Este número está dedicado al Dr. David Peltz nuestro editor por 13 años.
Ideations of Collective Memory in Hispanophone Africa: The Case of María Nsue Angüe’s *Ekomo*

Dr. Adam Lifshey  
*University at Albany*

As the first post-independence novel of Equatorial Guinea, the only Spanish-speaking country in Africa, María Nsue Angüe’s *Ekomo* might be expected to address themes of a young and unique nationhood. Instead, the novel’s title character represents the dying cultural memory of a tribe and, by extension, of an entire continent. The nation, as an entity, is never mentioned by name and is only alluded to once; the collective cultural memory at hand is being lost at a tribal and continental level, not being gained within a new national context. This absence of a national frame is particularly striking given the provocative remarks of Angüe’s editor and prologuist, Vicente Granados, who prefaces *Ekomo* by referring to Equatoguinean Spanish as “una lengua artificial” full of “errores de dispersión del sistema vocálico” and other “innumerables confusiones” (11). Granados is convinced of both the inherent superiority of Castilian Spanish and the lack of anything in Angüe’s novel that might contest Spain, the former colonial power, in any sense whatsoever: he argues that “no hay en la novela el más mínimo resentimiento, ni trata ninguna cuestión política de carácter panfleterio, porque la obra cumple una de las características de la literatura guineana escrita: la ausencia de sentimientos anticolonialistas” (13). Similarly, just prior to the publication of *Ekomo*, the important Equatoguinean writer Donato Ndongo-Bédyogo asserted that “La ausencia de estridencias anticolonialistas
podría, desde luego, llegar a ser una singularidad permanente de la literatura guineana, que daria así al resto de las literaturas africanas un tono nuevo caracterizado por la serenidad, sin veces quebradas por el llanto ni indignaciones retrospectivas" ("El marco," 29). Yet the text of *Ekomo* belies both Granados’s neocolonial self-satisfaction with the first hispanicophone novel of post-independence Equatorial Guinea and Ndongo-Bidyogo’s hypothesis that “serenidad” might permanently mark Equatoguinean literature. An explicitly nationalistic message of anticolonial protest may be noticeably lacking in the novel, but that absence in no way elides the author’s profound lamentation for a collective memory that is collapsing on both tribal and continental scales. The postcolonial context of Africa is clearly implicated in Angue’s multiple ideations of collective memories on the verge of being extinguished, and as such *Ekomo* should be read as complicating the narrative of not only the national literature of Equatorial Guinea but also of hispanicophone literature in general in all its global diversity. 

A brief description of the novel is as follows: *Ekomo* is narrated by Nnanga, the wife of the title character, who is a young man suffering a persistent illness in his leg. Upon the death of the tribal elder, Nnanga sets out with Ekomo on a journey whose ostensible goal is curative (they search for someone to heal Ekomo’s sickness) but whose allegorical purpose is spiritual and educational. Ekomo, who is versed in indigenous African oral traditions, explains these histories and stories to Nnanga. The journey itself thus articulates a collective indigenous memory. Yet this memory is mostly conveyed at the climax of the journey, with Ekomo on the verge of death, as he and his leg are decomposing even in life: Ekomo, like the collective cultural memory he represents, no longer has anything to sustain him. As maggots emerge from his body, his journey in all senses, including the metonymic one of his tribe and continent, culminates in death and utter solitude. 

This performance of a tribal and continental memory perceived to be dying in *Ekomo* can be contextualized within (and without) the entity that is Equatorial Guinea. *Ekomo* is, after all, the first Equatoguinean novel since the nation itself gained sovereignty, and so its virtual ignoring of nationhood as a collective cultural concept is noteworthy. The reasons for the invisibility of nationhood in *Ekomo* may lie in the fact that Equatorial Guinea is a remarkably artificial construct. The country is constituted by an island currently named Bioko, a swath of mainland called Rio Muni, and some faraway islets. Bioko was historically populated by one group of people, the Bubi, while Rio Muni is the home of several others, including the Fang. Malabo, the capital of Equatorial Guinea, is located on Bioko, home of the Bubi, but the national governments always have been dominated by Fang. Whereas Bioko was relatively urbanized as the seat of most Spanish colonial activity, Rio Muni, by contrast, is mostly tropical forest. Along with these internal differentiations, Equatorial Guinea is externally distinct as the only Spanish-speaking nation in Africa, having been weakly ruled by Spain for two centuries until 1968. Since independence, the nation has been ruled by two dictatorships that are responsible for killing perhaps over a tenth of the population and fueling mass exile; refugee estimates at one point reached as much as a third of the population and virtually all of the educated elite. In general, the artificial, anomalous and disastrous construction of Equatorial Guinea may very well be the reason why questions of collective memory in *Ekomo* ignore national existence altogether in favor of tribal and continental identifications. 

As for Maria Nsue Angue herself, she is a Fang and her novel, set in a tribal village, accordingly takes place in Rio Muni. The history of the author and her text, however, is in no sense restricted to an isolated Equatoguinean environment. Angue was born in Ebebeyin, Rio Muni, in 1945, but moved to Spain as a young child and apparently has lived there ever since. In a 1993 interview, she noted, “Pienso en Español, sueño en Español y hablo en Español la mayor parte de tiempo de mi vida...¿Qué argumento utilizaría usted para afirmar que robo una lengua que siempre ha sido la mía, si cuando llegué a España tenía ocho años y ni siquiera sabía decir tres palabras en Fang? (“Maria Nsue Angue” 117). In the same interview, she cites her principal literary influences as Rosalia de Castro, Carmen Laforet, Ana Maria Matute, Santa Teresa de Jesús, the Brontë sisters and, most recently, Toni Morrison (115) – a list of canonical Western women writers that contains not a single African author – and observes, “He estado muy poco tiempo en Guinea y, desde luego, tengo muy poco contacto con sus actividades” (118). Moreover, *Ekomo* was written in Spain and published in Madrid in either 1984 or 1985. Yet despite the extensive Spanish background of the author and the text, *Ekomo* was immediately acknowledged as Equatorial Guinea’s first novel since independence. One critic, Juan Bautista Osbita, even has affirmed in an Equatoguinean journal that “para el lector guineano, esta novela revela una palpante experiencia del prototipo universo fam de este país” (48). The problematic of considering the loss in *Ekomo* of a Fang
tribal heritage as well as of a continental African memory—in addition to the virtual nonexistence of a national Equatoguinean imaginary—may be set within these seemingly contradictory dynamics: the expatriate origins of the nation’s first post-independence novel and even the foreign creation of the nation itself.

Prior to the appearance of Ekomo, no autochthonous genealogy of novel-writing existed even in colonial times that might point toward an inchoate collective vision of Equatorial Guinea in which Angú might situate her post-independence text. Although the Bubi and the Fang and other ethnic groups all maintained rich oral literary cultures, no novelistic tradition emerged as elsewhere in colonized Africa. In fact, only two novels by Equatoguineans appeared during the period of Spanish colonialism, which lasted until 1968. These texts were Leoncio Evita’s Cuando los Combes luchaban of 1953 and Daniel Jones Mathama’s Una lanza por el Boabi of 1962, novels that were quite isolated from each other in time and spirit and likewise distant on many levels from Ekomo. Evita’s novel, for instance, features a wild plot including cannibals dressed up as leopards and a pacific tribe who defeat them with the help of a bombastic Spanish general; both Evita’s text and Mathama’s are often read as implicitly collaborationist, although this conclusion certainly can be argued in the case of Evita in particular. In any case, with Ekomo appearing more than a score of years after the second of only two colonial-era novels, Maria Angú Nsue cannot be perceived as writing within a coherent or even extant national novelistic tradition. For these reasons, Ekomo is “une œuvre qui est désormais considérée unaniment par la critique comme le premier roman moderne de la Guinée Équatoriale” (Miampika 15).5

When Ekomo opens, a tribal elder is sitting in judgment of a case of adultery in a village. The elder justifies his reasoning about the punishment he chooses by noting “Todos recordaréis que se dijo en la antigüedad: ‘No busques a la mujer de tu hermano’” (18). This invocation of tribal memory by the elder, however, is followed by a bad omen: in a sky described as “ceniciento,” a black cloud appears in the shape of a tombstone (19). The elder interprets the sign as follows:

Esta es la gran señal de los pasados. Esta es la señal del Africa antigua, la lápida de los poderosos. Cada vez que veaís esta señal dibujada en el cielo, habréis de entender que un poderoso va a morir en Africa...Esta señal que aparece hoy en el cielo se aparecía a los antiguos, cuando Africa era Africa. Y cuando en Africa sólo se adoraban los dioses africanos. (19)

The elder here thus draws upon his own knowledge of tribal and continental memory in order to interpret an omen that paradoxically makes an appearance in a collective context that no longer exists: Africa, he suggests, is no longer Africa. And as Maria Zelina Limonta notes, “El término lápida pues adquiere connotaciones simbólicas, convirtiéndose en imagen estructural del pacto que va a desaparecer, romperse, enterrarse” (95). The forecasted death of “un poderoso” only underlines this fact. The elder then adds,

yo me pregunto: ¿Quiénes son los poderosos de la tierra? Porque habréis de entender que, cuando hablo de la tierra, hablo de Africa y, no lo digo por decir, ya que hace mucho tiempo que los africanos abandonaron a Africa y Africa a los africanos. En Africa ya no hay poderosos. (20)

Africa and Africans have become mutually alienated: the elder, a link to all previous generations, is certain that a collapse of vast social proportions is underway.

The elder thus establishes a framework in which a continental death already in progress is about to receive yet another mortal blow. The tombstone in the sky is soon followed by another omen that reinforces this idea: the sacred ceiba tree at the spiritual center of the village suddenly collapses, dragging a “una rama joven y robusta” along with it (26). This ceiba, according to Nnanga, the narrator and wife of Ekomo,

guarda el totem de la tribu, pues en sus raíces están enterradas las venturas, desventuras, las epidemias, el hambre y la abundancia de la tribu. En la ceiba está la muerte, la vida, la salud y la enfermedad. Por ello, los miembros de la tribu saben guardar las normas establecidas por los antepasados desde hace siglos para que no lleguen a nosotros los estragos. La ceiba sagrada ha anunciado que van a morir dos hombres: Un gran jefe y un hombre joven. (25-26)

Nnanga’s narrative voice here is at once individual and collective, since it functions as a tribal voice as much as her own. Similarly, the death of the ceiba augurs the personal fatalities of not only a “gran jefe” (symbolized by the tree itself) and a young man (symbolized by the “rama joven y robusta”), but also of the tribal collectiv-
ity that they represent. Indeed, according to Limonta, “la ceiba ha sido derribada indirectamente por todos, por aquellos que, bien por el escepticismo o por la indolencia, han permitido que el mundo de sus antepasados se resquebrajara, fuese desapareciendo” (98). It is at this exact moment that Ekomo appears in the novel in person for the first time. He has returned to the village from a city, emblem of modernity, where he was busy committing adultery. There is something wrong with his leg, and the suspicion grows in Nnanga that somehow Ekomo may be the young man whose fate has just been augured by the fallen ceiba tree.

The choice of a ceiba as the central symbol of the tribe is a striking one, since according to Vicente Granados, the editor and prologuist of the novel, the ceiba is “un árbol ajeno a la tradición fang, porque el árbol sagrado de esa tribu es el oveng” (11). With his consistent eagerness to produce in Angué’s text his own sense of narrative coherence, this time on a symbolic rather than linguistic level, Granados adds, “Puesto que Ekomo se mueve dentro de la cosmogonía fang, sugeri a la autora que cambiara el árbol, y me contestó tajante: la ceiba es el árbol del bien” (12). This interchange is interesting on several counts. Earlier, Granados lauded Angué’s attempts to edit out local Equatoguinean versions of Spanish – these were “errores” and “confusiones” in need of correction (11) – while this time he encourages her to replace the ceiba with a more authentic symbol. This suggests that Granados tolerates indigenous cultural constructs just so long as they do not challenge the supremacy of Castilian orthodoxy. Angué, in turn, now deliberately melds a Western allegory (“el árbol de bien”) into a Fang cultural context. Although Angué is evidently producing this text under the postcolonial gaze of Granados, she still manages to claim narrative space for herself where she can, in this case by paradoxically persisting in the inclusion of a Western motif in an African allegory.

The great chief whose death the ceiba foreshadows turns out to be none other than the tribal elder, who had opened the book by convoking ancestral memory to justify his punishment of the adulterers, and who had used that same memory to read the tombstone in the sky. On his death, Nnanga reflects, “Me di cuenta que acababa de morirse el ultimo superviviente de una época que había acabado hacia tiempo. La época del abuelo [el gran jefe] había acabado antes con él. Triste verdad” (41). These lines echo the paradox offered earlier by the elder himself about the imminent death of a powerful African in an Africa already dead. Nnanga then adds that the elder “marcaba con su muerte el fin de un Africa y daba comienzo a otra...al africano de hoy le interesan otras cosas. Tiene otros problemas, otros dioses, otras creencias, y va abandonando lentamente su tradición, influenciado por la ola que está atravesando” (42). Here again, a personal fate is merged with a collective one: the elder personifies a dying tribal and continental memory, an Africa that is ceasing to be Africa.

Now, Nnanga and the whole village wait for the second half of the prophecy to be fulfilled: a young man must die. The worsening leg of Ekomo makes him the likely candidate. In the aftermath of the elder’s death, a great lethargy and uncertainty pervades the village, as the traditional world itself seems to have perished along with the elder and the villagers no longer know what to do with themselves. As Nnanga notes, “La naturaleza se había apartado del hombre, formando un mundo ajeno, insensible a los hombres y sus acontecimientos” (59). Amid this alienation, the narrative turns to Nfumbaha, a young man who had recently returned from Europe, where he had acquired some Western education and belief systems. Although the dying tribal elder had forbidden any villager to enter the forest during a certain period after his death, Nfumbaha decides to defy that ban. On seeing him disappear into the woods, Nnanga notes, “Nfumbaha había estado mucho tiempo en Europa, y había perdido el respeto a la tradición. Podía salvarse quizás del embriego de la selva, porque era ya medio blanco. Quizás...” (60). The village waits a long time for Nfumbaha to return, but he does not. Search parties are sent out, but to no avail. With Nfumbaha now presumed lost for having violated the elder’s dying prohibition, Nnanga reflects:

Nfumbaha, el africano de hoy, hombre del mañana, tras estar dos lluvias en Europa, dejó su tradición encerrada entre los libros; dejó allí su personalidad y sus creencias africanas, y el ser sin continente regresó a su pueblo con un desfraz del europeo sin el europeo dentro. Con una máscara de Europa pero sin su rostro en ella. Medio blanco, medio negro...Las lágrimas de la madre son las del Africa y sus lamentos se esparcen alargados por el aire hasta los confines de la tierra por todos aquellos hijos perdidos y no hallados. ¿Quién puede escuchar el llanto de la madre Africa sin sentir compasión por esa mujer que no hace más que echar hijos al mundo para ver como poco a poco van perdiendo su personalidad? Y sin embargo, cada vez que cae uno de sus hijos, Africa llora personificándose en cada una de las madres del Nfumbaha. (85)
Here again, a memory of Africa has been lost by one man, Nfebaha, a loss that seamlessly segues into that of a continent. Nfebaha’s mother is “madre Africa” and the personal and tribal loss is continental in scale. As before, the national context is bypassed altogether, while the collectivities that are the village and all Africa are inextricable.

At this point, halfway through the novel, dramatic tension would seem to have reached its resolution: the prophecy of the ceiba tree has been fulfilled with the deaths of the village elder and Nfebaha. Ekomo’s leg, however, only has deteriorated further. Throughout the time that passes during the Nfebaha episode, Ekomo’s leg continues to swell and his limp grows more pronounced. In addition, Nnanga notes that Ekomo was actually Nfebaha’s best friend and his “amigo-hermano” (86). Ekomo is therefore marked by association and metaphorical consanguinity with the fate of Nfebaha, an association that perhaps marks him for death as well. As Ekomo and Nnanga leave the tribe in search of a doctor for his leg, the village setting of the first half of the book is now replaced by an archetypal journey in the second half. Yet this journey, like the elder and Nfebaha, seems doomed from the start.

The journey that Nnanga and Ekomo now make is in search of a cure, but a cure for what? Ekomo’s leg would seem to be a stand-in for all that Nnanga has witnessed decomposing in Africa from the start. And that leg is putrefying even as they begin their quest: on the journey outward from the village, his leg is already emitting a foul liquid that streams onto the floor and attracts the attention of flies. Nonetheless, Nnanga and Ekomo still think they can find a doctor to help them. Their first call is to a famous medicine man in a distant region of the forest. Nnanga is particularly hopeful that this man can also help her with her sterility, since she badly wants a child. This sterility, on a symbolic level, matches Ekomo’s leg: decomposition on one hand and infertility on the other. The chapter involving their stay at the medicine man’s asylum is replete with traditional stories: the text relays fertility rituals and beliefs, genealogies of the founding families of Africa, accounts of the birth of voodoo, etc. The medicine man, therefore, represents in his memory of traditional stories and cures the last effort by Nnanga and Ekomo to find a remedy in African sources for that which ails them. At the end of the chapter, the medicine man operates on Ekomo’s leg and extracts a gruesome foreign growth. Like much else in the novel, the precise cause of deterioration—whether personal or cultural or political—remains somewhat amorphous, but the tentacled growth that attaches itself fatally to Ekomo’s leg seems to resonate symbolically with the other vague foreign forces (read colonialism or neocolonialism) that throughout the plot slowly dismember local structures in one form or another.

The operation by the medicine man does not help Ekomo, and in this failure disappears the last turning to African remedies for an African disintegration. Ekomo and Nnanga decide to continue their journey to a city with a Western hospital staffed by white doctors. Given Nfebaha’s fate, however, the West and its institutions seem unlikely to provide alternative salvation. Ekomo, like Nfebaha, has been exposed to Western urban presences before, but that hardly has been wholesome or regenerative: the novel starts out with his committing adultery in a city. The white doctor in the hospital takes one look at Ekomo’s leg and says that only immediate amputation can save off certain death. Ekomo rejects that plan summarily and he and Nnanga set off once more.

Ekomo’s death is now assured. So is, by metaphorical extension, that of all Africa. It is at this precise moment of certified death that the travelers reach a sacred river, an arrival that occasions a series of collective memories initiated by Nnanga but then recalled aloud by Ekomo. Nnanga associates the sacred river with foundational stories she had heard as a girl from her nanny, such as one that begins,

Mucho tiempo atrás, antes de que llegase la raza blanca a estas tierras, nuestros antepasados, hombres nomadas, viendo desde el bajo Egipto a través del gran continente, llegaron a las orillas de un río grande, al que pusieron el nombre Ntam, que significa gracias o buenaventuranza, porque vieron que sus tierras eran buenas. Y habitaron en sus orillas durante muchos siglos. (158)

When Ekomo learns that Nnanga is remembering fragments of these stories, he immediately becomes the voice of the continental past: “Aquí,” he tells her, “nacieron hombres de muchas de nuestras tribus. Aquí, muchas de nuestras costumbres tradicionales y en estas orillas, muchos de nuestros héroes recordados hasta hoy. Este río es histórico” (158-59). Ekomo proceeds to relate a long sequence of traditional stories of which Nnanga is ignorant; these include how the ancestors sought a promised land, how the Fang tribe emerged from a complex genealogy of ancestors, how the custom of dowry-giving was established, how the pygmies once disappeared into a tree trunk, how albinos exist because of an ancient
that "la obra cumple una de las características de la literatura
guineana escrita: la ausencia de sentimientos anticolonialistas" 
(13). While it is true that the text does not explicitly assail with
nationalistic fervor the colonial or postcolonial power structures of
Equatorial Guinea, its extended lament for the death of longstanding
tribal and continental orders can be read as criticism of those ex-
ternal forces whose presences coincided with this cultural collapse.
That the novel is more a dirige than a diatrite does not make it
devoid of "sentimientos anticolonialistas." Furthermore, to the ex-
tent that the mourning process culls forth remembrances of Afri-
can traditions, *Ekomo* rescues in print those indigenous cultural
ideas and forms that are otherwise suppressed or endangered with
extinction by colonial and postcolonial forces. Thus María Zelina
Limonta concludes, "Nse se une a novelistas como Birago Diop,
Camaraye, Ngugi wa Thiong'o cuyas novelas...están escritas con
el objetivo de descolonizar la mente de sus lectores a través del uso
deliberado de la oralidad, y al mismo tiempo conservar la estética
africana" (93).

Such conclusions about the anticolonialism of *Ekomo* may be
tempered for some readers by considerations of Angüe's own back-
ground as a lifelong expatriate for whom Castilian Spanish and
Spanish are in many ways far more immediate than the Fang lan-
guage and Equatorial Guinea. In a recent interview, Angüe has
gone so far as to say that "El ser africana no tiene que ver nada en
mi vida. Me sentiría igual siendo India, europea, asiática o árabe" 
(Ngö, "Novelística," 102). Shortly thereafter, however, she adds,
"Doy gracias a Dios por ser negra y africana para poder confundirme
con África y compartir su sentir desde una óptica diferente a los
nativos, al mismo tiempo que compartir su sentir desde la óptica
africana. La simbiosis es mi fuerza y me alegra de ello" (102). The
constant slippage in Angüe's sense of self-identity arguably reso-
nates with the intersticing of Western and African cultures in *Ekomo,*
yet in no sense do the two exist on equal planes in the narrative as
perhaps they do in Angüe's conception of her own life: in *Ekomo,*
the latter is clearly imploding as the former is ascending, however
amorphous that ascension may be behind the foregrounded indi-
vidual trajectories of Nnanga and Ekomo. The collapse of tradi-
tional Africa signaled by the novel stands alone as cultural and
political commentary on a continent, commentary to which Angüe's
extratextual views on her own individual or collective identities are
interesting but ultimately irrelevant.

In Nnanga's solitude at the end of the novel there lies a pro-
found pathos that goes beyond the loss of her husband, for she has lost much more than that: she also has lost a tribe and a continent that are now alienated from her forever. Her lament, like that of Ntumbaha’s mother, is for all Africa. The only surviving representation of what little collective memory has been imparted to her is the written form of her own story. In other words, the novel itself becomes the repository of the vanishing collective memory that has been passed on orally by the tribal elder and Ekomo, both now dead. Moreover, the novel is in Spanish, not Fang. Readers are thus left with the further alienations of Nnanga to which there is no possible resolution: her story of a vanishing African memory is relayed, and therefore preserved, only in a Western genre and a Western language. Furthermore, that memory is here written, not spoken: even its mode of transmission is non-traditional. Although Angüe fills her novel with the formal characteristics of oral narrative, there is a melancholy implicit in a reader’s experiencing of Nnanga’s memories in written form, rather than oral, in the first place. Tellingly, the most poignant moment of the text comes before it even starts, in the dedication by Angüe that paradoxically seems to undermine the existence of the very narration at hand: “A Nnanga, mi amiga vieja. Lástima que no sepa leer” (7).

NOTES

1 The date of Ekomo’s publication is disputed by different sources as either 1984 or 1985. Ndongo-Bidyogo’s comments are from his editorial preface to the Antología de la literatura guineana of 1984, the first significant work of its kind. He also authored the 1987 novel Las tineblas de tu memoria negra.

2 The nation is currently in the midst of a major alteration in its geopolitical importance, as oil was recently discovered offshore in apparently sizeable quantities; the United States, among other global interests, is involved in this development, whose repercussions are likely to include the literary.

3 One source, however, gives 1950 as her birth year (N’Gom 81).


5 Shortly after the publication of Ekomo, a second Equatoguinean novel of the post-independence period appeared, Juan Balboa Boneke’s El reenfrento: el retorno del exiliado of 1985; this text reads as a fictionalized autobiography of an exile returning to Equatorial Guinea. Regarding other Equatoguinean female authors, as late as 1993 the only one besides Angüe was Raquel Ilomba, who also was living in Spain, apparently permanently (“Maria Nsue Angüe” 114). For further background on Equatoguinean literature, see Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo’s “La literatura moderna hispanofona en Guinea Ecuatorial” and M’bare N’Gom’s “Algunos aspectos de la literatura hispano-negroaficana: la creación cultural en Guinea Ecuatorial” and “La literatura hispano-negroaficana e identidad cultural en la posindependencia.”

WORKS CITED

—. “La literatura hispano-negroaficana e identidad cultural en la posindependencia.” Letras peninsulares 13 (2.3; Fall 2000): 545-59.