellion of the chicken.

ANDRÉS:— I’m always thinking about it. Chicken and Pig. Pig is yet another oppressed.

MIGUEL:— The chicken are up to their beaks of being eaten! [Miguel stands up and draws a chicken on a piece of plywood] Let’s put a hat on him, because he’s up to his head... He’s up to his eggs! Look at him: he’s smiling and all, but it’s a malicious smile, don’t pay any attention to him. This is what the chicken does: he knows where he’s going and he smiles at you to wish you a bad digestion, an indigestion. He says ‘Son of a bitch, you’ll go down with me!’.

ANDRÉS:— Have you eaten monkey? These are our cousins who didn’t evolve. —Miguel says yes with his head.

ADELAIDA:— Have you? How does it taste?

MIGUEL:— Like chicken! Hahaha! It tastes like chicken! All meat tastes like chicken! Crocodile, snake... it’s all chicken!... Malabo lives inside an egg, [he draws an egg with a sign on it:] “IS THERE CHICKEN?” See? Now the chicken wants to eat chicken. [He draws a suit and a pair of pants on top of the chicken’s comb:] He might be wearing a suit, but it’s gotten way over his head...

ANDRÉS:— Have you asked yourselves what would happen if the world would run out of hens? We wouldn’t have the eggs to do anything! Hahaha!

MIGUEL:— Well, look [he makes a circular movement with his hand, pointing to each and one of us]: the clan is getting bigger. The chicken family is growing.

Perhaps the most powerful original metaphor I came across during my time in the country, the figure of the chicken became, from then on, a recurrent trope in our conversations on the social order and the often surreal forms that social life takes in Malabo. The chicken, the globally abused, he who had once found himself on a position to rebel against the tyranny of

39 In most Spanish speaking countries, “eggs” is a metaphor for ‘balls’, ‘testicles’. 
human consumption, had developed a taste for chicken himself. He was strolling the streets wearing a suit well over his head, on top of his comb, as if showing off his new quasi human status. He might still be a chicken, but he could now afford the luxury of feeding off his own: other chicken desperately waiting for their turn to eat chicken too. Malabo was contained in an egg, the foremost symbol of the world. Inside there was nothing but a mass of confused poultry feeding off itself. That the chicken family was growing was, simultaneously, a hopeful and a scornful remark: we, the chicken family, were now aware of what was happening, but it remained to be seen whether the chicken would rise. And if so, against what.

If my translating skills do it justice, the playful dialogue between Miguel and Andrés will serve as a perfect example of how creativity opens spaces —‘blank pages’— for people to write more meaningful phrasings of reality. The fact that there’s no such thing as an immutable discourse together with their ability to master practice allows readers/writers to escape “from the law of each text in particular, and from that of the social milieu” (de Certeau, 1984:174). Jokes and colorful stories, metaphors such as the “rebellion of the chicken,” promote a re-appropriation of discourse through an alternative formulation of the reality it conveys. This process of reality (re)phrasing is making it possible for Equatoguineans to “divert the system without actually leaving it” (ibid, p. xiii, 32). It is through metaphors of the social order that people are concealing that which might be considered dangerous knowledge, while at the same time disseminating it through private channels. These two aspects, concealing and disseminating, combine to make reading a process that results not only in the illusory prolongation of an official text, but on a “common poetics” brewing beneath it (ibid).

As it will be discussed later on, contemporary Equatoguinean society is a classless society. The dynamism of the postcolony mixed with people’s capacity to write social texts makes everyday life a poietic practice —and a self-poietic one, because as the following chapter will show, just as people change social texts, they too change along with them.

**Outlining the place of Self in the anthropological project**

As informal writers, consumers are uncredited producers, “poets of their own acts, silent discoverers of their own paths in the jungle of functionalist rationality” (de Certeau, 1984:xviii). An analysis of everyday practices would then go about scrutinizing the forms that the informal takes as well as the creativity of groups and its intrinsically subversive nature. It has been argued that the foundation of these enunciative procedures is the figure of analogy. Because they do not spread as explicit knowledge through mainstream channels, subversive metaphors become acceptable, or at least hard to attack, given the impossibility of pinpointing specific
sources (thus sometimes the need to engage in scapegoating), and the obvious difficulty of formally gathering bouncy expressions of informal knowledge in order to insure its material and symbolic destruction, as Western practices of public book burning once intended. From this perspective, and through the eyes of those who internalize them in order to know how to better manipulate them, acknowledging the authority of rules is fundamental.

The whole existential business of reality-writing then is of a strategic nature: people internalize discourse and transform it as they see fit according to their own agendas, later bringing it back into society through practice. The wider social text is slowly but continuously updated according to how ‘coherent’ it is with respect to the practices it is supposed to structure. Eventually, official discourse changes only to be internalized again by a people who will repeat the whole process. This enunciation-based reality changer mimics the cognitive procedures already sketched by a sociology of knowledge and symbolic interaction theories in general (see Berger & Luckmann, 1991 [1966]; Mead, 2009 [1934]; Goffman, 1959; Cooley, 1992 [1922]). Despite their paramount importance for gaining an anthropological understanding of human life as it is experienced through culture, the repercussions that intersubjective reality (re)phrasing has on the formation of individual and collective identities have been studied predominantly by social psychologists and/or sociologists (Tajfel, 1974; Brubaker, 2003; 2004; Kedourie, 1993 [1966]; Calhoun, 1994; 1995). Why this line of inquiry didn’t become an openly followed path by anthropologists already at the time of its formulation (with the obvious exception of Barth, 1969) can only by explained in terms of a zealous attitude of discipline self-differentiation and/or as a shortcoming product of two hundred years of building disciplinary authority through an exoticizing discourse and the attention it has paid, in line with the colonialist project it originally served, to emphasizing difference between ‘scientists’ and their ‘objects’ of study. But if one is to investigate the role that individual actors play in shaping macro dynamics, one cannot go around the self, its formation, the stuff that it’s composed of, and its potential for action. The importance of self-formation is key if one is ever to understand why it is only after an individual feels existentially threatened that he is driven “to set himself up as a producer of writing” (de Certeau, 1984:138). The creative act of reality-writing, then, cannot be properly accounted for without acknowledging the self who embarks on it as if in a project to produce his own place and being in the cultural order he struggles to master.
Under “a sky with an aura of pure evil”

In order to fully understand self-formation in Malabo it’s necessary to account for the specific environment in which the self is born as well as the processes that frame its development. My argument on the subject is based on four principles. First, that “social struggle is a zero sum game where the only prize is the accumulation of power” (Bayart, 1993:239-240). This means that in social life, which tends to be experienced as a competition for both material and immaterial resources, one person’s gains are usually equated with another person’s losses. I understand ‘power’ as ‘control’ in people’s striving for ‘balance’ —control over one’s self, the future, etcetera. Second, that implicit in the social struggle there’s an intersubjective one, which means that “in all human relationships the other is potentially a source of fulfillment and frustration, of being; and nonbeing” (Jackson, 2005:129-130). In other words, interacting with others can be positive or negative depending on whether the self experiences that it gains or losses from that interaction. Reciprocity is therefore key to maintain “the life affirming order of social life” (ibid, p. 58-59), which posits a fundamental problem for the Equatoguinean self, because in the postcolonial setting and in African societies in general reciprocity never implies a reduction of domination and inequality (Bayart, 1993:232). The third principle is that, because ‘passive victims’ are in fact actors capable of alternative forms of political action, politics in the postcolonial state is produced “from the bottom up” (ibid, p. 208). Fourth, that the reasons that guide people’s trajectories in the social struggle are highly individualistic and thus oriented towards self-fulfillment, which tends to be phrased as their lack of concern for the common wellbeing. Take, for instance my hangies’ constant chatter on people’s ‘evil’:

**MARÍA:** —It’s because people are EEE..
**EVERYBODY:**—EEEVIL!
**CARLOS:**—But like, INTENTIONALLY EVIL. Yes, yes, yes. You notice it. You feel it. I’ve always felt that in Equatorial Guinea there is a sky with an aura of pure evil shrouding Malabo and Bata.

As this chapter throws light on the kinds of interactions promoted by the postcolonial setting and how ‘a politics of the belly’ determines people’s strategies for sustaining a self amidst social/intersubjective struggle, its final objective is to encourage reflection on Equatorial Guinea’s endemic corruption, nepotism and ethnic discrimination, so widely sensationalized and capitalized on by the global media and engaged scholars alike.
Politics of the belly

The term “politics of the belly” or “la politique du ventre,” is a Cameroonian expression that builds on the idea that “those in power intend to ‘eat’ [where] ‘eating’ applies to the idea of accumulation, opening up possibilities of social mobility and enabling the holder of power to ‘set himself up’” (Bayart, 1993:xvii-xviii). To ‘set oneself up’ is to establish oneself through socioeconomic success. In a more existential way, it can also be identified with its consequences: self-creation and maintenance. The need to ‘eat’ (to accumulate) is everywhere, but nowhere is its expression more acute than in the state apparatus and the dynamics by which it functions. In Equatorial Guinea, a 45 year-old dictatorship with no signs of dying anytime soon, the need to ‘eat’ is identified with an inherent wish to perpetuate oneself in a position of power, an idea made explicit when people are faced, for example, with the more democratic prospect of a rotatory power. One afternoon, as my hangies and I engaged in creative talking, I got to hear how deeply rooted this need to ‘eat’ is in the collective consciousness:

ADELA:—Imagine some kind of democracy that would allow the more traditional family order to continue. If we already know that once a political force or a family comes to power the first thing it’ll do is to bring ‘all its people’ along, and if we’re trying to put together a democracy based on elections and a rotatory power, do you think it’d work for example, that instead of creating political parties, there could be families with political agendas? I mean, that a bunch of families put forward a project of nation and people are called to vote. Do you think it’d work? Tavo says it wouldn’t because the winning family would invariably try to perpetuate itself in power. Like, forever.

SANDY:—Of course it wouldn’t work! Only if there’s a civil war. Or if they exterminate up to the last baby of the family that wins, as they did with the Russian family, the tsar’s. Up to the last baby’s got to die. So that when somebody else tries to fight them, the national troops would have nobody to defend.

TAVO:—And those who would take over [after the extermination of the winning family’s last baby]. Would they try to stay in power forever too?

SANDY:—Logically! After the manioc we’ve eaten, there’s got to be paella every day!

Note how Sandy’s remark on manioc and paella echo the figure of accumulation metaphorized as ‘eating’. Moreover, the fact that manioc is a food for the non-powerful in contrast with paella, which is a food for the powerful, indicates that while everybody ‘eats’, not everybody ‘eats’ equally (ibid, p. 235). A politics of the belly recognizes the problem of inequality, whose vehicles are inherent to the genesis of the postcolonial state, as well as to the strategies of the actors, their procedures of accumulation and the world of political make-believe (ibid, p. ix). While inequality is by no means a feature exclusive of African societies, it is in them that the lines of inequality tend to match those of the family because power is usually experienced as a family asset (ibid, p. 155). Furthermore, inequality doesn’t follow these lines as if they were newer versions of old tribal structures. Actors’ strategies actively contribute to
the creation of a system of social stratification in as much as such system reflects and prolongs “relations between the self and the self, and between the self and others” (ibid, p. 267). Intersubjectivity is thus a matrix for social stratification. The self a place from which “the possible invention of a democratic culture will be born.”

Whatever the acuteness of inequality south of the Sahara, class relations are in no way a primary source of conflict. This could be due to a continuity of values that identify ‘eating’, whatever the means, with an ethic that goes beyond mere ‘stealing’, because “a man of power who is able to amass and redistribute wealth becomes a ‘man of honor’” (ibid, p. 242). The same dynamics lie behind the ‘issue’ of nepotism: jobs are assets distributed by powerful men among their own, because depriving one’s own from taking part in one’s success would be an extremely immoral thing to do. Having a bunch of kinsmen occupying a lot of power positions within public administration also speaks about the practical impossibility of separating ‘civil society’ and ‘political society’, which is a recurrent feature in the postcolonial struggle, and a main condition in Equatorial Guinea today.

The postcolonial struggle

Equatorial Guinea’s most basic makeup is contributing to a reciprocal assimilation of elites, this is, “the equivocal interpenetration and mutual reinforcement of political society and civil society,” which makes trying to approach these as two separate structures incredibly difficult in practice (Bayart, 1993:163). The country’s small population, most of which is young and just in the process of becoming educated, helps keeping the elite circles from growing. Besides, the small population aspect makes it possible for those in power for a long time, as it’s Obiang Nguema’s case, to know who is who in the groups of influence. The apparent cohesiveness of the elite doesn’t mean that there aren’t any factional struggles. These exist, and have just slowly started to be recognized.40 Whatever the presence of struggle, it has to be made clear that an unequal distribution of goods, instead of representing a risk for social unrest, can in fact be working as a means to keep the people of power in place: Obiang Nguema finds himself at the top, knowing who is who, and at the front of a deeply unequal society, a position that strengthens his role as the “principal distributor of sinecures” (ibid, p. 225), and whose favor is, at least in theory, reachable by anybody knowing how to navigate his/her networks.

40 “More promising is a younger generation of officials, mostly educated overseas, that is bringing fresh ideas, openness and a strong desire of change. But their influence is often overshadowed by the old guard, dubbed ‘crocodiles’ by the Equatoguineans.” See Blas, J. “Reporting back: Equatorial Guinea.” Financial Times, 23/01/2014. In: http://blogs.ft.com/the-world/2014/01/reporting-back-equatorial-guinea/ [accessed 20/04/2015]
Dominant groups

Like in many other postcolonial states, in Equatorial Guinea members of the circles of influence had known one another for a very long time, which grants an intimate character to the processes of reciprocal assimilation taking place in the country. This merging usually takes place in the private sphere, mostly through marriages as means to establish ‘alliances’. The processes of assimilation tend to obey generational lines, although this seeming boundary is compensated by the fact that they occur transcontinentally, within Equatoguinean communities living in the US, France, London and Spain. When asked her opinion about the country’s ‘upper classes’, a woman told me she wouldn’t call them ‘classes’, telling me instead that some ‘last names’ had more weight than others. Tavo, one of my hangies listening to our conversation, intervened:

There are ‘last names’ in the sense that, the people who were in Spain [throughout the 1970s], were the children of those who were powerful [at home] back in the day, and that, for better or worse, were either exiled or had the means to send their kids abroad. So whether you liked it or not, we all [children to the exiles and the powerful at home] had a lot of contact [while in Spain]. People from our generation still mingle regardless of whether one is a minister and the other is a janitor,\textsuperscript{41} because there isn’t any distinction, we all have moved within the same circles and frequented the same places.

Tavo’s words show that in Equatorial Guinea dominant groups are made of personal relations built after generational lines. Because the state is the main source of private revenues for the powerful, and because such revenues are later re-distributed through their networks (which also include ‘non-powerful’), the state cannot be separated from the private. The element of personal relations grants people from all corners of the social landscape access to the benefits of someone else’s standing. This is why Equatoguineans experience their deeply unequal society as a ‘classless society’: personal relations postulate incredible vertical mobility. A person’s prospects of mobility thus depend on the quality and size of her networks, as well as on her ability to use the status symbols that render such connections visible.

A classless society

When I asked my hangies whether they thought it was possible to phrase social inequality in Equatorial Guinea as a result of ‘class struggle’, they all agreed that it wasn’t a matter of ‘class’. “You can see a person driving a super car, but he’ll still be a person from the village. In here there aren’t any social classes.” What becomes obvious from this example is that people think about social classes in terms of the status symbols they’re supposed to deploy: ‘upper class’

\textsuperscript{41} ‘Minister’ and ‘janitor’ cannot be understood as markers of fixed status, because in Equatorial Guinea’s vertiginous social fluidity, “one day you can be a minister and the next a janitor” regardless of who you are.

52
equals expensive cars and/or a higher education; while ‘lower class’ means dirty taxis and/or a mediocre education. That a ‘person from the village’ (this is, from a rural area where education is usually not available) can go around driving a high status symbol like a ‘super car’ speaks not only about people’s difficulty with classifying subjects as wholly pertaining to a certain strata (a difficulty they seem to overcome by thinking in terms of family or ‘last names’ instead of ‘classes’ per se), but also about the need to look for alternative ways of phrasing lived inequality as a play between ‘dominators’ and ‘dominated’. People arbitrarily access and make use of symbols and kinds of capital that would serve as basic indicators for one or the other category. Indeed, it has been recognized how “African societies do not correspond to the configurations that would make them real class societies” and that “from this point of view, and contrary to current opinion, it is not even clear that the concretization of the dominant class is any more advanced than that of the subordinate classes” (Bayart, 1993:178).

Networks

A politics of the belly presupposes that access to resources, like one’s potential assimilation into groups of influence, takes place in the fabric of networks. Accordingly, these are tightly woven systems of relations that go back in time and are constantly reinforced through marriages, alliances and many other reciprocal forms of exchange. Not surprisingly, and in line with the previously exposed argument of the difficulties of separating civil society from political society, networks made it possible for state and private actors to merge roles and identities, or to jump from one to another as they see fit according to the situation.

Networks, as social constructions, are flexible, which is to say that they are not constituted by people’s fixed identities, although the pushing up and down of family links and ethnic belonging work as strategies for the actor’s arguments depending on whether they find them to be convenient. Just as networks integrate, they hierarchize, because even if they promote a circulation of goods, such goods are never equally distributed. The undoubted power of networks in contemporary Equatoguinean society is most certainly due to the country’s small population. As it was shown by Tavo’s statement about how people of his generation intermingle regardless of their positions, networks link individuals from all corners of the social landscape, which also carries along the question of knowledge about its members as it circulates from one end to the other. Because of this knowledge, communication is fast and extremely effective. The social climate promoted by networks creates a fertile ground for rumors and gossip, which increases people’s possibilities of getting into trouble:
José:—One can be sitting at home, and [rumors] just keep pouring and pouring.

Ana:—And one can’t do anything about it! [José shakes his head saying ‘no’]

The way things are here, it can be today or tomorrow, somebody will wake up saying ‘Ô! Today it’ll be José!’; and will make what we call octavillas. The person is going to take a piece of paper and will write: ‘José has done this and that, José is an oppositor, José bla bla bla’. Then poor José [defending himself] will write an octillaume about his boss and so on. We don’t have a mail service, but these things arrive!

An impending risk of trouble makes most Equatoguineans susceptible to malicious gossip and thus creates in them powerful feelings of anxiety which over a period of time turn into ‘paranoia’ and depression, some say, ultimately leading people to madness and suicide. As civil society and state administration are indiscernible from one another, what happens within sociality, also happens within institutional life. In Equatorial Guinea “no institution, however ‘massive’ or ‘bureaucratic’ it might be, escapes from the pernicious miasmas of personal rivalries” (Bayart, 1993:215). Because of this perpetual being exposed to all kinds of gossip and potential trouble, loyalty becomes the most valuable asset an individual possesses.

Blood Vs ideological affinity

The question of affiliation in Equatorial Guinea was problematized by native author Ocha’a Mve already in the mid-1980s (Ocha’a Mve, 1985:38-40). He recognized the issues that having a people prioritizing blood affinity over ideological affinity posits for the development of a democratic culture. Thirty years after, the condition remains:

Tavo:—You want your people to always have it good, and to be protected.

Adela:—And ‘your people’ means your family and your clan, your childhood friends and other acquaintances.

Tavo:—First of all it’s those who are closest to you, and those whom you know that will be loyal. Loyalty. Loyalty is very important. Loyalty is no longer a matter of culture, I mean loyalty in a sense that, ‘I want loyalty because that loyalty is what will allow me to remain there, in that position’.

Adela:—Loyalty as it’s generally understood in Europe is a bit different, it’s more like based on ideological affinity, not on blood affinity.

Tavo:—I’m talking about [loyalty as] blood affinity. Let’s say that the secret society there exists, is [dependent] on loyalties to achieve its purposes. It can be to gain certain things, or to keep its existence a secret. You need loyalty to do that. And such a loyalty can be obtained in a thousand ways, like in exchange of money, or in other ways.

One of the forms that loyalty is said to be established within the highest political circles is through murdering a fellow kinsman to prove one’s commitment to those the individual is trying to join, much in the style of street gangs’ or the mob’s initiation rites. Because of the tightly woven fabric of social life as a mesh of family and political solidarities, people who have spent time abroad and/or have been at least partially socialized in alternative ways, often
find themselves torn apart when having to choose between blood or ideological loyalties. However, and as it has been argued before, the prominence of kin makes blood loyalties to be generally prioritized, which compromises the development of groups based on ideological affinity, and thus the chances for a multi-party democracy in the near future.

**Intersubjectivity and the self in the mesh of networks**

In the world of networks, every new loyalty implies the potential betrayal of an old one. Therefore, people who have been at least partially socialized abroad, like the comebackees, often opt for keeping a low profile or for withdrawing as much as possible from the “anguishing” sociality at home. In doing so they face a paradox: keeping away might protect them from the risks associated with negative interaction, but also makes them increasingly alienated. In order to keep their social selves ‘wholesome’, they have to give up social life, which, I was repeatedly told, is ultimately driving many people insane. Taking part in the world of networks thus brings along an existential factor. In line with an existential phenomenology, I argue that the social is lived intersubjectively, this is, as a mesh of reciprocal relationships among subjects (Jackson, 2005:50). It is within intersubjectivity and reciprocity that people experience identity and difference. Because they depend so highly on reciprocity, intersubjective relations are characterized by a struggle between “being an actor and being acted upon, being a ‘who’ and being a ‘what’” (ibid, pp. 129-130, 137), of being in control of one’s circumstances or of being controlled by them. Because networks tend to run along kin and family, and because inequality matches family lines, some people identify inequality with ethnicity, as did two 14 year-old kids who complained about how “the only ones who have money are the Fang.” Further analysis, however, makes ethnicity appear more as a principle of differentiation from the outside than of identification between persons—and an asset of variable value to be only invoked when and if it’s thought it’ll contribute to one’s own gain.

**The true value of the ethnic factor**

As argued before, the most discursively significant ethnic rivalry in Bioko island is that of the Bubi —the native minority— versus the Fang —the foreign majority—. The fact that differentiation between those who have money and those who don’t is often phrased as ethnic (“the Fang versus everybody else”) is no coincidence. While it’s true that ‘ethnicity’ as a discursive construction was deployed by the Spanish colonial administration in an attempt to promote social fragmentation and thus exercise better control over its subjects (Ndongo, 1977; Sundiata, 1996), it’s also true that as a discursively constructed reality it became an objective
means for social self categorization among the locals. But as life in the postcolonial state moves forward, more and more people are refusing to take upon themselves a specific ethnic identity. The material I collected points toward a dynamics of interaction in which ethnicity as identity is strategically managed, usually with the purpose of legitimizing claims. One of my hangies, for example, was critical of ethnic groupings, but wouldn’t hesitate to present herself as the granddaughter of one of the Fang fathers of independence, a claim she expected to help her in the process of brokering a scholarship abroad. As it turns out, ethnicity is one of those few instances where, because of resources at stake, identification and allegiances can prolong an already established system of inequality: some try “to grant all the privileges and posts of responsibility to the people of his tribe and his clan,” while practicing “this favoritism in the division of material benefits and the distribution of services” (Bayart, 1993:43). When an ethnic self ‘sets himself up’, there’s an implicit expectation that he will reinforce his position by strengthening the positions of the selves around him —more often than not, he owes his success to a network. What follows is a re-distribution of goods as an expression of gratitude: building something at one’s hometown, giving jobs to one’s fellow kinsmen regardless of their education or merits, fixing scholarships for the youths under one’s wing and the like. This process makes it clear that in contemporary Equatorial Guinea, ethnicity is working “less as a political force in itself than a channel through which competition for the acquisition of wealth, power or status is expressed” (ibid, p. 55). Regardless of it being a referent of choice for the phrasing of inequality, a deeper analysis shows that the enunciative procedures and discursive practices performed with regards to ethnicity speak not so much about an inherently ethnic element, but about the relationships proper of a social struggle experienced as a zero sum game.

Corruption

Deemed by Bayart “a flourishing informal State economy” (Bayart, 1993:78), corruption is perhaps one of the most prominent features of Equatoguinean society as described by the global media and engaged scholars alike. It is continuously exposed as a gross enterprise more or less exclusive of those at the top (they are, after all, the ones in control of significant goods) but corruption takes place everywhere, and everybody participates in it in one way or another. When it takes place at the bottom of the bureaucratic apparatus, corruption can very well be thought of as “a survival economy” (ibid). The reason being that, for those who find themselves in ephemeral positions of relative power, the public arks represent a virtually unlimited source of funds. The appeal that such ephemeral positions of relative power, together with the uncertainty they imply (one can be arbitrarily fired, just as it was arbitrarily appointed) have
for the wider population is enormous, many turning them into their foremost goal in life. While discussing the youth’s take on the future, Sone, a male in his mid-20s, told me:

Do you know what the problem with this country is? People themselves don’t want to progress. They want a comfortable life, they study just to get an office. Why? Because they want to steal.

People’s fascination with *el cargo* (‘the position’) is reinforced by the symbols it carries, such as the suit and the luxury car. The power of their appeal also explains why the state is constantly inventing new dependencies, offices, ministries. When seen in terms of possibilities for accumulation, it’s people’s relationship to the bureaucratic apparatus what enables them to obtain a prominent place in the social scene, a factor that once again reinforces the interdependence of the private and the public realms. Because competition for resources as a means to gain influence is so ruthless, it is “all the more important for the president of the Republic to enrich himself if he is to affirm his own authority over the other networks” (ibid, p. 226). In the end, the country functions as a kleptocracy: “with the material stakes so high no holds are barred in the competition between the chiefs of the network, however violent they may be: homicides, arbitrary imprisonment, forced displacement of whole communities” (ibid, p. 235). The list of ‘human rights violations’ goes on and on.

It is through this understanding that we can start thinking about corruption and ‘ethnic-based’ inequality as mere manifestations of the ‘politics of the belly’. Consequently, implicit in all social struggles taking place in the postcolonial state is a kind of anxiety built on the need to accumulate, a dynamic that all actors regardless of them being rich or poor, follow in order to stand their social ground. That all actors, rich and poor, participate in the scramble for resources as signifiers of influence is a key thing to observe, for it becomes acute to acknowledge it if one is ever to grant freedom of agency to a seemingly eternal African victim.

Indeed, “contrary to the popular image of the innocent masses, corruption and predatoriness are not found exclusively amongst the powerful. Rather, they are modes of social and political behavior shared by a plurality of actors on more or less a great scale” (ibid, p. 238). In this view, corruption is a strategy deployed amidst social struggle, of course, backed up by a feeling of inherent inequality and uncertainty. People’s taken-for-granted attitudes of “the first thing you do when you’re up is to pack your pockets” are indicative of this feeling, a getting-even while you can afford doing it. Because corruption is a struggle, people’s denunciations of each other rarely pursue the higher value of justice:

A Guineana was called to the Ministry of Labor because her secretary accused her: ‘You accuse *me* of stealing when everybody steals!’ She’s not trying to
defend herself by denying it! You see, her problem is that out of everybody who’s stealing, she’s the one being accused. And they [the Ministry of Labor] are saying that she’s right. They’re asking why she is the one being ‘targeted’!

Practice in the Equatoguinean postcolony

Everywhere, people are victims and victimizers in the social struggle. In the particular case of the postcolonial context, such strategies can take many morally dubious forms for the untrained (or naïve) Western eye. Especially in closed environments like Equatorial Guinea’s, people’s strategies of social survival have to be understood as potential modes of political action. The possibilities for action are “fields of the politically thinkable” made up by the twisting and turning of the most disparate values and discourses. What these practices and strategies imply is that “far from being the victims of their very real vulnerability,” African individuals, much like their governments, “pursue their own objectives, within the margins of failure and success that the implementation of any strategy entails” (Bayart, 1993:25-26). Because “users make (bricolent) innumerable and infinitesimal transformations of and within the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt it to their own interests and their own rules,” our job is now to determine “the procedures, bases, effects, and possibilities of this collective activity” (de Certeau, 1984:xiv). The following chapter will therefore explore people’s acts of self-making through display, (re)appropriation and enunciation, which are but a few strategies Equatoguineans are deploying amidst the struggle for being in a postcolonial state.
Let us speak about what makes a self: the world. Or in Malabo’s case, “the banal world,” as one of my closest hangies, Oscar, once put it. I got to hear the expression for the first time while we discussed el Guineano’s troubled relation with la chaqueta (the suit), an ambivalent object which due to its symbolism was simultaneously coveted and despised by old and young men alike. “Vanity, eh. And above all, the need to be on top of everybody else, no matter what, just to get a position. A mere position. ‘Me, as a yoghurt, I’m better than you’. It doesn’t matter if the yoghurt is all green.” Only an artist of the quotidian could have come up with phrasing people as rotten yoghurts. The joking and talking about los yogures continued throughout that day and thereafter, making it clear that in Malabo, being was rarely a matter of existing as a ‘yoghurt’ per se: not a matter of ‘freshness’—age—, nor of ‘nutritional facts’—education, ideas—; but of what others imagined it to be through the romanticization of ‘colorful tags’—cars, a suit—or a famous ‘brand’—family last names—. As condemnatory as Oscar’s phrasings might sound, he was deeply aware of the role that history played in the configuration of these arbitrary, sometimes plainly ‘nonsensical’ systems of value-setting. He seemed to understand that “however one construes being, it involves a relationship between what is given by circumstance, and what one brings into being by virtue of one’s own desire or will” (Jackson, 2005:182). Oscar’s whole take on los yogures then was, despite appearances, a yielding one. People’s submitting to the ‘laws of the banal world’ was a means to make being amidst lateral struggles, their ‘nonsensical’ ways of value-setting hardly more than tools to help themselves feel that they had a say in the production of their social personae, the strategy being, more often than not, that of fusing their values to the values of others. Equatoguineans’ creative acts of self-production can be said to be collectively owned ways of redistributing being, and of imaginatively negotiating new relationships between constraining social discourses and their inner potential to successfully meet them or actively ignore them.

Earn to show

It’s more or less common knowledge that what separates humans from their cousin species is the former’s constant strive to accumulate self-value through the objectification of highly subjective and immaterial elements: love, voice, pride, recognition, and a long etcetera. Such things can be thought of as ‘food’ for a self, which is made of a memory and a consciousness.
constitutive of roles, identities, and all positionalities resulting from the interaction between it and its others. Because their positive existence depends on having access to such values, selves will feel threatened when there’s a breakdown in the relations of reciprocity they embark on to insure them. Such breakdowns, “either real or imagined, tend to be experienced as reversals in the life affirming order of social life” (Jackson, 2005:58-59). The struggle to keep such ‘life affirming order of social life’ is a process that aims at creating, maintaining and protecting one’s self through its interactions with others, which becomes acute when people live in environments where the distribution of resources is deeply unequal. When one finds oneself unable to openly act in order to restore the lost ‘life affirming order of social life’, one still can “act indirectly, through the resources of the imagination, thought and language, and thereby change one’s experience of one’s relationship to the external forces that bear so heavily upon one” (ibid, p. 182). In Malabo, such ways of acting might seem completely ‘nonsensical’ to those whose social survival strategies have been devised within a different cultural system, as it’s the case of the comebackees. 30 year-old Maria couldn’t understand why people would give up earning a good living in order to get themselves a ‘title’:

That’s why a lot of people say that between stability and power in the form of the position, your first choice is the position. I, as a private person, can be offering you 5 million CFA francs per month, but then you get a call from mister whoever, general director of grocery shops and night clubs, offering you 500 thousand instead. Where will you go? You’ll go with the mister general director of whatever, because of the position, because the title makes you feel that you’re important, while working for me without a name but earning 5 million you’d have a much better life.

What ‘a much better life’ means is debatable. The ‘title’ or ‘position’ (a job as a public servant) often implies wearing a suit, which immediately grants individuals a visibly higher status and thus the immediate feeling of being a more powerful person. In Malabo, money as a means to have a “better life” is hardly ever equated with the possibility of improving one’s living conditions, in a Western sense. I came across many houses that didn’t have running water even though the city supply was working: their piping, if they ever had one, had fallen into disrepair, but used to not having running water at home, owners chose to put their money in a big plasma tv, air conditioner or a sound system instead of investing in ‘unnecessary’ new piping. Money as a means to have a “better life” is thus perceived as the power to acquire visible symbols of status (see Appendix, Photo 24), of which the most popular is the luxury car:

MARÍA: —People change cars as they change their underwear. All these girls, every day, a Mercedes, a V8, an XE6, a who-knows-what. And me, just thinking, ‘all these cars to drive in Malabo, where there aren’t any highways, to go to the supermarket...’. Because where else do you go?
ANDRÉS: —Our director, in the company, she brags about being the director and so on, she has a 30 million CFA franc car, but lives in a house that costs 7 million.

MARÍA: —Just imagine! The mental poverty! A house can look like this place [she points at the raw concrete walls of Miguel’s room] but there will be huge cars parked outside, five, six, seven cars for just one person!

ANDRÉS: —There’s this guy, also a director. He has a Mercedes S Class, a Camaro of the new ones, a Chrysler, a Crossfire, and one of these big Toyota Prado V8. But he lives in Buena Esperanza!42

MIGUEL: —In a pigsty! In a cardboard box! Why don’t they just move into their cars? I’m sure they can tune them to have a microwave installed.

The ultimate symbol of success, cars in Malabo as the object of display per excellence go back to the 1960’s, when members of the autonomous regime, Equatoguineans with political careers built with the blessing of Spain, were given suits, house help, a salary and a new Mercedes each (Ndongo, 1977:105). While the identification of cars with power is a widespread phenomenon proper of the postcolonial state (Bayart, 1993: 69, 94, 189, 200), a brief account of it in the Equatoguinean capital is due. Cars in Malabo are like suits: portable batches of status. They’re movable goods, which boosts their reach at signalizing. Buying a big car is a calculated strategy of display dressed up as casual fact of life: it reinforces the status quo by standardizing a symbol whose connotation is built on a premise of inequality as a natural feature of society. Cars call for attention while allowing the owner to pretend he/she doesn’t acknowledge those who give it: it’s a means to participate and to distance oneself from the social world of symbols which the self’s social existence depends on. But just as the car is a means to follow the rules of ‘the banal world’, is also a means to escape it: it serves as a screen of compliance, a batch of group membership that grants the owner the power to differentiate himself/herself from those still trapped in the struggle, thus securing a space for informal action. Unfortunately, this space is rarely exploited politically because the struggle to get one’s car in the first place tends to destroy whatever concern for the common wellbeing people might have once had. Furthermore, the vox populi has it that the struggle to get a car is the struggle to get a position, and

MIGUEL: —That’s why there aren’t any business initiatives, that’s why there isn’t any independence among the youths. Everybody is waiting for a [public servant] position, as if the position would solve your life, when in fact what it does to condition it, and to reduce you to an infrahuman level.

MARÍA: —The result is that you don’t promote the change you want, because in order to sustain such a change, you need to put in it a little more of yourself. But you’re not allowed to get out of the box, because if you do, they cut you off, and because all you want is to keep your wellbeing, your own wellbeing, not society’s wellbeing, you stop caring to practice the change you say you want.

42 Buena Esperanza (lit. ‘Good Hope’), a social housing project originally built by the government to relocate people living in Campo Yaoundé, an informal settlement also known as Niumbilly (Newbuilding).
Two elements become immediately salient: first, Miguel’s saying that a position (and thus submitting to the perks —like ‘the car’— it carries along) is something that reduces people “to an infrahuman level,” which talks about their dehumanization as de-individualization. And second, María’s saying that “you’re not allowed to get out of the box” unless you’re willing to risk losing what complying with “the box” has given you. Both instances speak of how people, in the process of merging identities with their material possessions, also become what’s expected from them by those who granted them access to these very possessions, usually the state. In this view, sticking to one’s humanity and individuality might imply refusing to participate in the social play of being through things which, even if it keeps their selves free from morally dubious loyalties and constraining expectations, translates in people’s literal lack of means to build a socially appealing self, which in turn might compromise its possibilities for network building and thus identity and personhood negotiation. Such is the paradox most Equatoguineans face amidst oil money and kin connections in the age of global values. A common way to get out of this crossroads is to engage in discourse re-appropriation.

Making discursive ends meet

Theorists on the quest for hegemony in the postcolonial state have argued that “far from suggesting the withering of African societies, their marriage to overseas cultural influences shows their vigorous temperament,” because the manifestations of hybridity that result from it are “an expression not of the hegemonic power of colonialism, but of the ‘extraordinary flexibility’ of the people in its grasp” (Bayart, 1993:28). As everyday life in Malabo takes place full of informal spaces and ‘nonsensical’ actions, the problem of “marrying” local ‘traditional’ and Western values doesn’t seem to be a practical one. However, because it takes place within the discursive realm, and reality is discursively constructed, some might experience a conflict at the moment of internalizing and objectifying social reality. According to a hangie,

the problem is that we don’t have time. We have accumulated way too much information from the outside, and we want to be like, or to have the forms of life, the forms of thinking of everything that comes from the outside, from the West. And then what happens? We have all this information and we expect these changes to take place from one day to the next, and that’s impossible, we need a process of many, many years, but as of today, the same information [contents] doesn’t allow us to go through that process [of assimilation], so I keep thinking that Africa is our main problem. That’s why we have some many wars, so many ethnic and tribal problems.

What is notable here is how the man associates the issue of appropriation with Africa’s wars, as well as with ethnic and tribal conflicts. In his view, people’s rushing into wanting to live according to foreign standards/values is the main problem, identifying the impossibility of
adopting them as they are with a lack of time to ‘digest’ them. The man doesn’t think about re-appropriation as such, this is, as the act of absorbing a value/meaning and transforming it according to the lived experiences of the collectivity exposed to it. The conflicts it creates invisibilize the processes of creolization taking place underneath. Another hangie went a step further in this way, phrasing re-appropriation as “misinterpretation”:

When a country gets out of poverty from one day to the next, the truth is that it is still poor. Haha. It’s still poor. The country is poor. The only thing is that it starts getting accustomed, it starts adapting to new social structures, to new symbols, but even then, people misinterpret them. This misinterpretation is the origin of a stream of hollow rebelliousness and arrogance and superiority. Mass media also invite to it. Today we live in such a globalized world that I can, from my bed, have a conversation with you in México while you send me satellite images of your house in Sweden, and then I automatically have somehow been in these places without even having to have traveled. But when I get out of my house, I again encounter my reality, and try to force these fictions upon my reality. It is when you want to force them that things can go wrong.

While the kinds of problems and ‘culture shocks’ that such ‘forcing of fiction upon reality’ can cause are obvious, it is interesting to point out that the person speaking identifies exogenous values/meanings/symbols with “fictions” in sharp contrast with a reality which is, consequently, identified with lived everyday material and social experience. More than conflict, the daily process of creolization suggests “a real ideological interiority which is capable of inspiring institutional or administrative innovations” (Bayart, 1993:244), but that is not ideal given that it’s commonly experienced as “a source of contradictions, of rifts and of suffering.” Dannie, a female comebackee who studied in London, talks about her experience with the local bureaucrats’ sociality:

DANIE:—When I came back to [Equatorial] Guinea, they asked me ‘What do you want? A job in the public or the private [sector]?’ And I said, ‘F* that! I just came from Europe! It HAS to be in the public sector, this is my country! How am I going to work for the whites? No! I’ll work for my country! For the homeland! Let’s do it!

MIGUEL:—Por una Guinea mejor!43 Hahahaha!

DANIE:—And it was loo-king-for-trou-ble! ‘This one? [Dannie fakes a faulty English accent] She come fra England, she think she so nice, her heels are so high, ó, the way she walk, ó this, ó that.’ Señor! [Dannie beats the table repeatedly] HERE’S THE ORDER OF THE DAY! And after four and a half years being everybody’s topic, do you know what it is to cry? TO CRY? To come home crying, but CRYING like a baby, and not because of what they say, but because of the whole situation? You just go ‘WHAT THE F* IS GOING ON? Why is this man talking to me about my hair color when I’m trying to discuss the budget for what we need to buy?!!?’

Dannie’s frustration with the ways of interaction within the state’s apparatus is general among middle aged comebackees. All of those whom I had the chance to speak to had similar

43 Por una Guinea mejor (lit. ‘For a better Guinea’), Obiang Nguema’s regime official slogan.
stories to tell. Santiago, who was born and raised in Malabo, studied in Spain thanks to his relatives, but the experience of life abroad didn’t make him forget how things work at home:

I became an adult here in Guinea, so all that time [while growing up] I could observe people’s behavior, and it made me opt for a career that would allow me to be barricaded somewhere, doing my job. What I do is, I try to go [to work] with as much serenity as possible, and, when I have to go to these [crowded bureaucratic] places, I arrive, and talk to them calmly, I enter my own Zen temple in my head, and I search for serenity. Because if I start talking the way I should be talking to this person that is breaking my balls, we’d end up very badly… People use to tell me that I live inside a cloud, that only I know what goes on in that cloud.

As it will be shown later on, ‘escaping’ is a coping strategy as old as human cognition. For now it’ll suffice to say that not everybody is as self-contained as Santiago. For most people, the only viable way to cope with crashes between discourse and practice is to adapt value to situation in order to maximize benefits during interaction: while people blame each other for their incapacity to act ‘coherently’, or at least to treat others “how you’d like to be treated,” there are those who capitalize on the fact that assimilation, more than ‘becoming similar to’ what one absorbs, means “‘making something similar’ to what one is, making it one’s own, appropriating or reappropriating it” (de Certeau, 1984:166).

A big part of the previous chapter went about arguing how people’s will to achieve privilege is what’s keeping the underlying structures of inequality firmly in place. In contemporary Malabo, the narrative of ‘the right to the will to power’ often appears as a local adaptation of a Western narrative. Such is the case of the many young men climbing the tangled threads of kin loyalties in order to get a ‘position’: they put aside whatever moral constraints they may feel under the freeing premise that everybody has the right to become ‘a self-made man’, where in Equatorial Guinea, to be a ‘self-made man’ means to exploit one’s ability to navigate the tangled networks of kin and political loyalties in order to manipulate them to one’s own advantage. The same principle is exemplified by the case of a mulatta who, describing herself as a “complete feminist,” was enormously proud of having a husband, a boyfriend and two lovers, and of being able to extract money out of each and one of them. Her rationale was that since “men and women are equal,” she was obviously entitled to have as many men as her male counterparts had women. Polygamy is legal among Fang males. There might have been something liberating in ‘getting even’ while phrasing the deed as gender equality, but what she experienced as her biggest victory was that each of her partners was practically obliged to give her weekly allowances because she was, after all, “their woman,” and such was their duty, “as men.”

44 Polygamy is legal among Fang males.
Adaptations of Western values and/or discourses to non-Western contexts like the ones described above might seem abhorrent, but it’s fundamental to see them not as borrowings, but as (re)appropriations which are in turn structured by enunciative procedures. In time, through the collective writing of the social text, such (re)appropriations can generate feelings of social identification and thus constitute the basis of new groups and types of affinities.

The power of enunciation

In a linguistic/semiotic tradition, *enunciation* refers to the speech act. Within anthropology, it might very well represent a link between individual and society alternative to the habitus: it bridges practices and discourses internalized through subjective experience. It solves the question of agency which the habitus circumscribes: there’s the fact that all actors, depending on what they believe to be in their best interest, sometimes actively join the social struggle and sometimes choose to ignore it. The present study makes use of the concept of enunciation as ‘formulation’ in order to refer us back to the processes of individual objectification that take place after the internalization of texts/realities/discourses and prior to their externalization as modified objects. Re-emphasizing reality as discursively constructed is important to understand the role that enunciation plays in engendering agency and opening spaces for political action in environments otherwise considered oppressive and/or undemocratic, through the dissemination of unofficial discourses, bricolent objects and deviant meanings. I argue that the structuring of contemporary Equatoguinean society “is not separable from the production of meanings as a product of social relations,” and that the political systems “whose dynamics are equivocal and reversible, do not have any value outside their heterogeneous actualization from one actor to another and from one context to another, in the same way that a text is created by the way in which it is read” (Bayart, 1993:37). Indeed, the ambivalence of African societies seems easier to understand once they’re seen as constantly and contradictorily written systems of domination made up and sustained by the actors as writers/producers. Thus in order to understand the actors’ positions in the social landscape as a precondition to chart the landscape itself, the next thing to do is to try to identify “procedures (differentiated between one actor and another or, if the actors are the same, between one context and another) of enunciation of a same institution, a same practice or a same discourse” (ibid). The hot-potato topic of the wave of suicides that shook Malabo in February 2014 provides us with an ideal example of how people locate themselves in definite enunciatory positions, further structuring (and strengthening) clusters and networks.
Suicides: a foreigner’s overview

On February 2014, Malabo was rocked by a ‘mysterious’ wave of suicides. The first one, which had occurred a couple of months prior to my arrival and involved a soldier who shot dead his two comrades before killing himself, came alive again in light of the more recent two. Within days of each other, a man married to a woman from a powerful family was said to have jumped from the window of his suite in the city’s most luxurious hotel; and a young 7-month pregnant Equatoguinean woman threw herself from the balcony of her apartment in Madrid. Gossip about the man who had jumped from the window was everywhere: I got to hear about it from a hangie one afternoon only to be reminded of it when I overheard two women talking while buying chicken wings in a street grill that night. I imagined that ‘suicide’ was going to be a touchy topic to discuss with my hangies, some of whom had said to be relatives of the dead girl, the dead man, or of both. Surprisingly, it was anything but. Everybody seemed eager to discuss it, but nobody could agree on what had really happened. People’s versions of events of one case and the other were sometimes extremely similar, but they kept varying depending of who I was speaking with. In general, my hangies take on the suicides, and particularly, on the case of the man who was said to have jumped from the hotel window, could be grouped in four distinctive narratives: suicide as political assassination, suicide as the result of clinical depression, as a screen to cover the deadly consequences of family feuds and/or broken alliances, and as the proof of witchcraft-motivated blood offerings (human sacrifices).

Suicides: political assassinations

For the explicitly politicized (mainly active members of the opposition living abroad), suicides in Equatorial Guinea are an obvious cover-up for political assassinations. According to some of my hangies such narrative is most popular abroad because the phrasing obeys the all-too-typical agenda of a diaspora that constantly turns random happenings into de facto accusations towards the regime, they say, not necessarily because they care for ‘justice’, but because the legitimacy of their claims to power rests in the illegitimacy of those who hold it, a fact they’re committed to elaborate upon by any means, including the capitalization of an obviously depressed man’s suicide. In cases of ‘mysterious’ deaths, the maxima in the air is always that “in Equatorial Guinea nobody commits suicide, they get suicided.”45 However, only exiles seem to pair suicided with ‘assassinated by the state’. In Malabo, that people “get suicided” applies

45 See i. e. Moto-Nsá, Severo. “Carmelo Martín Modú Ebuka... Una saga familiar, marcada por la tragedia [sic].” El Confidencial de Guinea Ecuatorial. 03/02/2014. Available at: http://geconfidencial.blogspot.se/2014/02/carmelo-martín-modu-ebuka-una-saga.html [accessed: 13/07/2015]
to killings in general, which account for the absolute majority of deaths in the country because as one hangie put it echoing scholarship on witchcraft from Evans-Pritchard (1937) to Niehaus (2001), “in here nobody dies a natural death, nobody, nobody, nobody.”

Suicides: the outcome of depression

For the self-proclaimed unp politicized (generally, members of the wider society living within the national territory), the suicides that shook Malabo in early 2014 were the natural result of a socially unrecognized illness, this is, depression. According to a hangie,

There’s a lot of stress in this country, but we don’t have a consciousness of suicide as the outcome of depression, because people says those are illnesses of whites… Here nobody is happy, I swear it, and I don’t say it because I’m not happy, but because we’re in a country where everybody is obsessed with having material things, a car, money… Let’s take the case of this guy [the one who jumped from a hotel window]. He is married to a woman from there, and when you’re married to a woman from there, well, just imagine the pressure you’ll always be under because ‘I put you there’... Imagine the pressure at home, at work. Those are drops that slowly mount… What I think is that this guy had a bad, bad depression. Because depression, even though you go on vacation, you come back here, and nobody takes it away from you.

Depression is a phenomenon collectively taking place in Malabo, I speculate, given the ravishing lateral struggles people are more or less forced to engage in in order to become ‘somebody’ in a country plagued by inequalities, oil money and tightly woven networks. The processes of (re)appropriation of otherwise exogenous values/symbols/meanings, which people don’t have the time to ‘digest’ in their eagerness to adopt them, keeps a crisis of meaning and representation going, which is also affecting everyday interaction. A product of this is what my hangies refer to as el agobio (‘the anguish’), this is, the feeling of being gradually and negatively overwhelmed by everything and everybody around you:

Here the anguish affects you as a person, it eats your spirit, it breaks you. And if you don’t have anybody that can help you go through it, well, you’re lost. There’s a lot of people that kill themselves now, when such cases were unheard of before.

In my hangies’ stories, ‘the anguish’ is a social illness which can only be fought by removing the sufferer from the corroding environment. For now, it is enough to underline the fact that in Equatorial Guinea “nobody is happy,” a condition many explain in two ways. One, that the constant struggle for having as a means of becoming is alienating people from themselves. Two, that the struggle for being is pushing people into relationships, or, better said, “alliances,” that don’t necessarily please them in an emotional way, but that are seen as

46 From an important family. “From there”, from “la cuna” (lit. ‘the cradle’), as if referring to her ‘royal’ birth.
economically convenient and/or politically viable to insure their own wellbeing along with that of their families, often phrasing personal ambition as a much nobler “common good.”

Suicides: cover-up for family feuds/broken alliances

For the network-connected, this is, those who are in possession of ‘insider’s knowledge’ thanks to the many networks they are active in, the February 2014 suicides, perhaps due to the prominence of the dead, were the product of family feuds due to alliance break ups. Such alliances are often marriages that, as argued before, rarely please people in an emotional way, but are seen as economically convenient and/or politically viable to insure an individual’s and his/her family’s wellbeing. People might enter them following a very non-Western sense of duty: “it is my duty to fulfill my destiny for the common good,” meaning, in reality, their own economic success merged with that of their kinsmen. Because polygamy is legal for the most numerous social group (the Fang), there’s a general feeling that men choose their first wives according to the socioeconomic advantages such a union could grant them, always convinced that their emotional needs will be later satisfied by a second wife or by a number of lovers. Women however, get scarred in the process. Those that aren’t viable ‘first wives’ due to their lack of status or wealth automatically become second-level subjects, a blow to the self that many try to circumvent by intentionally becoming pregnant with the children of powerful single men as a means to ‘trap them’. Family and children are in themselves, after all, assets for the Equatoguinean male. Regardless of whether the strategy works or not, one thing is clear: first wives, although not exactly married in a romantic Western sense, become susceptible to public humiliation when their husbands, though legally polygamous, start fooling around. If a man, for whatever reason, tries to leave his first wife, he becomes a potential object of repudiation from the woman’s side. If the woman comes from a powerful family, chances are she’ll take matters into her own hands. In the case of the man who jumped through the window, such was the third narrative I encountered: he had been the victim of a murder orchestrated by his powerful wife after he had tried to leave her:

LINDA:―If you get involved with a powerful family, and your wife turns out to be a bad woman, you can’t do anything. Let’s say, if your wife cheats on you and she’s the president’s niece, what can you do to her?
MONY:―Leave her and that’s it.
LINDA:―You cannot leave her.
ANGEL:―Yes you can.
MARTA:―No, you cannot. It would imply a lot of things.
ANGEL:―The thing is that you, when you decide to enter a circle, you know what you’re exposing yourself to.
MONY:―Or you don’t… Once you’re in is when you start asking yourself ‘How do I get out of here?’ It’s easy to get in. It’s easy to get ourselves into
things of which we have no idea until we’re already there. Then you go on trying to fool yourself. But once you’re in and you want out, that’s the complicated part. I sincerely believe that my uncle entered a circle from which he couldn’t get out. When he wanted out, the problems started... I think someone removed him from his/her way. I think so, and I’m very sorry, but I think he was removed from somebody else’s way.

ANGEL:—What is clear is that he was seeing someone else.
MONY:—Somebody helped him [to die]. My uncle didn’t commit suicide.
ANGEL:—But the cameras see him [throwing himself from the window].
MONY:—The cameras see him going through the window, but they don’t see who else was inside that room.

The narrative of the man’s suicide as a cover-up for murder motivated by a broken alliance was widespread among those ‘connected’ and the version was confirmed to me over and over again. A man who was to marry a woman didn’t seem very happy about it, but when asked why he wouldn’t just leave her, his only answer was a deep “in here people die because of these things.” A hangie also commented on how the dead man’s body had been found with at least one gunshot to its side. The trope of murdering relatives, especially when those involved are wealthy and powerful, is a common feature of much Equatoguinean oral tradition stemming from old witchcraft beliefs. Because of the ‘powerful family’ aspect, the man’s ‘suicide’ was also understood by many as a ritual sacrifice, this is, as a ‘blood offering’.

Suicides: blood offerings
For those at the networks periphery, the man’s suicide had been a cover-up for a human sacrifice, this is, a blood offering his family had made in order to keep their status unthreatened. The narrative echoes ekong witchcraft traditions where people ‘offer’ a relative in order to join a circle of witches or to attain power from the dead. The practice took a new meaning under Macías’ rule (when those who denounced family members as ‘dissidents’ were rewarded with positions) thus bringing the explicitly political dimension into the act/belief of ‘relative offering’ in exchange for power. According to my hangies, this narrative is reinforced by people’s lack of belief in natural death, because “when you die, let’s say, of cancer, people will start saying that you died because your uncle or your grandfather has eaten you”:

ANGEL:—A few days ago I was walking toward Martinez Hermanos [the supermarket] and there were some guys in suits. Malabo is very small, everybody knows each other and speaks out loud. So the two men were saying things like ‘eh, that guy was eaten, they wanted to take his blood’, I mean, they were talking witchcraft.
MARTA:—It’s true that a lot of people die, as we’ve said, of HIV and many other diseases. But what is impossible are these sudden deaths that happen in here... Like, these three [suicides] you see right now. For us to hear about a suicide is veeeeeery, very, very rare. The Guineano doesn’t have that mentality.
ANGEL:—No. He doesn’t have any suicide consciousness, but it happens, depression is real.
MARTA:—Yeah, but depression doesn’t come all of the sudden… We come with our European mind, and you get in, because you met Juan in Spain, you say ‘I’ve found love’ and you come here, you get in, and you get in blinded. You don’t know where you’re stepping… Maybe it wasn’t done directly to him, but who knows what he might have seen… And when you reach your limits, because you reach a limit in which you say ‘f* this’, because you come from Spain, where you don’t see any of these things, you don’t even smell their existence. You know. In Spain all you see is the tarot lady telling you ‘tomorrow is going to be a wonderful day!’. So when you see something that escapes your reason, there comes the madness. Because nobody is there fifty years for the grace of God.

Marta, a woman in her mid-20s, was born in Spain in an Equatoguinean community. Her mother was native to one of the most well-known towns in the country due to the power of its witches. As a firm believer “in both good and evil,” Marta was convinced there was witchcraft behind the suicides, her rationale being that wherever there’s power, there’s witchcraft, a posture made patent in her last sentence. By saying that “nobody is there fifty years for the grace of God,” Marta meant that Obiang Nguema himself must be involved in all kinds of witchcraft and dark magic given his seemingly supernatural power to remain untouched during five decades despite numerous rumors of prostate cancer going back to the mid-1980s. For Angel, the bottom of the matter is that in Equatorial Guinea no autopsies are performed unless requested by the family, which no family ever does, for fear of having their loved one’s heart, brains or genitals removed for their use in witchcraft and/or their consumption in practices of ritual cannibalism.

Creating/maintaining selves through enunciative procedures

As the narratives described above show, “the heterogeneity of African societies refers to a multiplicity of enunciative procedures put into practice concurrently by the actors,” which results in that the social area “is constantly being redefined by the contradictory enunciation that the actors make of it” (Bayart, 1993:36-37). Everything is true at the same time. Every single death is simultaneously natural, supernatural, political and familial. We must remember that while “the imposed knowledge and symbols become objects manipulated by practitioners who have not produced them,” their manipulation “merely serves as a framework for the stubborn, guileful, everyday practices that make use of it” (de Certeau, 1984:32). As they formulate death in any of its variations, actors/writers locate themselves at a specific location from which they can establish relations via shared knowledge and/or beliefs, which not only means feeding their selves through positive interaction with others, but creating collective spaces that can organize patterns of community making. In this sense, enunciative procedures are capable of engendering discourse and thus hold an incredible potential for
political action. In Malabo, the *congosá* (gossip) that such narratives give rise to constitutes both a weapon to be used against the other and a creation/maintenance strategy for the self. It can protect people from experiencing social losses, for example, by directly calling into question the desirability of the things they can’t afford. A brief example is that of HIV and big cars, which I got to hear while hanging out at la plaza de E’Waiso. One afternoon we were seated out there and saw an endless parade of luxury cars strolling the street adjacent to the Centro Cultural Francés. When it had been going on too long for us to keep ignoring it, one of my female hangies commented: “Mother of god! Would you look at those cars? Where do they bring them from? Those SUVs aren’t even sold in here!” Her comment gave rise to a conversation about the women driving: white, black or mulattas between 40 and 60 years old who’d wear expensive clothes but had always a sour, long, sick face. According to my hangies, these women belong to a social strata that is widely infected with HIV because of the powerful men’s promiscuity. Often of little or no education at all, such men had made a lot of money thanks to family networks and spent much of their adult life hunting young girls, whom they’d seduce, infecting them and becoming reinfected by them, and spreading the disease to their wives at home, who are the ones driving big cars along with their sexually transmitted diseases.

Narratives like this, regardless of them being true or mere strategies of self-maintenance when feeling threatened by the success of others, show how people’s actions in socially oppressive contexts are not necessarily unpredictable but aren’t predetermined either, and that “the structure of inequality, the quest for hegemony [and] the legitimate problematic of politics are only worth as much as their enunciation to which they are subjected on behalf of the actors” (Bayart, 1993:267). The story of the women driving luxury cars is built on a premise of inequality. However, as far as my female hangies were concerned, by the time our conversation was over they had realized how such women and such cars were nothing to be envious of. The facts of inequality had been left untouched. It was my hangies’ selves in the struggle for being what had been secured: ‘these women might have cars, but they are sick; we might not have cars, but we are healthy’. The ‘life affirming order of social life’ had been restored.

Enunciative procedures, because of their potential to rephrase social reality, lie at the heart of all the sneaky practices devised by actors/writers to help themselves when lacking a safe place from which to speak. There’s a pleasing sensation every time one gets away with something, an experience of freedom and control whenever one punches a hole in the official text. The next natural step in our analysis is therefore to explore narrativization as a strategy for self-making, as well as its potential to structure practice.
Narrated means for being off the (c)age of myth-making

As previous chapters have suggested, people immersed in the social struggle within a postcolonial setting pursue all kinds of strategies to win every day contests for being: that which is ‘thinkable’ is, in fact, ‘doable’ through actors’ re-appropriation of bricolent discourses. The postulation of agency grants individuals the power to join or resist the very dynamics upon which their societies are built. Actors adapt dominant discourses, values, symbols and meanings to their own personal interests following their own rules. Our job, then, is to determine the conditions that give rise to these procedures, as well as their effects and potentialities. This chapter approaches narrativization as a strategy for self-making through the structuring of practice, because just as our elaboration on enunciative procedures has shown, “a theory of narration is indissociable from a theory of practices, as [it is] its condition as well as its production” (de Certeau, 1984:78).

A wide array of disciplines ranging from the study of myths to neuroscience has made it patent that in order to apprehend reality both as physical environment and intersubjective construct, we recur to “metaphors, images, stories and things that human beings everywhere deploy as ‘objective correlatives’ of the give and take of their quotidian relationships with others,” since these “provide us with rough analogues of the patterns of intersubjective experience which we are seldom in a position to directly apprehend” (Jackson, 2005:37). This use is strengthened by the fact that “narrated reality constantly tells us what must be believed and what must be done” (de Certeau, 1984:186). Stories, then, “provide the decorative container of a narrativity for everyday practices”, their narrativization being thus “a textual ‘way of operating’ having its own procedures and tactics” (ibid, pp. 70, 78).

One of narrativity’s most basic functions is to help reinforcing discursive parsimony, this is, people’s sense of stability of the real. This is because “when we can analogize aspects of our own bodies and worlds with structures we encounter in stories, the self-constructed narratives that make up our understanding of our position in the world gain strength and coherence” (Spolsky, 2010:40). In other words, to structure experience through narration is a means for objectifying it, and thus make subjective experience appear ‘objectively real’, because once it can be communicated, it belongs to the world ‘out there’. We become reassured subjects as the stuff we’re made of (memories, fears, hopes, pains) echoes other people’s experiences and beliefs. It’s in this field of intersubjective exchange that the rebellious potential of narrativization as practice is to be found. Just as it reassures, it problematizes. Remember,
for instance, people’s contesting versions of the suicides that shook Malabo in February 2014. Distancing oneself from a narrated object through irony, parody and fatalist humor have also been classically studied and constitute, we could say, a genre in themselves (see i.e. Scott, 1985). Such stories have the power to challenge one’s self by problematizing the contents of its enunciation.

The new black man

I heard one of such stories as we sat, a group of four, after dinner one night. A hangie commented on how hard it is to organize events in Malabo because everybody is always late. “My mother uses to say” someone commented, “that the problems between the black man and the white man started the day God finished creating the world: he asked both men to come meet him. The white man arrived on time, but the black man was already living in [Equatorial] Guinea, and so he was late. That’s why the white man got to keep everything, including the power to always subdue the black man. Because he arrived first, and we’re always late!” Everybody broke out in laughter. “Yé! All that black man got to keep were the words ‘behave yourself and multiply’, eh!” someone else gagged.

Narrativizing inequality as inherently racial through mythical elements (a god, the creation of the world and the beginning of time) has been widely studied by anthropologists and folklorists (see i.e. Winwood Reade, 1873:424; quoted in Jackson, 2005:67; see also Jackson, 1998:108-124). However, in contemporary Malabo, ‘racial difference’ as a narratological avenue is taking people beyond the traditional black-man/white-man stories. It works in another register, in a more quotidian and spontaneous manner, as a means to challenge everyday discursive authority and what some experience as an exogenous morality. A couple of weeks after hearing the story of black man being late, some women and I were discussing culinary traditions and eating taboos for the local ethnic groups when I got to hear still one more joke on the matter:

ANITA: —You know the Bible says that there are animals you’re not supposed to eat…
CARLOS.— Yeah, that’s what the Bible says, but that’s the white man’s interpretation of it. When the black man interprets the Bible he knows that everything that moves is actually edible.

The comment was, again, received by the audience with scornful laughter. While at first this dialogue might look like one more stance of what some have called ‘provocative impotence’ (Sartre, 1987:174; see also Scott, 1985), by insinuating that white man can afford
to be picky with his food while black man has to eat whatever he has at hand, the context of the exchange and the attitudes of the participants —more skeptic than defiant— indicated something else. In this narrative, ‘food’ is a resource both white and black men have access to. The bible is merely an object through which a discourse of domination attempts to regulate it. By challenging the interpretive authority of white man, black man reaffirms himself not only as different from him, but as equally capable of authoritative interpretation and decision making, the proof of it being the ‘doability’ of that which he thinks, this is, its consummation in practice. Whether black man can afford to be picky or not, is completely irrelevant. What matters is his freedom and willingness to eat something that white man has presented to him as unclean and/or forbidden.

Black man is a timeless metaphor of inequality framed by a discourse on race. Redeeming him from his long held role as the destitute victim of white man, God, circumstance or fate, could indicate a qualitative change in the collectivity which serves him as referent. Black man is a metaphor of an oppressed people: if the one changes, so does the other. As the link between narrativity and self-making has been explored, it is believed that “there probably isn’t very much of a self until a growing child has collected enough narrative memories to allow the construction of that self” (Spolsky, 2010:41). In a country where ‘nothing makes sense’ however, life itself can be narrativized as an objective product of contingency.

The schoolchild, the chairman and the church certificate

Narrativization helps people to organize a composite self in defiance of the arbitrariness of circumstance. Such is the case of Mario, one of the most reflective and well-articulated people I met. When I asked him what he was doing to hold such a stoic posture amidst the seemingly mad-driving social life in Malabo, he expressed he had learn to laugh at life because his own biography was little else than a series of ridiculous events:

According to Fang tradition, when a woman has a son out of wedlock the baby belongs to her family. So when I was born, they gave me the name of a cousin to a national hero. And I got my father’s [first] name [as my last]. Then, in my certificate of baptism, when they asked who my parents were, my mom’s dad said ‘no, he’ll be my son’, and so they wrote down the names of my grandpa and his wife as if they were my parents. Years went by. I went to school. My grandpa was the chairman, but then he left and there came a white man, who started looking at the files. There, he read the name that was given to me, and realized that my last names didn’t match those of the people figuring as my parents in the church certificate. He called me in, and asked who my parents were. I told him their names, but these didn’t match nor the name I go by nor the names written down as my parents in the church’s document. ‘Then? What’s going on here?’ We explained it to him but he said that the church document had to be mended and have my real parents’ names on it, because if not, I would be expelled from school, because it was a stupidity [not having done it right from the beginning]. So we had to go to this church, to try to find my godfather, and mend the document. I didn’t even know who
he was. I was told that when my baptism took place the only religious person in the village was the catechist, and so my grandpa asked him and his wife to be my godparents.

“Everybody and their tremendous arbitrariness!” was the reaction Mario’s story woke in yet another listener. Sure: from the day he was born, Mario’s life seemed, to outsiders, a chain of stupid decisions which had ultimately lead to a child with no good identity papers. For the white chairman, whose ‘thing’ for bureaucracy made him identify anomalous papers with anomalous personhood, Mario was a lacking person as his file was a lacking file. The legitimacy of his social existence was called into question. For Mario, who never before had stopped to wonder whether his identity papers were ‘sensical’ or ‘nonsensical’, it was precisely his experience with the white chairman what made him develop a double consciousness of himself, born out both of being labeled a product of ‘stupidity’ and of being experiencing, until then, his everyday existence in all normality. Such reflections made Mario grow a very philosophical take on how the ‘system’ works around him, as well as on his own position in it. He’s mastered contingency in the world by making peace with the arbitrariness of his own being, but only after narrativizing his subjective experiences of contingency (this is, after structuring them as a biography he then shares with humor) thus turning it into an object he now acts upon as much as he had been acted upon by it.

Invisible writings / On witchcraft and the occult

A general theory of narrativity argues that “stories teach because their audiences can learn by analogy the things they need to know in order to survive and the behavioral patterns they need to thrive within their cultural world”, because people can “learn from the mistakes of fictional others” (Spolsky, 2010:40, 50). One of the theory’s fundamental postulates goes that narrative is inherently pedagogical because its practice allows people to predict the actual consequences of potential actions—an extremely valuable resource in environments where the lack of freedom of speech through institutionalized means prevents experiential knowledge from being openly and massively disseminated. However Equatoguineans like to talk, we can’t ignore the fact that the lack of freedom of speech has been an issue throughout Obiang Nguema’s and Macías’ rules, and all the way back to the colonial period. This climate of formal ‘silence’ specially when dealing with ‘dissident’ expressions constitutes fertile grounds for the spreading of all kinds of strategies for informal political action which do not exclude contradictory participation, enunciation and symbolic struggle. In this regard, it has been noted how “the domain of the invisible and its associated sorcery, together with the manipulations of genealogies, have always been major areas of social antagonism” (Bayart, 1993:22).
Being witchcraft one of my hangies’ absolute favorite topics I had the chance to hear cases upon cases upon cases of it. A general ‘reading’ I made while transcribing the material shows that in Equatorial Guinea people use it not only to phrase group belonging, gender, race (white/black), and power; but also to narrativize existential issues: witchcraft is an insurance of sorts, a ‘weapon of the weak’, a discursive framework for the objectification (through the use of eggs, bones, blood, shells, herbs) of inequality. People see witchcraft both as a source of wealth and a proof of it, some of the stories phrasing lessons on the ephemeral quality of riches (disposal of goods without their enjoyment) or warning about the double-edged blade of loyalties (pacts), as these become a metaphor for political assassinations (blood offerings).

The girl, the man and the cat

The pedagogical aspect of such narratives is illustrated by a story that was referred to me as gossip, this is, as an event that had actually taken place a few weeks before my arrival:

Not so long ago a girl was taken. She had gotten out of school and a big car stopped her. The man in the car tells her ‘come on, get in, I’ll show you my house, I won’t do anything to you, I just want us to chat, if you come I’ll give you 7 million CFA francs [$11,850 USD]’. He swore and swore he wasn’t going to do anything to her. ‘All I want’, the man said, ‘is that my cat licks your breasts’. Of course the girl got in the car! I mean, you’re a student and that kind of money…. So they arrive at the man’s house, the cat licks her breasts, and the man gives her the money, but warns her not to tell anybody about what happened. The next day the girl comes to school with a heavy heart but a packed pocket: she and her best friend go to eat, they pay their bills, you know, they live the life. One day her friend asked her where the money had come from and the girl told her about the man and his cat. Within one week the girl falls ill, and nobody can do anything to save her. The hospital runs all kinds of tests, but they find nothing. So she dies. People start asking what had really happened because it is not normal to fall ill and die like that, so suddenly. Then, her friend couldn’t hold the secret anymore and tells the dead girl’s mother about the man and his cat. The mother asks the friend whether she knew where her daughter was keeping the money. She did. Twenty-four hours after the girl had died her body was sweating, sweating, sweating like, her clothes were dripping! How can it be that you’re dead and still sweat like if you were alive? Her family took the money to bury it with her body but when the casket was already closed, her father showed up, opened the casket and put two bullets in her chest, because he said that his daughter wasn’t dead, that his daughter was somewhere else, working for the man with the cat. She was working where the man had made the pact, thus the sweat dripping from her body. I truly believe it was her innocence what got her there. But nothing, the man had taken her to work in another country, and when her father shot her he killed her for good.

It has been noted that “a satisfactory representation or pattern of representations is not judged by whether it is true but by whether it is strong enough to support appropriate and habitual (and therefore fast) reactions in familiar situations” (Spolsky, 2010:45). Nowhere is this more true than in stories involving young females, money, and powerful males. Equatoguinean vox populi has it that rich men and politicians are turning the country’s schools into ‘whorehouses’ and young girls into prostitutes. Given the impending danger, girls have to be able to recognize an anomalous situation that at first may look familiar—a rich man trying
to buy sex from them, whatever his paraphilias— but turns out to be something different—a kind of ‘slavery of the soul’ through forced labor and sexual exploitation—. The case of the girl, the man and the cat has unmistakable influences of traditional *ekong* witchcraft, according to which the souls of people are extracted leaving their bodies hollow but not ‘dead’ in a biological sense, in order to send them to work abroad for a powerful —often white— person who’s also in pacts with witches or is a witch himself. Just as in the zombie-making traditions, the *ekong* narrative has its roots in collective trauma after slavery. While the ekong aspect of the story is undeniable, one more contemporary and disturbing feature emerges in the case of the girl and the cat: the story, besides being a historically-rooted pedagogical tool, also challenges the nature of a young girl’s death, collectively experienced by a whole community as unfair and untimely, in the midst of her being allegedly abused by a rich man.

*Mermaids: family pacts then and now*

The presence of witchcraft and the figure of the witch is pervasive throughout contemporary Equatorial Guinea. Given the acuteness and inefficiency of electrical infrastructure throughout the country, it is perhaps not surprising to hear that in Ekuku, a Kombe small town well known for its witches, “still not so long ago they were having a lot of problems with the electricity because the witches were turning it off, since they didn’t like it.” However their diversification, classical myths and figures continue to be deployed by Equatoguineans but have been adapted to serve more contemporary purposes. Another classical figure (and perhaps one of the oldest) in today’s witchcraft iconography in Equatorial Guinea is the demon-like mermaid, Mami Watá. As with the *ekong*, contemporary oral tradition holds it to be a symbolic remnant of collective trauma after slavery (however sporadic it actually was in Bioko island) and/or colonization. A male Bubi in his mid-30s explained to me that

as the colonizers came we [the Bubi] slowly retrieved to the forests because at night the colonizers would come, entering with their ships through our rivers, and would take away the strong men. And the image the natives had of the colonizers was that of a white person with long hair, coming out of the water. And they were called Mami Watá... That’s why the image we have of Mami Watá is a white mermaid, a white person with long hair, that comes out from the depths of the river, to kidnap or to make pacts, a devil.

Again as with *ekong*, white Europeans feature prominently in people’s narratives of danger and mistrust. Mami Watá is therefore key in narratives that objectify loyalties and networks as riches and alliances to be maintained through generations of the same family, thus helping people narrativize social and/or economic failure and success in terms of broken or
ongoing pacts with external forces. Lela, a Kombe girl in her mid-20s, told me how her family has been the victim of capricious mermaids throughout four generations:

We come from a coastal zone, the sea is like the axis of our lives. Every time my great-grandfather would go down to the sea, a mermaid would watch him, until one day she manifested, and told him ‘I want you, but I know you’re married, so I offer you…’, well, it’s not like they offer you something, they force you to do it, and if you try to say no, they immediately kill you, or worse, they become obsessed with you and follow you everywhere, that’s why they offer you all possible riches, because what does man want? He wants to feed his family, to have a good life, and to live in peace… My great-grandfather made a pact with the mermaid. She charmed him. She told him ‘I will give you everything, all that I ask in return is that when I come to see you, your wife can’t come into the house.’ He agreed, and kept the secret. Time passed and he became incredibly rich, until one day his wife for some reason came into the house and saw them together. The mermaid got upset, and told my great-grandpa ‘when I met you I made a deal, and now you’ve broken it… because I don’t want to take you, you have to give me your son’, but my great-grandpa had only one son, so he refused, and told her ‘No, if you want this to end, this ends right here, I will come with you’. And so the mermaid took him. One day he went down to the sea and didn’t come back. The mermaid, however, keeps watching my family to this day, because they say she wants to continue having ties with my family.

Lela’s family, which had been pretty wealthy, left the country in the years prior to independence. They lived in Spain in increasingly dire conditions after their fortune vanished as Macias’ regime destroyed the national economy together with whatever infrastructure the colonialists didn’t destroy themselves. Her family has been back in Equatorial Guinea for a few years now, and as part of a new generation of young girls, Lela feels an impending danger:

My cousin is in our hometown. Once she was outside and she saw a man appear. He told her he was a very important man, and that he had come from the sea. He told her ‘I want us to be together, I’ll give you everything you want: a house, cars, money, travels, everything, but you can’t be with any other men. Tomorrow I’ll come see you’. My cousin didn’t know what to do, you know, it’s one of these family things that, because we know we’ve been into a pact with a mermaid before, everybody tells you that if this person is not with you he won’t leave the family alone, you understand, he has to be with one of us so that the rest of the family can be at peace. Refusing a pact brings trouble, tragedy, deaths, because they get angry… My cousin said ‘well, if the elders have told me that I have to accept him, I will’. And so she waited, but the man never came. Everybody is sure he’ll be back. That’s why they don’t want me to spend the night in town when I go visit, because this color [she points at her arm] calls them out, me being mulatta, I can call their attention, and that’s what they say, ‘if one of them wants you he can follow you all the way to Malabo, he’ll follow you anywhere, and no one will be able to help you’.

Lela’s story paints a perfect picture of the processes behind modern myth-making. Through the narrative on his great-grandfather, she accounts for the dire social and economic situation her family endured once his great-grandpa was gone: the pact with the mermaid was broken, and so the family’s source of wealth was gone. The narrative also helped her and her elders to cope with the mystery of his disappearance: believing a mermaid took him offers the closure of causality, which is better than living with the uncertainty of what caused him to be lost at sea. If a broken pact with a mermaid explains the dire economic conditions her family
endured while living in Spain, the fact that her family is now back in Equatorial Guinea with a new generation of young female cousins opened the possibility (and the risk) of having to re-establish the long broken alliance. The mermaid, in the midst of oil money, has come back in the form of a rich man wanting to get the exclusive sexual favors of a young girl in exchange of houses, cars, money, and travels. While the whole family, elders included, seems aware of the dangers of entering such pacts, they also realize their inability to escape them: the will of the powerful can’t be contradicted. As if to better cope with the situation, the prospects get phrased in terms of peace: only after the mermaid gets what it wants will the rest of the family be left alone. More than left alone, we could argue after having sketched on the nature of networks and family connections, that the whole family would benefit out of one of such alliances. This is why elders warn the girls to run while they can, but to relent once they’ve been chosen: one family member has to take it to insure everybody else’s wellbeing.

Ties of blood

While it is disturbing to think that the elders would ‘sell’ the young girls of their family for their own social and economic stability, the trope is by no means new. The motif of ‘selling a relative’ is again present in ekong witchcraft, where joiners have to offer a kinsman in order to join the network of witches, and it has been present both ritually and as gossip since Macías’ times, as it was believed he sacrificed a family member in his quest for supernatural power. The trope is, in fact, so common, that it has become an important part of new narratives surrounding deaths framed as ritual and attributed to powerful actors, as it was the case of the wave of suicides previously described. Behind the narrative corpus of such stories is the figure of *lazos de sangre* (lit. ‘ties of blood’), a mob-like recruitment system allegedly used by the political elite to control access to power positions through its regulation via proofs of loyalty. According to the *vox populi*, joining the ‘ties of blood’ means that in order to become a part of the elite, you have to do things that other members have done, and these things are “bad things,” so that if at a later date somebody finds himself in a position to judge anybody else, somebody will remind him that he can’t do so, because he has done the same things. A man told me the story of a cousin of his:

**MAN:**—My cousin told me that when he was offered a good job, to become a minister, they told him ‘look, you can have this position, but we’d like to know what you’re willing to offer to us’. And they weren’t asking him to offer his car, no, no, no, what they want you to offer is blood. This exists. I can guarantee you that this exists… At the beginning they ask for one of your friends, then they’ll ask you to offer your brother, then a son, and if you have four sons they’ll ask you to offer your eldest, then the next-eldest, until at the end, you end up giving up your entire family.
ADE:— And this is a means to ensure loyalty...
MAN:—Obviously. And you are forced to keep on going if you aspire to possessions.
This is a very materialist society. Before, I didn’t believe in these things. I don’t believe in the evil of witchcraft, I believe in the evil of men.

The man told me how there had been some cases in which also the bodies of children had been found with the heart or the brain missing:

MAN:—One thing is whether they believe such things hold in fact some kind of power, but they make you do it anyway to have you join them… It’s a matter of loyalties, but the problem is that you have to reaffirm that loyalty every so often… So loyalty gives, but it also takes from you. And just as you became a minister, you can be cleaning that very office the year after.

When I asked the man whether it was possible to leave the ‘ties of blood’ after one has committed to them, I was told that even if people can leave the country, less than a few are willing to do it. This is because at the time most men start getting some kind of ‘moral hangover’ after whatever they’ve done, they’ve also grown so accustomed to the extremely high life standards granted by the political life, that they simply give up trying to quit despite the increasing pressure from their moral selves, which according to some, is what drives some of them to insanity. “The mermaid eats you,” was the man’s last remark on the subject.

Although it might look like it is by no means a myth giving its similarities with common methods of recruitment used by Western street gangs and the mob, the narrative of the ‘ties of blood’ could be circulating in inner political crests as a strategy to prevent actors from trying to join them and thus maintain more or less exclusive control over the state’s resources. The narrative links back to the trope of selling family members for riches and power, which, as has been argued somewhere else, is a feature of ekong witchcraft and a common political practice under president Macías’ rule. Accordingly, if the story’s first function is to found, the stories regarding ‘ties of blood’ open “a legitimate theater for practical actions… a field that authorizes dangerous and contingent social actions” (de Certeau, 1984:123, 125) such as a stoic resistance to work for the government despite material temptations in the name of preserving one’s moral/spiritual integrity, or a conscious decision to work for the government with the purpose of attaining riches in spite of dissolving one’s self in the mermaid’s belly. Indeed, it’s known that “the boom of esotericism turned out to be a mechanism of selection and exclusion which has reinforced the dominant circles” (Bayart, 1993:159). In Equatorial Guinea it is common knowledge that “those from Mongomo,” Obiang Nguema’s hometown, “use a lot of black magic, witchcraft,” and that cases of corpse mutilation or missing body parts are common, although more so in the continental region than in Bioko. The city of Bata was deemed “a
dangerous territory” when it’s about human sacrifices. “I’d like to believe that things happen more often in the interior because it’s bigger [than Bioko] and you can commit any crime or do anything and since here there isn’t a scientific police, nobody would know what happened,” a woman told me. However, although allegations on cannibalism and human sacrifices circulate in the region as they do in the rest of the continent, narratives on tomb desecration and corpse mutilation remain the most prominent features in witchcraft activity. “They say that the most well-lit city in Bata is the Bikuy cemetery, because there are so many cars in there at night and their lights shine so bright, that you could mistake the cemetery for a crowded city.”

Unearthly justice
Despite the fact that the witchcraft narrative tends to formulate riches and politics and that it’s under those disguises that it dominates the discursive landscape on power, that’s by no means the only form it takes while narrativizing social praxis. The concepts of justice/injustice are also strong elements in people’s enunciatory practices regarding witchcraft. I got to hear, again not as myth but as gossip, the story of a woman who swore to take justice into her own hands:

This happened three weeks ago… My neighbor is a doctor and she went to court to take care of some private business. While in there, she heard the case of a woman who had taken a taxi and was raped by the three men on it… Of these three men, they only found one. But because of brotherhood or who knows why, the judge exonerates him without even looking at the case. The woman, resentful, told [the rapist] ‘this isn’t over, as long as I’m alive, I’ll look for a way [to get back at you], I’ve seen that by the Earth I can’t, I’ll show you that by Death I can!’ Nobody made anything of her threats. She [the neighbor] works at the general hospital, where all cases go. One week after [the incident in court] she is about to start her shift when suddenly she’s called to the emergency room… ‘Come quickly, there’s this extraordinary case here right now, there’s a person sweating, sweating seas, we have run all possible tests and nothing shows, he doesn’t have hepatitis C, nor AIDS, nothing!’ And when my neighbor gets to the ER, who does she find? The rapist from the courthouse!

While this account is a classic example of how narratives are deployed as a weapon of the weak, I’m convinced of its significance within the contemporary Equatoguinean context. The inefficiency of the national justice system and gender discrimination that women are constantly subjected to makes this narrative doubly emancipating: a woman might be victimized, twice, first by men and then by the state, but she still is, more or less by herself, capable of inflicting much more damage than that which was inflicted upon her. Despite their willingness to join (in an effort to manipulate) the same dynamics that oppress them, Equatoguinean women don’t seem to be experiencing themselves as victimized beings, as objects being acted upon. Whether through witchcraft or the administration of pregnancies, the women I spoke to feel capable of acting upon those who attempt to victimize them.
However this might be true, it’s important not to look away from the fact that in a postcolonial, dictatorial state with a polygamous majority and a deeply rooted culture of gender inequality, regardless of the way they feel about themselves, women are extremely vulnerable. Narratives like the rapist’s might not only serve to empower women, but also to discourage men from attempting to victimize them. Perhaps this is the reason why immigrant women (and more specifically, Cameroonian women) have a reputation of being extremely dangerous given the witchcraft they’re said to practice: the local men are not to mess with them.

While the vulnerability aspect of women’s lives gives narratives on witchcraft the power to discursively ‘insure’ them, women still have to respect some kind of universal order whose expression is the equal distribution of moral, material and emotional resources. When justice (as the restoring of balance of such an order) isn’t her primary goal, women’s attempts at taking action can backfire. Take, for instance, the case of Bisila, a crazy homeless who used to stroll the streets surrounding Plaza de E’Waiso. Once a happily married woman, jealous Bisila had tried to ‘trap’ the love of her husband by feeding him his favorite food laced with herbs prepared by a witch, who warned her that somebody had to eat the dish by midnight the same day or there was going to be a tragedy in the family. That night Bisila’s husband came home late, so in order to avoid the tragedy she had to eat the food herself. After eating it, she went insane. Her husband couldn’t handle her madness, and soon after left the country with their kids. “Sometimes you can find Bisila in the streets, making the same ‘medicine’ she took,” I was told. “You find her putting herbs and nacre in a pot, talking to the spirits.”

Very much a pedagogical narrative, Bisila’s story warns women against being greedy and possessive when they already have an enjoyable life. It’s also a warning about the risks of getting tangled in the nets of power (in this case expressed as the practice of witchcraft) and the high price you can end up paying, physically, emotionally, mentally and socially, if you fall in the temptation of tampering with another human being’s life and/or will when it’s not really a matter of restoring ‘the life affirming order of social life’, but of disrupting it. In other words, narratives like these are keeping people from turning into oppressors, just as much as they are protecting them from being/feeling oppressed. The role this process could be playing when considering any prospects for social change is enormous, since it is known that continuous encounters with narrative “recursively reorganize an individual brain/mind into a connected set of schemata that represent the self and the situation of that self in its environment, such that the achieved or constructed patterns support both the individual’s identity and his or her behavior” (Spolsky, 2010:40). Accordingly, an encounter with narrative can literally “change your mind,” because “these constructed patterns by which we know ourselves are, like other learned
patterns, not only in our brains (…) but are also embodied in our skin, our limbs, and our muscles as well” (ibid). Thus narrativization as a practice is also an embodied process buildable through sensory experience. In light of this fact, narratives constructed after the experience of physical environments become a crucial means to understand self-making/maintenance. That Equatorial Guinea is going through a phase of vertiginous infrastructural change offers a perfect opportunity to study such processes.

**Beyond a zebra crossing**

“The morning after my first night back in Malabo,” told me Joaquín, young man who until not that long ago had been living abroad with relatives,

I wake up early and my father tells me, ‘Where are you going at 5 in the morning?’, and I tell him ‘Ahh, chico! I want to get to know the city. You say the city has changed: let me see it with my own feet’. So I’m walking, and I get to Gepetrol, there’s the hotel, the roundabout. I wanted to see that CEMAC building, which was allegedly the boom of architecture. And I find myself walking across the roundabout, through a zebra crossing, which takes me to a garden, and the garden later takes me nowhere. So I, consciously, turn back and say ‘Hell, maybe I turned where I shouldn’t’. You see! Then the spirit of humanism gets into me, so I turn back, and say ‘How is this possible? Let’s see.’ But all I see is the same roundabout with the zebra crossing which again takes me to the forest. So I say ‘What are you trying to tell me? That from the city we go to the forest? Or that from the forest we go to the city? Are we moving backward, or are we moving forward? What the hell is this of having a roundabout with a zebra crossing which on top of it leads nowhere?

Just as narrated adventures organize walks, “they make the journey, before or during the time the feet perform it” (de Certeau, 1984:116). Joaquín might have started his walk that morning with the purpose of seeing a building, but the walk itself and the sensory experience of the environment (the combination of the roundabout, the zebra crossing, the forest) transformed his journey into a deeply significant one. His walk transcended both the space and time it took to complete it, and drove the young man to enunciate the contingency of urban infrastructure as a powerful metaphor of social development: Are we moving from underdevelopment to development, or vice versa? Are we moving forward, or are we moving backward? The power and opportunity to question the tangible and discursive authority of social development expressed through urban infrastructure (with all the nonsensical, improvised elements it sometimes combines in the most bricolent, heterogeneous fashion) is mastered by Joaquín through the narrativization of a deeply subjective experience. The realm of the senses was transformed into the realm of the ‘spiritual’, as the young man phrases a sudden creative rush as ‘the spirit of humanism’ taking over his body. Narratives such as ‘The rebellion of the chicken’ make it clear that such creativity is not an attribute exclusive to a few
individuals. On the contrary: they show that narrativization is capable of providing people with a very specific kind of nourishment, this is, with “food to feed representational hunger,” given that recent research in cognitive linguistics suggests that “narrative activity —both the production and the comprehension of stories— [could soon be proved to be] an evolved, embodied process, like language and like metabolism” (Spolsky, 2010:39).

The idea of narrativization as “food for representational hunger” is not so far-fetched given the ‘representational starvation’ that Equatoguineans could be said to have experienced for decades as they were deprived of independent press, public museums and civil spaces in general. The exceptional receptiveness that people show when attending theatre plays and poetry readings is a telling sign of such ‘representational hunger’. I’ve seen the great comfort people find in artistic experience as a means to access realms of symbolic expression they otherwise wouldn’t have access to beyond their own subjective readings of everyday ‘nonsense’ —chicken, cars, speeches, infrastructure, etc.—. If it’s an axiom that people only get to know themselves ‘through the eyes of the other’ (see i. e. Cooley, 1992 [1922]), Equatoguineans are getting to know, and to re-write themselves, through the creative act of re-writing their Others: the West and its development, democracy and human rights discourses, the East embodied in the many Chinese workers walking the streets of Malabo. The shared project of getting to know oneself through the phrasing of others, whether it being through sensory experience or through fictional characters in theater plays, is an enterprise Equatoguineans are embarking on, slowly but surely, feeding the embryo of an imagined nation. The narrative act, in this sense, is also an intersubjective act: “wired-in connectivity between people,” as key in the study of narrative interactions, is “situated on the border of the cultural and the personal” (Spolsky, 2010:48). Again, enunciation prevails over habitus. Behind all social practice, there’s always intersubjective meaning, and thus enunciatory practices. This fact also shows that “once again, a poetics has preceded theory” (de Certeau, 1984:151). And in a parallel manner, that the symbolic frames practice through the structuring of interaction.
Somewhere between having and becoming: strategies to divert madness in the homeland of an I who no one is

A restlessness. The aesthetic vertigo of infrastructural change. Shiny façades shining back in pre-pubescent pupils. “This can no longer be stopped,” say the enthusiasts, where “this” means ‘renewal’. Hope that can’t be tampered with because it’s already out there, growing roots in children’s bodies, silently and invisibly, slowly and organically. “This” means the invention of a new collective memory divided in a before (“when we had nothing”) and an after, still undergoing definition through an existential battle between having and becoming. “They say that if you’re here more than two years, you slowly start going insane,” I was told by a hangie who lives ‘in a cloud’. “You have to get out, you soak yourself in civilization, and then you return.” But soaking oneself in ‘civilization’ doesn’t seem to be working that well: every person I met expressed having at least one ‘demented’ family member. It doesn’t matter if it’s phrased as the result of a family curse, of taking ‘medicine’ (a witch’s brew), or as the quietly pitied outcome of entangling oneself in the state’s webs of power: madness is out there to get you.

Taking a step back from the common assumption that Equatoguineans are Obiang Nguema’s eternal victims, I’d like to suggest that people’s experiences of alienation and recurrent cases of madness are not the result of direct top-down explicitly repressive mechanisms of control set up by the state. Instead, I propose to look at them in light of a more lateral kind of pressure, a lateral struggle that results from people’s needs for self-making/maintenance amidst an inherently corroding sociality, itself the result of the trajectory of the place: a postcolonial setting characterized by the impossibility of privacy, forceful kinship/political loyalties, economic self-interest, labor uncertainty and a kind of ‘paranoia’ that perhaps for being rooted in history (according to some, in Macías’ doctrine of “accuse and you’ll be rewarded”) has to be constantly dealt with through a complex mix of social maneuvering, narrativization, and the most varied forms of display. If this is what’s breaking so many people down, what are the unbroken doing to hold themselves together? The final segment of an all-too-brief journey through the intersubjective spaces unfolding as we speak in the streets of Malabo, this chapter aims at looking at the strategic forms of interaction that people engage while making mean and being in a state sustained by a politics of the belly, the dynamics of networks, and the facts of inequality they’re both built upon.
It has been argued that people’s quotidian agendas are oriented towards self-gain, which makes them liable to appear as inherently ‘evil’ and/or to imply a general lack of concern for the wellbeing of others. I’d like to treat such agendas as fueled by a will/need to create and isolate interstices for action, a grounds for agency that can make actors feel empowered even when subjected to the will of others. I take a strategy, then, to be a manipulation of power relationships, “an effort to delimit one’s own place in a world bewitched by the invisible powers of the Other” (de Certeau, 1984:35-36). The fact that people’s behaviors are marked by ambiguity makes them highly effective yet difficult to reproach in an open manner: perfidy and denunciation are therefore common currency in the postcolonial state (Bayart, 1993:254) and, as it’ll be shown, Equatorial Guinea is not the exception.

The liberating world of petty retaliation

Let us remember the case of the Guineana who, when accused of stealing, didn’t care for denying it but wondered instead why out of all those who steal, she was the one being targeted. This example sets a perfect background for the fact that, perhaps because of the same mechanisms that lie behind strategic denunciation, people often believe they’re being strategically fired. Like cinderellas at a midnight clock strike, ministers become janitors, general directors are turned into assistants. Even at those instances in which employers base dismissals on the grounds of, let’s say, low performance, hardly any reason besides personal motives are considered to be truly meaningful. People feel wronged, know that it’s personal, and move on without letting go of the grudge. They wait for the time to exert ‘justice’ regardless of how disempowered they might be at their new positions. More often than not, and in the pettiest ways imaginable, people ‘get back’ at those who wronged them, or as in Alejandra’s case, at those who have wronged people they care for:

I went to see a Minister. There, I saw this girl working as a receptionist. I knew she knew me, and I knew who she was, but we didn’t speak because I had fired her sister, a shameless slack who never worked. She went into the Minister’s office to tell him that I had arrived, then came back to her desk and sat to talk on the phone. Ten minutes passed. Then one hour. Then three hours. All of a sudden the door opened, the Minister was going home! He was shocked when he saw me sitting there. The girl had gone in and out without telling him that I was waiting!

To sit in a waiting room for three and a half hours believing you can’t leave because the person you need to see will call you in at any moment might sound awful, but is no life threatening thing. The severity of the wronged’s strategies to ‘get back’ at their wrongdoers is always relative to the positions they occupy, but the effectiveness or value of a strategy isn’t
necessarily determined by the severity of its outcome. The things that the wronged do to ‘get back’ at their wrongdoers in order to restore ‘the life affirming order of social life’ might appear futile and insignificant but their strength lies beyond their contents, in their organization. They represent the powerless’ efforts to exert power over those who have exerted it upon them. Remember the story of the rape victim who ‘got back’ at her rapist through witchcraft after the authorities failed to indict him. In any case, ‘getting back’ at one’s wrongdoers implies engaging them in a game of relative power positions, this is, in the social struggle. But not everybody is willing to participate. Some Equatoguineans choose to live what they call “a quiet life,” which usually means distancing themselves from public realms where the lateral struggle occurs at its rawest. Putting distance could also be seen as a strategy for gaining control over one’s being, but it’s sure not free from elements conducive to loss of self and madness.

Escaping

Earlier examples have shown how network sociality, with its lightning-fast communication, circulation of intimate knowledge and ability to link people located at the extremes of the social landscape, can be experienced as deeply corroding. Participating in the networks, despite the benefits it can report, also puts a person’s social integrity on the line. Some feel the need to isolate themselves in order to stop having to deal with the overwhelming tasks of mask changing, loyalty proving and alliance tending. The condition is widespread among the comebackees, but is not exclusive to them. Anybody and everybody feels the need to flee Malabo in order to break free from “the anguish,” but in the democratic world of alienation, escaping not always means abandoning. As the following examples will show, Equatoguineans ‘transplant’ interaction from one realm to another in order to control it; and they create alternative life spaces just as easy as they objectify ‘sociality’ as a ‘place’ they can escape from.

Interaction transplants

One of my first impressions upon arrival in Malabo was that women always seemed sad, for example, at the workplace, whereas men tended to project such confidence while performing in the same environments that I often got the impression that some had integrated script to being. While a gendered experience of alienation might not sound that surprising given the old taken-for-granted division between the public/private realms as more or less correlative with male/female identities, it’s in Malabo’s ‘informal’/public scene —the bars, the markets, the streets, the nightclubs— that women take a dominant role, and openly participate in all kinds of interaction that many men are choosing to retreat from. At first, I thought of men’s retreat as
due to the money factor: most women are out there to ‘get’ what men are expected to ‘give’, 
but obviously not all of them can afford it, or at least not as often as women would like them 
to. Now, I’m convinced that some men are withdrawing from the struggle at the 
‘informal’/public setting (which one hangie described as “uncontrollable” and highly 
dependent on display), in order to contain it in the form of more or less stable extramarital 
relationships ‘controllable’ through their transplant into the ‘formal’/private. My female 
hangies all agreed on that their boyfriends/lovers try to compensate with sex and proofs of 
commitment the money and things they can’t afford to give them, but my observations made 
me think that this ‘compensation’ has less to do with men’s ‘will to please’ than with their ‘will 
to prevail’ through gaining control over the administration of resources during interaction with 
a gendered other. Most men might not be able to administer money, perfumes and expensive 
champagne in a way that is advantageous to them, but they can administer time, visits, sex, 
phone calls and promises. Through regulating interaction with a female Other at the more 
controllable ‘formal’/private realm, some men are protecting themselves from feeling 
‘emasculated’ by women’s exigencies in the ‘informal’/public. Transplanting interaction from 
one realm to another, I believe, is therefore a strategy men use to avoid feeling disempowered.

Flying away

However prominent the gender struggle is in Malabo, not everything is, at least directly, 
dependent on it. It’s true that most young women seem eager to get together with a rich man 
(which consequently makes it necessary for them to put themselves “out there”), but those 
young men who can subsist by themselves exhibit a tendency to search for self-maintenance 
through social isolation. A man in his mid-20s working as a low-profile employee at the travel 
department of a Chinese company in town, describes his life as being rather reclusive:

When I go out I have my headphones on, with music at the loudest, so that I don’t have 
to listen, nor to see, because every time I say ‘Vale, let’s see what’s going on around me’, 
I start seeing stupid things, that I say, ‘My god, how is it possible to live in a country like 
this? What’s wrong with this people?’ That’s why I spend all my time at home. I get out 
of work, I go to my room, I turn my computer on, and I do my little things. Then, the night 
comes, so I sleep. Then, I wake up, so I go to work. That’s all I do. When I’m fed up with 
this place I take a flight, I go to Spain or wherever, just to see some civilization.

Leaving Equatorial Guinea “to see some civilization” is a common strategy deployed 
by whoever with at least one relative living somewhere abroad, which practically means 
everybody. Flight tickets’ high prices represent an obvious nuisance but it isn’t one that even 
the poor can’t get around. I got to hear how entire extended families have organized themselves
to raise money in order to pay for the tickets of, for example, an insane boy committed to a mental hospital in Spain, to bring him to Guinea to spend a few months with his family; and for a girl living in Guinea, in order to fly her to Spain to visit her father. Relatives living abroad also contribute, if not always with money for the flight tickets, most often with long periods of food and board for the visitors, who’re usually treated as regular members of the family.

Here an important point has to be made: not only those that purposely isolate themselves end up feeling the need to leave the country at least temporarily. Dannie, a female comebackee who studied in London thanks to her relatives’ collective efforts, also leaves town but for the opposite reasons. In her case, it is ‘being social’ what drives her away:

This year I decided to be social. To get out of my shell. But in this country it’s very hard to establish real friendships, and that burdens me a lot. That’s why I’ve always stayed at home, with my kids. Now, when the anguish gets to me in a way that I say ‘I can’t handle it anymore’, I take a flight to London. I stay there for a week or two, I see my old friends, have a great time, and only then I come back [to deal with] women in here, always very concerned about aguacate, about whether you’re sleeping with their friend, their boyfriend, their husband or their lover.

If people, due to their multiple and often conflicting interpersonal relationships, have a hard time dealing with each other on a day-to-day basis to the point of falling prey to the anguish, one can only imagine the kind of issues that those who were raised abroad and are now back in the country are experiencing. Regardless of sharing a knowledge gained through recurrent cultural crashes, the group remains heterogeneous. The young people who have decided to work for the regime, many believing they’ll be in a position to do something positive for their country, often feel the need to shell themselves from sociality in Malabo while having to endure, at the same time, open condemnation from exiles, activists and scholars abroad. Members of the older generation who, until recently, had lived in Spain, find themselves in an openly critical position towards the government, but helplessly alienated from, and often resentful towards, the people they spent so many years trying to ‘speak’ for. A hangie told me how his uncle, an old man who had spent all his life in Spain, was now living in Malabo but was desperately irritated by its people, whom he uses to refer to as los indígenas.

Escape, as ‘the action of escaping from a place’, is still “one of the constituent strategies of the production of politics and social relations [which] persists in eroding the civic space, constraining the processes of accumulation of power and wealth, and in making predacity easier than exploitation” (Bayart, 1993:259). In other words, ‘escaping’ as a strategy is, at a macro

47 Lit. ‘avocado’. It refers to hair extensions, natural or fake, that Equatoguinean women buy to have them sewn to their own Afro hair. They call it aguacate because that’s the name of the street where the hair is sold in Madrid.

48 Fig. the ‘natives’ as a non-developed, ‘backward’ people.
level, tampering with the development of civility in Malabo. Whether compromising this development at the macro level it’s worth the relief that escaping reports to the people that leave, is debatable. What cannot be ignored is that at the end, the strategy of ‘escaping’ could be reinforcing the anxieties that first gave rise to the need for its deployment:

It’s all momentary. Even if you get out of here, you know that at the end you’re going to have to come back. Here you have your children, here’s your family. And fighting outside [abroad] is not the same as fighting inside [at home]. Here, you work and you can get in a matter of months what at some other places might take you years to obtain. This country is a virgin territory for a lot of things.

The idea of pioneering, of getting a piece of ‘the national cake’, of being able to do something for one’s homeland ‘from within’, or all of the above combined, are pulling people back to Equatorial Guinea like a centrifugal force that ends up dissolving their selves at the center. Once they’re back in Malabo, or if they couldn’t leave the city, or if evading network sociality is not an option, people keep trying to secure their own ground. They turn an ‘escape from’ into an ‘arrival at’. Because they remain, however ‘anguished’, the writers of social reality, all they need to engage in self-making is a different text on the nature of being.

Re-writing the nature of being

In my attempts to document the scandalous growth of churches taking place all over Bioko island, the role that Miguel, my closest hangie, has played, is nothing short of that of a prophet:

We live the oil situation, the mentality situation, and that of the religions. We’re in a crossroads like that of Hernán Cortés. [History] It’s repeating itself and the Nigerians have found their manna… It’s a delicate topic. It’s fascinating how the Nigerian is still hustling to win over the island [Bioko]. If he can’t do it democratically, he’ll end up doing it spiritually.

What Miguel means when he says “we’re in a crossroads like that of Hernán Cortés,” is that ‘we [Equatoguineans] are at a turning point in our history’. The fact that he uses the name of the 1531 Spanish conquistador of Mexico as a referent of colonialism, which he then equates with ‘a turning point in history’ is remarkable. It posits the question of whether Miguel experiences the ‘crossroads’ at which Equatoguineans find themselves today as a sort

---

49 Like two 14-year old cousins had done before him, Miguel recognizes the fact that people’s ‘mentality’ is not changing as fast as the material reality of the country, a discrepancy that results in the “misinterpretation” of new values/symbols (see ‘Making discursive ends meet’, in From rotten yoghurts to mysterious deaths, p. 61).
50 With ‘manna’ Miguel means a ‘means of subsistence granted by the divinity’: a sarcastic way to phrase ‘money’ obtained through the business of preaching. The spread of non-Catholic groups brought to Malabo by Nigerian ministers it’s phrased as a political threat due to the complex diplomatic relations between Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea going back to the 1970s (see ‘A disrespectful neighbor’, in A little white spot, p. 16).
of neocolonial era characterized by the plundering of oil riches and induced cultural change once again buffered by religion. Miguel’s references are indicative of a wider awareness on the links between religion and power/money/politics, which seems to be making some people willing to explore the possibilities they present them with. The tendency points towards a self-making strategy directly related to the economic exploitation of the spiritual resource:

**ANDRÉS:** —Do you know what’s the best way to make money here right now? With no effort. You proclaim yourself a pastor, you open your little church… This church, *Pare de Sufrir*, is now at the old Cine Marfil. Can you believe it? The old Cine Marfil! The place where Macías was judged! That’s a historical place!

**MIGUEL:** —Of course it is!

**ANDRÉS:** —Well, it’s a church now. And that church started here, in front of this building, in that house over there (he points towards the window, and to the house across the street). Some mister would come, he’d put out five of those white plastic chairs, he’d say ‘we sit right here’ and so on, and started preaching, calling people in, asking for alms. Today, he’s powerful enough to invite that Benny Hill [sic] to come to [Equatorial] Guinea.

**MARÍA:** —I wonder, when this Benny Hill [sic] came, how many miracles did he perform?

**ANDRÉS:** —I didn’t see any!

**MIGUEL:** —I went out to buy a Coca-Cola and chicken, and that street over there [points towards the Rey Bonkoro street], was flooded with people. A few kids sat down with me and I asked them ‘Eh, where are all these people coming from?’ And they said ‘From the miracle!’ Hahaha! That’s what they told me! ‘Our peace has come, haven’t you heard?’ And I said ‘Wá? From that thing in the posters you’ve put all over?’ Because there were more posters of that Benny Hill [sic] than of Obiang Nguema that week. He was everywhere. A sorcerer! A demon that comes here to demonize people and to take their souls!

The fact that people choose to join religious groups despite a general conception of pastors as charlatans is nothing extraordinary. The strategy of searching for meaning and solace in an alternative immaterial reality can clearly be traced all the way back to the wake of symbolic thinking in pre-sapiens hominids. Despite the explicit tendency of many Equatoguineans to capitalize on the spiritual needs of their fellow citizens, people are still joining churches, some say, not necessarily in an effort to feel empowered:

You go to any of these little towns where there are only three or four houses, and there’s going to be a church there, and everybody are going to be members of it, I think, because people need to believe in something. People are very depressed. It’s depression. Also, if they’re always drinking alcohol, alcohol, alcohol, is because they need something to evade themselves.

Coping with the products of a corroding sociality by deploying evasion through alcohol and religion, where ‘evasion’ (like drunkenness) is yet another kind of escaping, is easily comparable with self-isolation and ‘flying away’. My own observations acknowledge the

---

51 Lit. ‘Quit suffering’, a Spanish name by which the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God is known.
52 My hangies aren’t talking about Benny Hill (the English comedian), but about Benny Hinn, a televangelist known for his “Miracle Crusades.” See: [https://www.bennyhinn.org/](https://www.bennyhinn.org/) [accessed 26/07/2015]
existence of the collective depression my hangie mentions, but also show how people get involved in churches not to evade themselves, but to gain access to a new set of solidarities through a less aggressive (no lateral struggle-based) form of community-making. How beneficial a re-writing of the nature of being based in Christian values is resulting for young Equatoguineans with no money and rather disjointed family lives was explained to me by Nicolás, an Annobonés male in his early 20s. Joining the Seventh Day Adventist Church, he said, has changed his world, reconfiguring who he is and what’s important in life. This change didn’t take place so much through ‘reading scripture’ as it did through attending church-hosted study circles where people his own age get to discuss and reflect on the ‘materialist’ nature of social life in Malabo, and their own position in it as youths. Nicolás’ new found self has also given a more positive meaning to his life at home, where he’s the sole responsible for his mother (who gave him up at birth) and his four younger half-brothers and sisters.

Solidarities like those Nicolás has established are not the only kind of church-based solidarities, and the young man’s ways of appropriating them are not the only ways of doing it. I got to hear how the power of people praying together is the only means to exorcize demon-mermaids, which to me is indicative of people’s manipulation of intersubjectively constructed realities for the benefit of those who are being tormented by them, perhaps aiming at a wider ‘cleansing’ of the social body, not only through its objectification in the body of the possessed, but by trying to completely eradicate, one by one, as if in an ‘concrete’ manner, the countless maladies that pray on the spirits/minds of its citizens. As such, church-based solidarities are practically indistinguishable from political action. Through the manipulation of symbolic elements (the mermaid, the possessed, the prayers, the community) people challenge and thus re-write the nature of being in oppressive environments. Paradoxically, religious groups are able to engage in micro political action because “like the prophetic movements of the colonial period, contemporary sects ignore rather than contest the State” (Bayart, 1993:256-257).

Regardless of how fruitful church-based solidarities and faith in general might be for Equatoguineans today, these still are contested by a pessimistic vox populi that, in a rather dark manner, mocks their every attempt at making being:

My mom goes to some catholic church. People there attend mass, pray out loud, sing the graces of [the Virgin] Mary and what not. Do you know what my uncle uses to tell her? He tells her, ‘Look, I’ve noticed your masses start at 5 in the morning, but you know, when it’s dark in here, it’s because it’s light in other places. What I’m trying to make you understand is that God, when he planned it that way, he did it so that when it’s daylight in here, and people somewhere else are sleeping, he listens to you. When it’s dark in here, and he’s listening to people somewhere else, you need to sleep. Now, if when it’s his time to rest, you’re already out there making noise, clapping and signing and so on, no wonder why the Lord never listens to you!’
Many people choose to stick to their faith as a means to engage in less corroding forms of sociality. Others decide to dive head first in it and to embrace the lateral struggle in an effort to learn how to exploit it. For the young now socialized in the ways of quick money and much needed display, there are more practical, more effective ways of making-do than worshiping a god that plays deaf with you. As the next strategy for self-making will show, sometimes all people need to make some gains is to ask the right person, at the right time, for the right thing.

“Would you treat me to a Fanta?”

One afternoon as we walked to an ATM machine, a female hangie and I heard a car honking the horn. A young man waved at us. Sandy, my hangie, waved back. The car made a U-turn and parked on the other side of the street. Sandy told me the man was an old friend of hers, and that she hadn’t seen him in a while. We crossed the street to meet him. After three minutes of greetings and rushed chitchatting, Sandy and the man said goodbye. Just as I turned to walk away, I heard how my hangie asked him, “Would you treat me to a Fanta?” I thought it was odd. The young man put his hand down his pocket, reached for his wallet and extracted a 10,000 CFA franc bill (ca. $20 USD) which he then handed over to her. “There you go. You girls have a nice day!” I heard him saying as Sandy and I rushed to cross the street on our way back to the ATM machine. “What did just happen?” I asked her. “Nothing, let’s go to the Mercado Central!” she said with a huge smile. “I want to buy myself a pair of flip-flops!” I didn’t understand. “Is he coming with us? Are we supposed to go somewhere to drink Fanta?” I asked, because the bill the man had given her was worth enough to buy 20 cans of Fanta, or 3 pairs of flip-flops, or 5 portions of chopped ribs at a nearby grill, or to pay for 20 taxi rides. She laughed really hard, probably thinking how stupid I was. “With ‘Fanta’ I didn’t mean an actual soda,” Sandy explained. “It was just a way for me to ask him for money, and for him to show off by giving it to me.” I then wondered whether she was owing him something, a date or whatever. “It doesn’t have anything to do with sex” she said. As pretty much anybody writing on social life in Malabo would have done, I kept bugging her about the whole “Fanta” thing for the rest of the day and throughout the weeks that followed.

My insistence paid off and I soon learned that the “Fanta” play is a sort of power game, a playful exchange that not only takes place between young men and women, but also between juniors and elders, rich and poor, foreigners and Guineanos —though foreigners might not get it, feeling annoyed by the locals’ constant ‘begging’—, or whoever that might find themselves at asymmetric power positions during casual interaction. In this playful exchange, a “Fanta” can mean anything, but is, in most cases, a referent for money. The play, even when taking
place between men and women, doesn’t seem to have anything to do with ‘prostitution’, because the girls who get the money don’t need to give men something back. They phrase the exchange as inherently reciprocal in terms of “he gives me money, I give him the chance to feel good about himself.” So it seems like the play is a tactic of the ‘weak’ to extract money and feel ‘strong’, and of the ‘strong’ to consolidate their standing through allowing themselves to ‘show off’ more or less at the expense of the ‘weak’. No loss of self seems ever present in the part of the ‘weak’, because whatever there could result out of the very act of meeting —like, ‘he’s wearing a suit and I’m not’, ‘he has a car and I don’t’— seems always overwritten by the ‘wins’ reported to them in the form of the money they get, and/or in the highly enjoyable feeling of having ‘fooled’ the ‘strong’ out of some cash in an unexpected, spontaneous manner.

Following de Certeau (1984:36-37), the “Fanta” play is not a ‘strategy’, but a ‘tactic’: its place is not an isolated space of the self but the place of the other. It depends on opportunity, and it must “vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers.” A tactic takes place where it is least expected, because “it is a guileful ruse… an art of the weak” (ibid). Given that “a tactic is determined by the absence of power just as a strategy is organized by the postulation of power” (ibid, p. 38), the tactical nature of the “Fanta” play becomes explicit when it’s carried out between males and females. Men ‘give’, but as they ‘give’, they also disentangle themselves from the women that are ‘given’, thus reaffirming their power and independence, while promoting the stability of women’s positions as intrinsically dependent ‘receivers’. This, of course, is inherent to the play regardless of its players, but the ‘disentangling’ aspect of it is more visible in a male-female interaction, at which expectations for more ‘stable’ exchanges might be created (women seem always on the look for well-off ‘sponsors’ —boyfriends, husbands, lovers) but soon have to be ditched as the ‘giver’ moves away his show-off somewhere else to expand it.

Who’s doing what

In Equatorial Guinea, as in most postcolonial states, “the strategies adopted by the great majority of the population for survival are identical to the ones adopted by the leaders to accumulate wealth and power. The line dividing these two categories of actors is a thin one” (Bayart, 1993:237-238). Therefore, to go on phrasing social struggle in Malabo as the simple result of a top-down oppressive mechanism is not acceptable. The concept of ‘lateral struggle’ comes closer to describing interaction experienced as corroding. Given this fact, it’s not surprising to find people alienated from and by their peers’ behavior:
I’ve always thought that *el Guineano* is his own republic. Everybody is his own president and his own republic. Everywhere you go you find somebody cheating his/her way to something!

This freedom and willingness to ‘cheat one’s way to something’ ties back to our previous arguments on the unmistakable power for political action present among discursively victimized readers/writers. However, we should make clear that regardless of the potential of their actions, and as it’s common in the postcolony, this more ‘equal’ distribution of power which is expected to eventually produce structural changes is yet to reflect itself in a more ‘equal’ distribution of wealth. Also, we need to acknowledge that “the impoverishment of the ‘little men’ does not necessarily provoke any radicalization of their political consciousness, nor does it erode the prestige of the State brokers” (Bayart, 1993: 209). This would explain why Equatorial Guinea seems so stable despite the acuteness of inequality within its borders.

Some believe that “the social frustrations caused by the economy of survival force many ‘little men’ to make radical choices,” which are to “either allow oneself to sink into dementia or to seize by force that which society denies them” (ibid, p. 240). In Malabo, a very few seem interested in ‘seizing by force’ that which society denies them: banditry is relatively rare, a hangie says, because “everybody thinks too highly of themselves, and everybody feels [as they wait for their turn to get a ‘position’] that they’ll become rich any day.”

**On rebelliousness**

“Do you know what the problem with this country is?” Sone, a male in his mid-20s, asked me once. “People themselves don’t want to progress. They want a comfortable life, they study just to get an office. Why? Because they want to steal.

Because everybody thinks so highly of themselves, everybody is waiting for their turn to be in an office… Here, everybody you see [he points around], everybody is the ‘number one’. It’s good, because people don’t minimize themselves, but it’s bad, because they don’t realize they can become something more. Here we don’t have a royal family, everybody is royal. They get someone behind them, and they feel they’ve made it. This life, and this country, are very strange. If you’re not rebellious, nobody respects you. It is like that. You have to be more rebellious than the other to make yourself respectable.

Rebelliousness was sometimes defined as a shallow attitude proper of “ignorants who, on top, don’t realize they’re ignorant”; and others described as having to do less with “how people want you to see them” —this is, with impression management—, than with “how they see themselves” —this is, with people’s self-image—. Perhaps because of how ‘rebelliousness’ contributes to the stress of everyday interaction adding an edge to the lateral struggle, many seem to have started resenting it. Also, it was a recurrent attribute in people’s depictions of the
national self, commonly referred to as el Guineano, which is now widely disowned—an act that’s only possible through its enunciation. The collectively imagined national self is formulated as a bundle of negative features. I suggest that discursively separating oneself from el Guineano is also a strategy for individual self-making, one that is providing people with new intersubjective spaces—‘blank pages’—for them to write more positive versions of themselves now, and maybe one day, of their country as a nation.

_El Guineano or the I who no one is_

_I-my-self naked soul / I-my-self picture without image
I-my-self crepeed upon / and with the self altered,
who actually am I? —R. S. Boturu, live reading
at La Casa Tomada, Malabo 08/02/2014

Much literature on Equatorial Guinea deals with its national identity, or, better said, with the lack of it (see i.e. Bokokó Boko, in Liniger-Goumaz, 1996:105-106). An optimistic author conceptualized la Guineanidad (lit. ‘Guineanity’) as the end result of a melting of Bantú values with those of a Western Christian civilization brought about by Spain through colonialism (Ocha’a Mve, 1985:41). Today, Equatorial Guinea’s national identity as collectively constructed seems to evade conceptualization, I believe, for two reasons. First, because the ethnic element still makes people—though less and less—imagine the social landscape as fragmented in terms of clans/towns. Second, because popular conceptions of the national self are overwhelmingly negative. As a closing argument to this chapter, I’d like to suggest that the country is not lacking a national identity: it has one, but it is so negative that people are choosing to disown it, which I insist, is not necessarily a bad thing, because people’s phrasings of a negative national self are allowing them to critically objectify widespread antisocial behaviors and thus manage them as an exteriority. My argument goes that as individuals distance themselves from el Guineano they create room for more positive individual self-making, which could translate, once these individual projects of self become widespread enough to re-write social reality as collectively experienced, in the organic, positive reformulation of a national identity from the grassroots. People’s disowning of the national self then, I suggest, is not a symptom of an alienating politics occurring top-down, but of some kind of social healing and thus potential political restoration slowly taking place bottom-up.

Because “every person, every citizen, is a synthesis of the nation in the valorative and pejorative” (Ocha’a Mve, 1985:43-44), I believe people’s take on the national self will show, per syllogism, the positive outcome of the self-making strategy that Equatoguineans deploy as
they phrase him and disown him. A brief account of his characteristics as he was consistently described to me would show that el Guineano is a squabbler, a drunk, a thief, a liar, a toady and a coward, while he’s also shameless, mentally dependent, egotistic/self-interested and uncultured; he doesn’t know his rights, he discriminates and kills his own, and he’s everything he hates about the European, all because el Guineano doesn’t have any amour-propre (see Appendix, pp. 103-105 for list with examples).

People’s depictions of the national self might be glum, but the fact that they are choosing to distance themselves from it testifies not only about people’s critical attitudes towards common-place behavior experienced as constitutive of a national ethos, but also about the integrity that their individual selves have managed to create/maintain throughout their life trajectories in what has been long considered a criminal state. As positive as this conclusion is, a problem remains. There’s the fact that creating discursive distance between ‘the individual self’ and ‘the national other’ implies a basic splitting of self-from-other that may become entrenched and habitual (Jackson, 2005:134). This doesn’t have to be ‘bad’, as I’ve argued before, because this distance from the negative national self is allowing people to develop self-critically and thus more positively. The problem with this splitting of individual self from national other is that it’s currently hindering people from collectively writing a ‘homeland’:

I think that el Guineano, well, first, we aren’t partisans. The concept of ‘homeland’ is like a cloud. I think the only moment in which we have the concept of ‘homeland’ is when the national football team is playing. Only then does el Guineano feel patriotic and talks about his colors and talks about his country.

How important the concepts of ‘homeland’ and ‘patriotism’ are for Equatoguineans can only be inferred from the regard with which they speak about those who embody these values. “Why do you believe that the US are how they are?” a young male asked me, referring to the US as a political and economic power. “The US are above all, very patriotic,” an older man answered. “For them, patriotism and the homeland are very important, because the topic of tribes and ethnic groups, well, they don’t give a lot of importance to it.” Clearly, the old man identified the force behind the US’s prominence as the unity of its people in a powerful national being, but regardless of how strongly I believe they’re already on their path, Equatoguineans will still have to wait some time before they can positively think of themselves and their country as a unified nation. As for today, mi Guinea —like some people like to call it, as if it were a sick child, in a bittersweet manner— is zealously devising all kinds of creative strategies to write itself a self, and Equatoguineans are doing it too, as they “cheat their way to something,” somewhere in the struggle between having and becoming.
When the ship sinks

A Bubi proverb has it that when the ship sinks, everybody learns how to swim. “And so here we are,” a hangie told me soon before I left Malabo, “kicking and scuffling.” While the conspicuous presence of madness might prove that some are in fact ‘drowning’, successful self-making in general is indicative of people’s resolution to ‘swim’. They might be afraid during the shipwreck, they might kick, punch, and swallow water — the struggle for social survival is, after all, a struggle for survival — but before long, survivors find themselves mastering circumstance and staying afloat without a lot of effort. So far so good with the proverb, with people’s deeds as poetry in practice.

Exactly one year after I got to hear the Bubi saying, I sat under a luscious lemon tree in the little backyard of the house I was renting a room at as an intern at the University of California Los Angeles. I was on the phone with my ex-hangie now good friend Marcelo, who had recently joined his Spanish girlfriend in Pamplona. While whining about the rough time I was having trying to re-adapt to Swedish — now also American — academic culture, I said “I’ll manage, you know, like the Bubi say, when the ship sinks”… “Everybody evolves to breath underwater!” Marcelo broke out in laughter. “Everybody grows gills, we learn to live off each other, and to withstand toxic oil spillings. When the ship sinks you *don’t* learn how to swim, but you don’t die either. It’s like you aren’t a proper ‘human’. You are something else, a different species. Oh, now I get it… You’re writing a thesis to prove our existence!” my friend laughed really hard, which left me absolutely floored. What got my attention — and my feelings, no less — was the analogy of Equatoguineans as some kind of non-human organisms studied by a ‘scientist’ which happened to be me. However hurtful that was, I soon realized that *that* wasn’t the point Marcelo had tried to get across. Yes, I was trying to document people’s ‘strategies for survival’ in the murky waters of the postcolonial state, made even more toxic due to ‘oil spillings’ and all kinds of ‘more developed’ predators attracted by them, but that wasn’t *it*. When I had a later chance to ask my friend whether he really thought of himself and Equatoguineans in general as ‘lesser human’, he scolded me for taking the metaphor “too literally.” It turns out he hadn’t meant ‘non-human’ in a pejorative way — how self-centered of our species would that be? — but merely tried to phrase a substantially different life form, framed by environmental possibilities and embodied by the beings who internalize them. Marcelo didn’t think he was some kind of sea monster. He had imagined ‘human’ to be the
‘norm’, while Equatoguineans in general, because they didn’t fit into the (Western?) norm, were therefore a ‘deviant’ species. This is exactly what the postcolonial subject is, and that is exactly what I’ve tried to get at: people’s consciousness of an alterity inherent to their selves as they individually and collectively ‘write them’ through practices structured by enunciation and experience. I’ve tried to approach their deeds as perfectly ‘sensical’ despite their ‘nonsensical’ looks, as a “growing gills” grounded on those historical contingencies that have, first, ‘sunken their ship’ (through colonialism) and then spoiled (through the discovery of oil) the delicate balance of their new ‘submarine ecosystem’ (the postcolonial state). And I’ve strived to do it without engaging in any kind of ‘anthropocentric’ (Western-centered) or evolutionist (developmentalist) judgements, deploying a nepantlera subjectivity to detach myself from what somebody once called “guineophobic milieus” (Ocha’a Mve, 1985:7).

My aim has been to challenge global discursive reality on Equatorial Guinea by reconstructing what people are doing to re-write themselves as individuals, as a collective, and in order to produce the text of a proper ‘homeland’. My method has been at least partially grounded on the fact that as a Mexican female, I too am a member of another ‘deviant’ species, which made this ‘reconstruction of experience’ take place not through ‘absorption’, but through its independent ‘production’ after an existential mimicking of sorts, which lies at the very heart of my take on participant observation. It’s through this idea of experience reconstruction after ‘mimicking’ that I’ve made peace with being a ‘scientist’ documenting the existence of ‘deviant’ life forms in their struggle for surviving each other and the environment. Mimicking, an embodied acceptance of the rules of the mimicked, builds on analogical, often synchronous performances. It establishes codes for metalinguistic signaling, which makes it conducive to supraverbal communication, which in turn deepens intercultural experience. It was through this ‘mimicking’ that I learned that even though I might never become a full member of Marcelo’s own ‘deviant’ kind, our “growing gills” resemble each other’s, and that’s all we need to create a common experiential — intersubjective — ground. In this view, it doesn’t matter what ships we came from, where they started their journey, or why they went down. We know what it’s like to be off the ship, and as sister species, we see through each other’s need to turn the roughest currents to our own advantage.

Given the fact that a poetics precedes theory (de Certeau, 1984:151), my friend’s poetic phrasing of the perils of existence in the Equatoguinean postcolony is once again a means to objectively revise them. Enunciative procedures like his are “a first step to bringing about change in conventional public narratives” (Spolsky, 2010:38). A creative writing of reality, then, is of an incredible political potential. People cast truths, pasts, hopes, pains, love and
uncertain futures into a shape that can be dealt with, manipulated, moved around, pushed away, adorned or destroyed. Hence the importance to recognize not only their casts, but to look at what it’s being done with them, this is, to acknowledge the reality of people’s will and power to re-arrange an exteriority, agency expressed in the calculated trajectories they trace every day as they make mean and being.

Hopefully, my concept of lateral struggle has made it possible to think about social violence in Malabo as something else than Obiang Nguema’s “psychological war against the population” (in Liniger-Goumaz, 1996:110). And how, because “the strategies adopted by the great majority of the population for survival are identical to the ones adopted by the leaders to accumulate wealth and power” (Bayart, 1993:237-238), the system of repression and rewards that characterizes Equatorial Guinea’s political history going back to the colonial years (Sundiata, 1983:94) as it was internalized by people, is now being brought into everyday practice in the form of a ravaging zero sum game where also being is at stake. The impact that such struggle has had on the development of the state apparatus through time is unmistakable, as thirty years ago it was already being noted how “constitutional development and the administration of justice face enormous difficulties amidst a civil society that doesn’t give up certain customs [that] hinder social development, with a tendency to plunge the country into cultural and social stagnation” (Ocha’a Mve, 1985:40). One could always wonder whether when my hangies talked about their country as a democracia a la Africana they were expressing the fact that, being a democratic government usually equated with a “power representative of the people” (Liniger-Goumaz, 1996:11), and being el Guineano as morally ruined as he’s said to be, Obiang Nguema’s regime then is, in a rather dark and scornful way, perfectly democratic as it is representative. In this view, it doesn’t matter that he’s not a democratically-elected leader, because he’s an inherently democratic (as in ‘popular’) figure. An easy way to prove this is to glance through the rather entertaining articles and blogs continuously written by exiles and the opposition: there aren’t a lot of differences between people’s depictions of el Guineano and dissidents’ descriptions of Obiang Nguema himself.

Equatoguineans might be “kicking and scuffling” and/or “growing gills,” but their struggle, regardless of being lateral or top-down, doesn’t make them less critical and reflective. Their phrasings on rotten yoghurts, mermaids, the rebellion of the chicken and the fact that “everybody is his own president and his own republic” offer but a small glimpse into the experiential depths of their everyday. This existential complexity is being overwritten, as we speak, by the ‘more developed’ fellows and their own ‘more authoritative’ discourses on development and human rights. But no Equatoguinean I met, perhaps because “everybody
thinks too highly of themselves,” was ever willing to play the victim. Whatever “the anguish” resulting from their “kicking and scuffling” and/or “growing gills,” they know the first rule of survival is to keep one’s head up. Thus it’s grossly unfair and ‘scientifically’ wrong to state that Equatoguineans, as Obiang Nguema’s eternal victims, live with no dignity. This kind of phrasings from the ‘more developed’ fellows makes people angry: it’s not like they’re provoking them a painful loss of self, they’re actually denying that they have one. Because “that which is imported and imposed, no matter how ‘objectively’ important for human life and livelihood, will tend to be resisted and rejected as long as it is felt to reduce the recipient to the passive status of an object” (Jackson, 2005:181), “rebelliousness” is an important feature of people’s self-making. They’re anticipating and counteracting self-denial.

Given that people are actively engaged in the production of their own ‘corroding’ sociality, the case of Equatorial Guinea is now, as it was nearly thirty years ago, not clear-cut enough for world opinion. Already in 1989, “everybody involved seemed to be bad” (Fegley, 1989:123-124). This ‘badness’ —born out of the country’s isolation, of an invariably biased press coverage, and of estimates which ‘took the place of truths’— has clouded the view of foreign scholars and activists alike. Equatoguineans, however, know better. And while they don’t deny that el Guineano exists, they also know their country is as ‘screwy’ as it’s young:

ANDRÉS: —We live in a young country.
MIGUEL: —Of course we do! What are forty-something years? Here we can’t pretend that we are what we’re not. That’s what people from the diaspora, many not dissidents but ignorant, don’t understand. Just because you’re not in [Equatorial] Guinea, and you go to the toilet and can flush it… that means absolutely nothing! What does the word ‘progress’ mean? Progress is culture, identity. No progress is ever lineal. Western progress will never be, and it shouldn’t be either, the model of progress for Africa. That would make us commit the mistakes they’ve committed. Let it be what God wants, and God wants that while in Equatorial Guinea we enjoy our sovereignty, that we live in peace.

Miguel’s words are a powerful echo of other voices. “The Republic of Equatorial Guinea is a young state,” it was written long ago, “and so it needs an experimental process of self-organization in all plains… Development is also a perfecting of the person, of the civil community; it’s culture and education, it’s political maturity, it’s a term of double meaning, the material and the spiritual” (Ocha’a Mve, 1985:110). And it is exactly on this path of double-fold development that Equatoguineans find themselves today, some “kicking and scuffling,” some “growing gills to breathe underwater,” but everybody moving on, slowly but surely, not only making do with the resources they’re given, but creating their own means, in the most creative ways, writing and re-writing them to make it.
Appendix

I. “So the sea swallowed us!”

Figure 1: Map hanging on the wall at the vaccine bureau. Uppsala, 13/08/2015.

Figure 2: A close-up. While the name of the country is clearly stated, both Bioko and Río Muni (the continental region) are gone, most definitely due to a lack of data from that region.

Figure 3: Bioko (closest to Cameroon) and Río Muni (labeled “Equatorial Guinea”) on GoogleMaps, 2015.
II. El Guineano who no one is

These are the most prominent features of Equatorial Guinea’s national self, or el Guineano, as it was consistently described to me throughout my nine weeks of fieldwork in Malabo. I was able to put together this list by isolating common patterns of enunciation (“the Guineano is...”) in recorded interviews, casual conversations, creative talking sessions, etc. Characteristics are ordered from #14 to #1, according to the disruptive impact they can have on the self-making process: #14 is considered ‘the most trivial’, and #1 ‘the most destructive’.

#14: El Guineano is a squabbler
“Guineanos quarrel with you, they hurt you, they put you in the hospital. Then they quarrel for something else, they kick you in the head, and you die.” —boy, 14

#13: El Guineano is a drunk
“A fool is drinking, he drinks and drinks, he doesn’t study. Guineanos don’t study. What do they study? Nothing. They go to ‘the university’, because here in the neighborhood there’s a university of drinking. They teach you how to drink. Only drunks go there.” —other boy, 14

#12: El Guineano is a thief
“The problem here is that el Guineano is a thief. They don’t work. If you leave clothes or shoes [hanged outside] at home, he’ll steal them. He doesn’t work hard. He just wants to steal. A lot of people have taken my shoes.” —Malinese street vendor, 30

#11: El Guineano is a liar
“Here lies are the order of the day. Lying is part of el Guineano’s colloquial language.” —man, 28

#10: El Guineano is shameless
“El Guineano is brazen, shameless, he doesn’t like having to give explanations.”—man, 24

#9: El Guineano is a toady
“That’s the mentality in here. Here el Guineano thinks that he who squeaks the loudest is the most loyal [to those in power].” —woman, 33
#8: El Guineano doesn’t know his rights

“Many don’t know their rights. That’s the problem. And the foreigners know it. I’ve heard people saying ‘ah, if you want el Guineano to sign a contract, make it a long one, he’ll never read it’”. —woman, 22

#7: El Guineano is mentally dependent

“Some man owed another man some money out of some lands that they had taken from him. They gave him 500,000 CFA francs from the value of his own lands, yet the man goes ‘I thank his Excellency the President of the Republic because thanks to his Excellency…’. What are you saying? That’s your money! It’s your right! What does this man have to do in the whole thing? Nothing! ‘Your Excellency’… That word, man! El Guineano believes that in order to be emancipated he must say ‘His Excellency’!” —man, 31

#6: El Guineano is egotistic and self-interested

“People here are egotistic. El Guineano acts according to what he believes is the most convenient for himself. He doesn’t act for the common good. About love, he acts depending on the [material] benefits that it can grant him.” —woman, 22

#5: El Guineano is a coward

“Some believe the president should make a law that forbids people from thanking him on TV for whatever bag of rice they were given at a party by some bureaucrat. But it’s not a question of making a law. Sometimes it’s the ghosts of a past that come after us. And of course, his is a ghost that will follow us for a very long time. Because the mister hasn’t done everything right, he has made a whole lot of mistakes. But el Guineano [doesn’t stop thanking the president on TV because he] is a coward. We are cowards.” —man, 30.

#4: El Guineano is uncultured

“My uncle uses to say that the level of culture in Equatorial Guinea reaches unsuspected levels. That if el Guineano breaks into an artist’s studio full of valuable paintings, he would steal the palette instead [because he won’t see the difference]!” —man, 28

ESTEBAN: —I don’t want to be Guineano. Because being Guineano is like a curse.
ADELAIDA:—How come?
MAURICIO:—Because el Guineano is uncultured! [chuckles]
ADELAIDA:—El Guineano is uncultured…?
GRANNIE: —You’re talking too much, eh! Dey wil put yu ne la blaibich! 53 Hahaha!
MAURICIO:—Look, el Guineano…
ESTEBAN: —El Guineano is UNCULTURED!

#3: *El Guineano* discriminates and kills his own
“Los Guineanos discriminate each other. They fight each other. They hate each other. They kill each other.” —boy, 14

#2: *El Guineano* is everything he hates about the European
“El Guineano is an adaptation of everything he doesn’t want to be, like for example the European. We go around bragging, saying that we’re bantú, Africans, that we should keep our traditions, bla bla bla, but it just so happens that all the stuff we see as negative in others, that’s what we are really the flag bearers of. You see. The flag bearers! For example, let’s talk about el Guineano. His thing is the material world. The banal world. The vanity, eh, and above all, the need to be on top of everybody else, no matter what, just to get a position. A mere position. ‘Me, as a yoghurt, I’m better than you’. It doesn’t matter if the yoghurt is all green.” —man, 30

#1: *El Guineano* doesn’t have any amour-propre
“I use to tell my mates that the problem we have here, is that el Guineano doesn’t have any love for himself. Because when you have self-esteem, when you love yourself, you can’t allow that they do to your neighbor that which you wouldn’t like they doing to you. That’s what these people are lacking. When el Guineano starts loving himself, he’ll start to love others. Only then will things change.” —man, 29

---

53 Pidgin. “They will put you in the Black Beach”, Malabo’s infamous jail for political prisoners.
When asked if he knew about Equatorial Guinea’s bad reputation abroad, a street food vendor that I used to talk to a lot, told me:

I believe I have enough mental maturity to discern from among the things that come from the outside, what is being said about [Equatorial] Guinea, and I know that *any Spanish channel that reports on Guinea won’t do.* When there were elections, some people, I don’t know who, came here [but] they kept showing the images of the 1980s of children bearing water buckets, I mean, the images that were convenient for them to show, and that’s the image that a lot of people has of [Equatorial] Guinea. When you come here, if you want to see zones that are very pretty, you’ll see them; and if you want to see zones that are really ugly, you’ll see them too, like in any other country.

The man’s position was widely shared. In an attempt to balance the image that the country has abroad, I’ve put together a selection of pictures that I myself took, both in Malabo and in Bata. Despite the many ‘prohibitions’ that the Equatoguinean government is said to have on cameras, I never had any problems, nobody ever bothered me, and most people loved being photographed. I often would lend my Canon DS1100 and people would give it back with a bunch of new pictures. This is what everyday life in Malabo’s public realms looks like.
Plaza de E´Waiso Ipola

Photo 4: Keeping an eye on things. Second-hand clothes vendor Mamá Mary pays careful attention to what goes on at la Plaza. Malabo, 02/2014.
Photos 5 and 6: Making do. A young architect settles into his new working space, on the third floor of a private residence in central Malabo. Willing to start working right away despite the lack of furniture, he improvised a drawing table by placing a discarded door on top of two empty barrels of TOTAL (oil) that he found in the vicinity.
Photo 7: A world of contrasts. A well-off customer brings some suits to a local tailor shop to have them adjusted.

Photo 8: Life in color. Seamstress Yolanda and her boss Mami on the wait for customers. Malabo, 03/2014.
Arts and cultural life

Photo 9: Talking light. At the presentation of Luz en la noche ("Light at night") by Equatoguinean poet and dramaturge Recaredo Silebo Boturu at La Casa Tomada, the only privately owned bookstore in the capital. Malabo, 02/2014.

Photo 12: *Speak up.* Open microphone during a poetry reading at the Centro Cultural de España in Malabo. 03/2014.

Photo 11: *Creativity at large.* Equatoguinean artist Juan Carlos Bueriberi working in his studio at the Leandro Mbomio house. Malabo, 03/2014.
Photo 14: Once upon a time. Known as Patio Mallo, the once living quarters for workers of a powerful Spanish family during the early 1900s. Allegedly occupied throughout, the place remains a residential complex largely untouched by the feverish infrastructural development taking place around it. Central Malabo, 02/2014.
Photo 15: Paint and renovate. A family home in Río Muni intervened by state workers. Writings/graffiti like this were ever-present both in Bioko and the continent. Sometimes they would include a number (indicating the days the building’s owner had to complete the task ordered) and/or an “X”, allegedly meaning “for wrecking”. As of March 2014, cases of actual action against disobedient owners were rare, and people would mock the signs rather than being intimidated by them.


Photo 17: Going home. A woman at the end of her morning shift as a street sweeper. Río Muni. 03/2014
Photo 18: Community making. Casual shopping at Mbini’s Street Market. Rio Muni, 03/2014.


Quotidian signs

Photo 22: There’s pepesup only in Saturdays and Sundays. Many private homes in Malabo are turned into ephemeral breakfast joints during the weekend. Selling pepesup (a thin, spicy fish soup) is a popular means to earn some cash on the side, given the relative low cost of the ingredients and its high demand from all-night partiers.
Photo 23: Bien. 8 year-old Esteban proudly shows his good grades. Malabo, 02/2014.
Photo 24: Showing off. Two teenage students hang out at Plaza de E’Waiso, one of them posing with her tablet. Note the “big cars” parked behind them, right outside the Centro Cultural Francés.

Photo 25: A moment of quiet. Seamstress Yolanda takes a well-deserved break.
Photo 26: Hunting for bargains. A satisfied female customer poses with a vendor at the “back regions” of the Semu Market, where she says the best bargains are found. Malabo, 02/2014.

Photo 27: Thumbs up. A Nigerian clothes vendor advertises his products outside the Central Market. Malabo, 03/2014.
Photo 28: Faith in color. Juan Carlos Bueriberi, plastic artist.

Photo 29: Beautiful service. Female bartenders in Bata.
Photo 30: Looking gorgeous. A woman flirts with the camera as she rocks a dress made out of traditional 8 of March commemorative fabric to celebrate Women’s Day, drinking a Fanta at Plaza de E’Waiso. Malabo, 08/03/2014.
Bibliography


*Diario Rombe, Periódico Digital de Guinea Ecuatorial*. Madrid.


Obiang recibe el premio Kim Jong II por su 'compromiso con la justicia, el desarrollo y la paz'. (2013, August 7). *EuropaPress*. Accessed on 14/08/2015, at:


