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The construction of identity in two novels by Joaquín Mbomio Bacheng

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Abstract:

The study of contemporary Equatorial Guinean fiction has been gaining momentum in recent years and is approaching a transitional period within academic circles. There have been several introductory works published that have drawn attention to the field and it can now be safely stated that more intensive projects have been undertaken. Two novels, *El párroco de Niefang* (1996) and *Huellas bajo tierra* (1998) by Joaquín Mbomio Bacheng, will be examined with a particular focus on the concept of identity. The discussion will explore how identity is manifested in these works at a textual level. This analysis will then feed into a larger perspective on the construction of identity in contemporary Equatorial Guinean fiction.

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The Spanish language literature produced by Equatorial Guinean authors has become increasingly resistant to classification in the fields of both of Hispanic and African literary studies. Such resistance is particularly evident when one begins to question the role of identity and processes of identity formation as explored and expressed in these contemporary narratives. This resistance can be seen as its strength as it truly forces scholars and literary critics to examine more carefully the types of analysis they employ to engage with these texts.

The objective of my analysis is to identify some of the ways in which Joaquín Mbomio Bacheng negotiates the concept of identity in his novels, an identity which is intrinsically 'hybrid' as a result of being fed by both European (Spanish) and African cultural streams. It will also be argued that these texts offer a reaction to the repressive dictatorships that have plagued the country since gaining independence in 1968. In addition, the discussion surrounding the concept of identity will touch upon historical elements and political circumstances that affect the understanding of the expression of identity as a whole.

There is a tendency in identity studies to view the concept as comprised of either static elements, or a series of fluid elements. Identity, as expressed in the selected texts, cannot be classified in these terms. It is important to note at this point that this commentary is not an attempt to describe an 'Equatorial Guinean' identity, nor should it be understood as simply an application of a theoretical model. The goal here is to highlight the ways in which the concept of identity is represented in the selected texts.

When presented with such a large quantity of possibilities, it is necessary to forge parameters within which the discussion can unfold. There is a consensus among scholars who have previously utilised the concept of identity that the term cannot be successfully employed to perform any kind of analytical work before the establishment of boundaries has been carried out. In order to begin this process, it may be helpful to examine how others have framed the issue as this will help to focus the discussion in areas that will be relevant to the prospective analysis of the primary texts.

The ambiguity that surrounds the subject can be attributed in part, to the variety of definitions and uses the term receives in everyday language. Brubaker and Cooper portray identity as 'richly ambiguous,' and they go on to describe ways in which the term is commonly used. In this description they note that identity can be understood as a 'core aspect of (individual and collective) "selfhood" ' (2000: 6), and state that identity 'bears a multivalent, even contradictory theoretical burden' (2000: 8). Brubaker and Cooper describe these divergent views as 'hard' and 'soft' (2000: 1).¹ These differing observations serve as examples of the types of approaches that are present in the field of identity studies.

¹ The divergent views between 'hard' and 'soft' conceptions of identity are also discussed in Grossberg (1996: 89). Additionally, Grossberg voices concerns over the study of identity. 'My argument is not with the fact that identity has been – and may still be- the site around which people are struggling, nor even with the significant advances that such struggles enabled over the past decades. Rather, it is a question of whether this is a fruitful path to continue following' (1996: 87).

Following on from the contradictions outlined by Brubaker and Cooper are a second set of contradictions that relate to the individual and the collective. The term 'identity' can be applied to both and raises questions regarding boundaries. Devereux describes identity as 'the absolute uniqueness' of an individual (1982: 42). Identity has also been coterminous with the concept of synthesis. Epstein explains that '[identity] represents the process by which the person seeks to integrate his various statuses and roles, as well as his diverse experiences, into a coherent image of self' (1978: 101).²

The separation of collective and self implies the imposition of boundaries and the process of inclusion and exclusion. It will be demonstrated that in these novels, the individual experience is employed as a model that can be extended to the larger experience of the population. The process of establishing sameness and difference must occur in relation to an 'other'. This can take the form of an individual or a group, so long as the point of reference is outside the self. According to Hall, identification or the negotiation of identity is continuously 'in process' (1996: 2). Instead of marking sameness, it is more prevalent to construct identity through marking difference.³ Masolo describes this as 'a process to create the identity of the same through the discrimination of the Other' [capital in original] (1994: 182). The process of identification relates to the ability of the subjects to identify with some aspects and exclude themselves (or others) from what they feel is the 'majority identity' (Amselle, 1990: 24). Therefore, there is an active role for the subject in the

² In the subject area of psychology, Maslow describes the search for identity as 'becoming what one truly is'. This description highly linked to the individual sense of self (1970: 95).

³ Grossberg is much more firm on this point and argues that 'identity is always constituted out of difference' (1996: 93). This excludes the possibility of the identification of sameness.

construction and negotiation of identity. This raises questions of agency and to what extent identity can be self-ascribed or imposed. The interchange that occurs between an individual subject and the 'other' can now be understood as an active exchange in that the subject can exercise rational will in the negotiation of identity.

At this point, it becomes clear that there are several identities available to an individual and the ascription to any given identity is determined through a set of situational circumstances. Hall goes further to describe identities as 'points of temporary attachment' which in turn can be interpreted as a type of situational identity (1996: 5). This interpretation is supported by Chabal and Daloz when they state: '[t]he saliency of any particular aspect of this identity changes according to the particulars of a given situation' (1999: 27).⁴ Situational identity relates back to the questions raised by Brubaker and Cooper in that this conception of identity is not fluid, but temporarily fixed according to specific circumstances; it is therefore neither 'hard' nor 'soft'.

El párroco de Niefang or the *Parish Priest of Niefang* was published in 1996.⁵ A historically based novel set in the time period directly following the coup d'état in 1979, the narrative follows a young priest, Father Gabriel, shortly after he is released from prison. In a similar way to Maximiliano Ncogo Esono's realistic representation of Malabo in *Adjá-Adjá y otros relatos*, Bacheng provides a very detailed

⁴ See also Bhabha (1996: 59).

⁵ Translations of the titles are taken from *An Introduction to the Literature of Equatorial Guinea: Between Colonialism & Dictatorship* (Lewis, 2007). The translation of the quotations is my own.

representation of the geographical area surrounding Niefang on the mainland of Río Muni.

The references to Niefang and the surrounding areas can be extended to apply to other places within the country. Niefang is described as 'one of those Guinean cities...' (1996: 16). Another geographical location described in this manner is Edum which is 'one of those villages characteristic of the rural area of Niefang' (1996: 32). These types of descriptions allow for the narrative to gain a universal quality, a technique that is also employed with characters that will be examined shortly.

Niefang is also described as the meeting place of two cultures; the fang from the interior and the coastal population from the Litoral region. The cultural hybridity of this geographical space is significant as it is mirrored by Father Gabriel himself. Bacheng very clearly defines the relationship that Father Gabriel has with Niefang and it is arguably this close connection that allows for a similar description of both the man and the space (1996: 19).

Father Gabriel embodies cultural hybridity and all of the inherent contradictions specifically framed in a religious context. The reader is told that evil is black, dark and symbolic of darkness, whereas goodness is bright, white and pure. This symbolic language is also used with reference to Father Gabriel who focuses on the contrast between his skin and his cassock and as a result feels a strange sensation, as if he was in between two worlds (1996: 28-29). Just as Niefang is seen

as a symbol of the symbiosis of cultures, Father Gabriel is the union of both indigenous and European cultures through religion.

This hybridity of European, Catholic and indigenous traditions and practices is a common theme throughout the novel. The character of Ndong aids in the demonstration of this intersection. Similar to the description of geographic locations, Ndong is presented as 'one of those young people who are wandering all over Guinea these days' (1996: 53). This description allows for Ndong to be perceived as one of many and can therefore be representative of a larger population. The situational interaction between Ndong and Father Gabriel is of the utmost importance in the novel. Their dialogue illustrates a fundamental divergence in perspective between that of the Catholic Church and the traditional indigenous value systems. The initial conversation between the two men exemplifies this contrast between Father Gabriel's religious indoctrination and the deterministic views of Ndong (1996: 45-46). As a result of this conversation Father Gabriel is left feeling isolated from his own people. He does not understand how they can be happy without devotion to God and this causes him to question elements of his own religious identity. Ndong makes it explicitly clear that Father Gabriel is not like him and points out that it is because he is good and pure (1996: 72). This classification is not entirely accurate as Father Gabriel has a lover, Maria Soledad, who is carrying his child. The statement made by Ndong that separates Father Gabriel from his people is in fact wrong, and Father Gabriel's sin is what brings him closer to his community. His religious identity, no matter how tarnished or compromised, is necessary, for without it, the people of Equatorial Guinea will not find hope. The hybridity

characterised by Father Gabriel, the combination of both traditions, becomes symbolic of the nation's identity as a whole (1996: 79). It can be argued that the characteristics of individual spaces and people have been provided in such a way by the author to allow them to be extended to the broader sphere. The hybridity inherent in *Niefang* is embodied by Father Gabriel who must accept his religious identity as a symbol of hope for the population.

Huellas bajo tierra or Underground Footprints was published in 1998. This narrative contains both historical and intertextual references that serve to anchor this text firmly in the tradition of contemporary writing. As observed by Marvin Lewis, the diary of Juan Ndong 'in combination with a variety of other narrative threads, provides a number of narrative perspectives that contribute to the metafictional structure of the work' (2007: 165). The framing of this narrative is significant as it mirrors the complexity of its content.

The diary is presented to the reader indirectly through the introduction to a Catalan character named Girolla given by an unidentified narrator. The diary entries become fictional testimony contained in historical events. The narrative runs parallel to the political development of the country as the protagonist experiences the pre- and post-Macias periods. The only information that the reader has concerning the unidentified character is that he is Equatorial Guinean. The fact that he remains anonymous is significant as it allows his experience to be extended to that of many others, a technique that has been illustrated in the previous text. The reader learns at the beginning of the text that the protagonist, Juan Ndong, has died in France and

it is this discovery that leads the reader to experience the diary through the unidentified character.

Bacheng presents Ndong's time in prison as a metaphor for the entire country during the Macias regime. The young Ndong states that an Equatorial Guinean learns many things while in prison. It is a veritable university of pain, suffering and death. The pivotal interaction in the text is an extensive exchange that occurs inside between the three characters who occupy the neighbouring cells: Father Gabriel, Patricio, a young intellectual and Nsue, a coffee farmer who voted against Macias in the elections (1998: 58-59).

A large portion of the text is dedicated to the debates between these men. It is not a coincidence that Father Gabriel appears as an intertextual reference in this novel. The link between the two novels becomes apparent as the informed reader learns that this part of the narration occurs prior to that of *The Parish Priest of Niefang*. This fact is significant as it allows the reader to gain a firm foothold in the elapsing time frame of the diary. It also serves as a reference point between the time period in the narration and the 'present' day in France. As well, the discussion between the three men contains many vital questions of religion and secularism, communism and democracy that concern Equatorial Guinean society. It can also be argued that each of these three men is representative of the types of people who were imprisoned during the Macias regime. The religious, the intellectual and the average man are all identified as subversive. This also demonstrates the arbitrary

nature of the convictions while at the same time presenting the reader with a selected cross-section of the population.

While Father Gabriel and Patricio have extensive philosophical and religious debates, Nsue, who is representative of the status quo, offers a cautionary comment. He asks if either of them have ever considered what the average person wants. He states: those of you who went abroad to study no longer identify with your own villages. Who will defend our traditions? (1998: 70). Nsue's comments can be seen as representative of a large majority of the population. He has spent his life dedicated to his ancestors, raising a family and working hard only to be imprisoned for voting for the wrong political candidate. His question also offers an explanation for Father Gabriel's feelings of isolation in the previous text as he cannot reconcile his European education with his ancestral traditions. In this conversation, it is also noted that Spanish or European philosophy cannot be employed to decipher an African reality (1998: 75).

All of these questions cause Juan Ndong reflect upon his own identity. He asks himself. Who am I? A Guinean. And what is a Guinean? How can one define what is Guinean? (1998: 71) These are the fundamental questions of the text. As Juan Ndong thinks about the two cultural streams that feed into his own identity, the colonial and the traditional, the reader becomes increasingly more aware that these are necessary questions that are being signalled by the author.

These preoccupations are quickly mirrored by the unidentified narrator. After having read the diary, he is plagued with questions concerning his identity: He states that he identifies with Juan Ndong to such an extent that he feels as though he was reading his own biography (1998: 99). This is the only sense of personal reflection that the reader receives from the unidentified character. He describes the diary as Juan Ndong having a profound dialogue with himself (1998: 99). This comment clarifies the structure of the novel as the diary acts as the perfect medium for the expression of this form of self-interrogation.

The final section of the diary is presented as a letter to a woman named Christine. Juan Ndong outlines all of the difficulties of their relationship in terms that can be applied to the broader relationship between Africa and Europe. He describes their union as 'the sorrow between two identities' and laments irreconcilable cultural differences (1998: 104). In the letter, he underlines the importance of his ancestors and highlights his place within a long family tradition. His ancestral identity is significant as it demonstrates the way in which he identifies himself. In addition to his name, which he explains many have held before him, he defines himself as the ancestral present and feels a strong connection to both the ancestral past and future.

In the last paragraphs of the narrative, the narrator has a moment of silence for his fallen countryman. Due to the fact that he was in the country illegally, it would be next to impossible for him to receive a proper burial. For this reason the narrator and the Frenchman who discovered him, take it upon themselves to bury

him underneath a ceiba tree, a symbol of liberty: a poignant moment given that Juan Ndong traveled to France to encounter liberty and to finally be at peace. The reader is left with the ultimate impression of solidarity that exists between Equatorial Guineans. The reaction from the narrator demonstrates the power of the shared experience.

Both of these novels make an attempt to reconcile questions surrounding identity, albeit in noticeably different ways. One of the key observations is the extension of the personal experiences of these characters to the larger population. Bacheng has painted a palpably realistic picture in which to set his characters in motion. Both novels contrast European and African traditions and underline the inherent hybridity of the contemporary subject. To the informed reader, the detailed descriptions of geographical areas and political regime help to anchor the fictional characters in a historical past which in turn provides the reader with a context for the expression of identity. The techniques employed by Bacheng question the boundaries between the individual and the collective and serve as a distinctive narrative response to a topic that is not easily explored.

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