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Between Three Continents: Rethinking Equatorial Guinea on the Fortieth Anniversary of Its Independence from Spain

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Folklore, Nation and Gender in a Colonial Encounter: Los *Coros y Danzas* de la *Sección Femenina de la Falange* in Equatorial Guinea

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In spring 1939, Francisco Franco put the female section of the *Falange* Party officially in charge of the "formation of the Spanish woman". The *Sección Femenina* was founded in 1934 and led by Pilar Primo de Rivera, sister of the *Falange*-founder José Antonio, until Franco's death. In the years following the Civil War, the organization managed to establish itself as a state-supportive organ with over 600'000 members. In 1938, it set up a culture department that dedicated itself to the "conservation" of "the authentic Spanish Folklore". In all provinces *Coros y Danzas*-groups were formed which in "field research" "rescued" "nearly forgotten" dances and "revitalized" them by performing in front of gradually growing audiences. The catalan *Sardana* or the basque *Txistu*, important symbols of regional independence movements, were re-invented¹ as national traditions. The declared aim was to fight the "invasion" of "Spanish Folklore" by the "Pseudo Flamenco" of the *gitanos* and by "modern music". Since 1942, several *Coros y Danzas*-groups had been performing outside of Spain as well, forming an "original embajada, sin mensajes políticos directos, densenvuelta y alegre"², as a Francoist historian puts it. Between 1948 and 1955, several big tours carried the *Coros y Danzas* to most European countries, to Latin America, to the USA, and to Morocco. In 1954, following an invitation of Faustino Ruiz, the *Governador General de las Provincias de Guinea Ecuatorial*, they went on stage in Equatorial Guinea and danced first in Bata, then in Niefang and Micomenseng.

¹ Hobsbawm, Eric: Introduction. The Invention of Tradition, in: Hobsbawm, Eric/Ranger, Terence (Ed.): The Invention of Tradition, Cambridge 1983, p.1-14. Bendix, Regina: In Search of Authenticity. The Formation of Folklore Studies, London 1997.

² Suárez Fernandez, Luís: Crónica de la Sección Femenina y su tiempo, Madrid 1993, p.216.

Inside and outside of Spain, the *Coras y Danzas* danced with a political mission, serving different aspects of the Francoist nation-building. In Western Europe and the USA, they tried to represent Spain as a friendly, harmless state during the years of its international isolation. At the same time they were expected to contribute to the construction of national identity and to the disciplination of the population in Spain and its colonies. Within the Francoist nation-building there was a close link between colonial and gender politics. In my dissertation, I analyze how the *Coras y Danzas*-dancers were staged, through performative material/semiotic processes, as female bodies with characteristics that made them suitable instruments of nation-building. My work draws on various internal documents, like letters or reports, archived mainly in the *Archivo General de Administración* and the *Real Academia de Historia* in Madrid; but also on newspaper articles, photographs, movies and oral-history interviews.

The dancers' function in the disciplination of the population was that of models. On stage they dissolved as individuals into a unified, functioning "dancing – machine"³. Their audience was supposed to do the same: form a well ordered, productive mass. On the other hand, newspapers published 'back-stage stories' about the always self-negating and cheerful behaviour of the dancers. In those stories they figure as examples of the ideal submissive subject. Moreover, the *Sección Femenina* believed in the civilizing effect of music itself:

„España no cantaba, y queremos hacer de España un país musical. Porque la música afina la sensibilidad, educa y cultiva el espíritu.“⁴

explained Pilar Primo de Rivera in 1948.

„Nosotras por nuestra parte hemos procurado en todo momento dar a conocer la Falange y la labor de la S.F. y ser ejemplares para que la Colonia llevase, a través de nosotras, una buena impresión“⁵.

³ Giese, Fritz: *Girlkultur. Vergleiche zwischen amerikanischem und europäischem Rhythmus und Lebensgefühl*, Munich 1925.

⁴ Primo de Rivera, Pilar: *Discursos, Circulares, Escritos*, Madrid (n.y.), p. 99.

⁵ AGA(03)051.023 LEG 60 TOP 23/27.704-28.302 GR7 No1.

writes the leader of the *Coros y Danzas*-tour to Equatorial Guinea in her report to Pilar Primo de Rivera in 1954. The letter displays the dancers' function as role models also within the Francoist colonial politics. Another aspect of those politics was the production of colonial knowledge.⁶ The documents show the *Sección Femeninas*' attempts to get to 'know' the 'indigenas'. The observations on their 'natural' character can be read with Foucault as disciplinary 'tableaux',⁷ produced in order to govern them.

In what I analyze with Deleuze as a rhizomatic performative process⁸, the dancers were staged as female bodies with characteristics that made them suitable for the Francoist nation-building. This process involved different technologies of power and occurred on various material/semiotic dimensions. One of the latter was a linguistic one: The documents shape the dancers by repeatedly attributing them the mentioned characteristics. In addition, there were diets, clothes and especially training that formed their flesh.

I understand the *Coros y Danzas*' political mission as a kind of 'construction plan' that prescribed the dancers' shape. Most of the time the construction turned out as intended: the dancers were submissive, 'alegre', disciplined, pure, self-negating, healthy, enduring and ethically 'authentic'. But sometimes their bodies did not fulfil what their mission demanded from them. The documents report of aggressive, undisciplined, ill and scared dancers. There are newspaper articles about exiled Spanish republicans – male ones – who forget about their 'resentments' against the Franco-regime, because they are overwhelmed by the attractiveness of the dancers. Those stories move the dancers close to the figure of the dangerous *femme fatale*, which is far away from ideal Francoist womanhood. In 'warrior dances' like the *Baila del Ibio* the dancers performed as warriors and the press describes them as 'conquistadoras', or 'guerrilla danzante'. The metaphor of the soldier who is usually male causes here a *genderblur*.

First, such 'accidents' were caused by the ambivalence of the dancers' political mission, which involved at the same time serving imperialist interests and representing a harmless state, thus opening up space for hybridity. Second, besides strategically-used power technologies it was also encounters, namely colonial encounters, that formed and de-formed them:

⁶ Stoler, Ann Laura: *Along the Archival Grain. Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*, Princeton 2009.

⁷ Michel Foucault: *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*, New York 1977.

⁸ Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Félix: *A Thousand Plateaus*. London and New York 2004.

„Actuamos el primer día en Bata para indígenas y españoles []. En un cine al aire libre. Esta ha sido la actuación mas penosa para las niñas. Los negros quedaban delante, junto a ellas. Con un calor espantoso y una masa de gente tan enorme que daba verdadera angustia bailar. Pero Dios que nos asiste en todo momento hizo que saliesen airozas y sin tener que lamentar ningún incidente”⁹.

explains the already cited report of the Equatorial Guinea tour. It was in part the climate in Equatorial Guinea, but especially their audience that scared the dancers and made them perform poorly. The documents report that in Niefang and Micomenseng the *Coras y Danzas* were not only confronted with a frightening audience, but were converted into an audience themselves, as “muchachas indígenas” danced “bailes preciosos”¹⁰ for them. That change of setting, that switch of role and finally the encounter with strange rhythms, were disconcerting, “strange encounters”¹¹ – hinting at the dancers being “strangers to themselves”¹².

Previous stories

Events do not occur in a vacuum. They meet events, circulating discourses and phantasms from the past. They meet previous ‘stories’ that have left traces in things and bodies, that have inscribed themselves on the flesh and mind of people and on documents; stories that determine the way people involved in an event think, feel and act.

I can only mention here a few of the stories that the *Coras y Danzas* performances in 1954 met in Equatorial Guinea. They are about rhythm, mimicry, protest and perversion.

The colonized danced. They ‘really’ did and they did in the colonial construction of “the negro” and her/his inborn musicality and the images of her/his wild, sexual, magical and dangerous moving to primitive drum playing that accompanied the colonialization not only of Equatorial Guinea.¹³ Already in the 1920s the colonial government organized big “fiestas

⁹ AGA(03)051.023 LEG 60 TOP 23/27.704-28.302 GR7 No1.

¹⁰ AGA(03)051.023 LEG 60 TOP 23/27.704-28.302 GR7 No1.

¹¹ Ahmed, Sara: *Strange Encounters. Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, London und New York, 2000.

¹² Kristeva, Julia: *Strangers to Ourselves*, New York 1991.

¹³ Pedrosa, José Manuel: *Negros músicos, Negros poetas: estereotipos y representaciones en Occidente de la oralidad Africana y Afroamericana*, in: *Oráfrica*, revista de oralidad Africana, 4, 2008, p.11-28.

populares". There was dancing and the authorities distributed alcohol, tobacco and gifts among the people.¹⁴ Those fiestas were consciously planned colonial politics. But the authorities surely lost control over them. Drunkenness, insults and chaos occurred. The colonial masters also held their private parties, where there was also dancing and drugs and "sexual affronts", a transgression of the boundaries of the colonial order. Perversions. A well studied field in colonial studies is *mestizaje*. One of the results of *mestizaje* was the presence of *mestizos*, people that according to Stoler were perceived as a threat to the colonial rule, being the "embodiment of European degeneration".¹⁵ In my thesis, I use the term *mestizaje* to name colonial perversions that not necessarily involved sexual contact. It summarizes any form of the colonized's "whitening" and the colonizer's "going native". Nerín describes, how functionaries of the Guardia Civil, who lived together with Guinean women, started to loose their Spanish costumes.¹⁶ On the other side, there were Guineans who became similar to the Spanish. Bhabha theorizes mimicry as a colonial strategy, aiming to produce colonized that were similar to the colonial masters, but not like them. "A reformed recognizable Other, which is almost the same, but not quite. Not quite/not white." "In order to be effective mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess. The mode of that discourse is therefore stricken by an indeterminacy."¹⁷ Mimicry slips out of control when it produces "colonial nonsense"¹⁸ and when the colonial masters are confronted with a mimic man or woman that is their distorted self-portrait. Examples of such mimic men and women were those Guineans in the 1920s who wore the clothes a Catalan business man sold them and which he had bought in a theatre: A black Faust in Micomenseng.¹⁹

Of the stories predating the *Coras y Danzas*-performance and occurring outside of Guinea, I want to mention two: First, I compare in my work the Francoist folklore-politics with those of the Portuguese Salazar-regime. Because just like the *Coras y Danzas*-tours, the construction and display of the Brazilian-African-Portuguese *Fado* can be read as a three continental, "Black Atlantic"²⁰ history.²¹ Second, The *Coras y Danzas*-shows caused many protests, for example in 1948 in Buenos Aires. They involved manifestations organized by local leftist groups, often including exiled Spanish republicans.

¹⁴ Nerín, Gustau: *Un Guàrdia Civil en la Selva*, Barcelona 2006, p.127.

¹⁵ Stoler, Ann Laura: *Sexual Affronts and Racial Frontiers. Cultural Competence and the Dangers of Métissage*, in: Stoler, Ann Laura: *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power. Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule*, Berkeley and Los Angeles 2002, p.79-111, p.80.

¹⁶ Nerín, Gustau: *Un Guàrdia Civil en la Selva*, Barcelona 2006, p.256ff.

¹⁷ Bhabha, Homi K.: *Of mimicry and man: The ambivalence of colonial discourses*, in: Bhabha, Homi K.: *The location of culture*, London and New York 2003, p. 85-92, p.86.

¹⁸ Bhabha, Homi K.: *Articulating the archaic : notes on colonial nonsense*, in: Collier, Peter and Geyer-Ryan, Helga (eds): *Literary theory today*, Ithaca, 1990.

¹⁹ Nerín, Gustau: *Un Guàrdia Civil en la Selva*, Barcelona 2006, p.128.

²⁰ Gilroy, Paul: *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness*, London 1993.

Why am I interested in the above-mentioned stories? Because in my study, I address the question whether the ill and scared dancers can be considered “colonial nonsense” in the conception of Bhabha I mentioned. In order to analyze their subversive potential, it is necessary to look at previous events that have shaped the minds and bodies of both the colonized and the colonizers and therefore influenced the effect the *Coros y Danzas* had on them. And of course events that disrupt the colonial order, implying mimicry and rhythm are especially important here. Asking about a possible ‘long-term-effect’ of the performances will include investigating the following stories. They are stories that occurred between 1964 and 1969.

Following stories

According to Pilar Primo de Rivera, the participants of the *Coros y Danzas*-tour felt in 1954 already “la inquietud de lo que Sección Femenina podía hacer por las mujeres nativas”²², but they just were not able to start work yet. They waited ten years. In 1964, the *Sección Femenina* started to build *escuelas the hogar*, where “native” children were vaccinated, and “indigenas” trained to become clean, obedient housewives. They also started to send girls and young women to Spain, where they were educated in *albergues de verano* and *Sección Femenina*-schools. In May 1964, María Dolores Bermudez Cañete writes in a report about her trip to Equatorial Guinea:

„La mujer en estos territorios va a exigir de nosotras le ayudemos a formarse como persona humana y como mujer, y no como española ni de la S.F. de F.E.T.”²³

In other words: the *Sección Femenina*-elite wanted colonized who were “almost the same, but not quite. Not quite/not white.” That strategy failed. In March 1969 Carmen Obón writes to Pilar Primo de Rivera about Marina Alene who had been educated at the *Escuela de Instructoras* in Barcelona and who the *Sección Femenina* had hoped would now become a teacher in one of the *Sección Femenina*-schools in Equatorial Guinea:

²¹ Da Costa Holton, Kimberly: *Fado's Historiography. Old Myths and New Frontiers*, in: P. The Online Journal of Portuguese Cultural Studies, 2006.

²² AGA (03) Ca. 251, LEG 1.

²³ AGA (03) Ca. 248, LEG 1.

„Marina se obsesiona con el mando, quiere ser Delegada y Directora del Colegio, quiere nuestra casa y el coche y también vivir con nosotras [...] para conseguirlo utilizará todos los medios no importa utilizarlos mal, el caso es llegar.

Ha pedido a su Gobierno crear una Sección Femenina Africana, aceptan su petición y la encargan bajo nuestro asesoramiento de su estudio. Presenta al Consejo un estudio idéntico al de España.”²⁴

Marina wanted an independent, African *Sección Femenina*. She did not want “almost the same” house as the colonizer. She did not want an identical house either. She wanted “their” house. Obvious accusations against Marina went further:

„Su casa es el lugar de reunión en el cual se deciden situaciones castigos y odios para los blancos “hay que acabar y machacar la cabeza de los blancos” éstas palabras las oyeron Conchita y Angela en una visita que le hicieron con relación a la Sección Femenina.”²⁵

In Marina’s case, slipping mimicry grew beyond the level of subject-constitution and became agency.²⁶ The documents written in 1969 record totally frightened colonial masters. So do those of the 1920s and those of 1954. What are the connections?

I am still at the beginning of my work. My mind-map keeps growing, as I add new stories of the past. I have also come across new stories in the present that influence greatly the way I think and feel, i.e. the epistemic position, out of which I analyze past stories. Those present stories include the people I meet, they include you.

In my study, I show how the construction of gender and the colonial rule in Equatorial Guinea were network-processes, in the way John Law²⁷ theorized them. The end of the Franco-regime was not the end of oppressive networks, not in Equatorial Guinea nor elsewhere. Our duty as academics is to help undo such networks not only by analysing them, but also by

²⁴ AGA (03) Ca. 251, LEG 5.

²⁵ AGA (03) Ca. 251, LEG 5.

²⁶ Chakravorty Spivak, Gayatri: Can the Subaltern Speak?, in: Cary Nelson and Larry Grossberg, (eds): *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Chicago 1988, p.271-313.

²⁷ Law, John/Hassard, John (Ed.): *Actor Network Theory and After*, Oxford 1999.

aporetic action, to cite Spivak²⁸. By 'perverting' them from within and building new networks. May this conference contribute to such rhizome-making!

²⁸ Chakravorty Spivak, Gayatri: Outside in the Teaching Machine, London and New York, 2009.