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RAISING ONE'S VOICE: THE QUEST FOR FREEDOM AND IDENTITY IN MARÍA NSUÉ ANGÜE'S EKOMO

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**Raising One's Voice: The Quest for Freedom and Identity in María Nsue Angüe's
Ekomo**

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Abstract: This article focuses on women and their daily quest for freedom and identity in a hostile Fang society in Equatorial Guinea, where traditions, colonialism, post-colonialism and neocolonialism maintain ambiguous relationships. It is a closer reading of María Nsue Angüe's novel, Ekomo, which discloses the images of the changing mode of existence in which women's negotiation of identity conflicts with the social organization. Whether living in the traditional society or modern world (the city), women in Equatorial Guinea, Africa, are confronted with a wide variety of challenges, the most crucial of which include space and role limitations, social contradictions, cultural disintegration, and political struggles. The primary goal of this paper is to suggest how María Nsue Angüe negotiates social identities as well as political and national debates (directly or indirectly) through the representations of the daily struggles of women in a hostile and complex Guinean society. The intention will be to reveal the women's voices as well as the way in which their acts of everyday resistance portray their understanding of the universe, while at the same time they provoke an identity crisis and a crisis in social and political structures.

Although her writing has shaped the contemporary experiences of women in a patriarchal society, María Nsue Angüe's novel: Ekomo (1985), is still not well known, especially to college students who engage in the study of West African women fiction. Perhaps, , María Nsue Angüe is often shadowed, just like the general scope of Equatorial Guinean literature when discussing Hispanic literature or African literature around the world. In the last decade, many scholars such as M'baré Ngom (2003), Adam Lifshey (2003, 2006); Dorothy Odartey-Wellington (2006, 2007); Dosinda García-Alvite (2008, 2003); Mendogo Minsongui Dieudonné (1997); María Zielina Limonta (2000); Lola Aponte Ramos (2004); Baltasar Fra-Molinero (2004); Clelia Rodríguez (2011); Benita Sampedro Vizcaya (2007); Michael Ugarte (2007;)Lawo-Sukam (2009, 2010), Marvin Lewis (2007); López Rodríguez (2008); Mbomio Bacheng (2002), among others, have shown great interest in María Nsue Angüe's work, trying to make her known to a large public as the first post-independence feminine novel of Equatorial Guinea. Scholars from three continents have tried to define this literary work linguistically, culturally, politically, structurally and thematically. However, very few scholars have paid a close attention to female characters in the novel and their quest for freedom and identity in a hostile Fang society where traditions, colonialism, post-colonialism and neocolonialism maintain ambiguous relationships. This article is a close reading of the novel Ekomo, which reveals the images of the changing mode of existence in which women's negotiation of identity conflicts with the social organization. Through the representation and valorization of the daily life of a female character, Nnanga, María Nsue Angüe discloses sites of tensions or clashing ideologies due to the limited social spaces and roles to which women are attributed within the patriarchal Fang society in Equatorial Guinea. Whenever

Nnanga speaks out, she displeases, she shocks or disturbs (Condé 131-2). Most of her acts not only disturb the organization of the traditional society, but also redefine its political, socio-economic, and cultural structures. They resolve and provoke an identity crisis and a crisis in social and political structures. The purpose of this paper is to question the ways in which women's acts of everyday resistance create misunderstandings between their perception of the universe and the "social order". María Nsue Angüe's narrative weaves complex human relationships where issues of race, desire, age, sex, exile, place and displacement, resistance, cultural and political affiliations are raised and given extended treatment.

The feminist/womanist and post-colonial theoretical approaches will serve as the model for this study. Using the 1995 French translation, Ekomo will be analyzed through the lens of African womanism as defined by Hudson-Weems (1993, 2004). First used by Alice Walker, the term womanism now represents a philosophy that celebrates black roots and the ideals of black life, attempting to give a balanced presentation of black womanhood, without the belligerence and ethnocentrism of Western feminisms (Salo 60). Although María Nsue Angüe, has expressed reservations with regard to feminist theories and writings, a womanist reading of her novel, Ekomo, will foreshadow the African centered representation of Equato-Guinean cultural beliefs, and it will valorize the author's choice of a female protagonist in the context of a postcolonial Guinea that suffered terrible transformations under Obiang Nguema's dictatorship. The postcolonial sources will include Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, authors of the highly respected books on postcolonial studies (2000, 2002), but other theorists such as Simon Gikandi (2003), also provide helpful insights. These theorists will help us reflect

on some broken mechanisms that are recurrent in the novel Ekomo as María Nsué Angüe chooses to rethink and remake the woman's identity in the modern Fang society. The focus will be on the value of this piece, showing its capacity to break with old conventional boundaries including fixed identities, and binary relationships such as presence/absence, life/death, past/present, and tradition/modernity. These boundaries raise the fundamental question of human existence in the novel (Lawo-Sukam, 2010), as well as the ongoing tension between African traditional and/or pre-colonial values, and imposed European culture. This study tries to point out one good example of a "colonized" represented as an "active agent" in the remaking and rethinking of culture itself (Gikandi 125), in postcolonial Equatorial Guinea through a female character, Nnanga whose voice represents that of a Fang village in Equatorial Guinea, (the only Spanish-speaking nation state in Africa), described in the novel as a community where the "men speak. The women stay quiet. The youth listen and the children play" (Nsué Angüe 10).

María Nsué Angüe's Ekomo may be best introduced as the work of a writer emerging from the silence. Although literature has been present in sub-Saharan Africa for decades, Equatorial Guinean writers such as: Ciriaco Bokesa, Donato Ndongo Bidyogo, Joaquín Mbomio Bacheng, Ávila Laurel, and others, were still struggling to find their paths through colonialism and later neocolonialism, (Lewis, 2007). The case of Equatorial Guinea was more complicated with ten years of bloody dictatorship (1968 – 1979). Within this time of torture and repression, intellectuals had no opportunity to emerge. As the poet Ciriaco Bokesa (1987) explains, "Silence was the eloquence of the strong [...]" only those who remained silent gained merit, creating out of their silent existence, a

catalyst of themes for their literary future” (97). Some intellectuals such as María Nsué Angüe herself, Donato Ndongó Bidyogo, and others, were forced to live in exile. Most of them went to Spain. Although Leoncio Evita’s Cuando los combes luchaban (*When the Combes Fought*) (1953), and Daniel Jones Mathama’s Una lanza por el Boabi (*A Spear Pierced the Boabi*) (1962), had already stained the literary canon in Equatorial Guinea, María Nsué Angüe’s novel, Ekomo was given a lot of honor for its merit. First, María Nsué Angüe emerged under the totalitarian regime of Obiang Nguema, in a context of competition dominated by males and assigned roles. It is important to remember that dictatorship started in the country with Macías Nguema continues till now. Her novel, Ekomo, published in Madrid (1985, 2008), and translated into French in 1995, becomes the first novel by an Equatorial Guinean woman. In addition, the content of her novel was impressive, especially at this time in the history of the country when the revitalization of the traditional culture was much needed in order to decolonize the Guinean identity crushed by the reality of colonialism. María Nsué Angüe had a recommendation from her father not to “write like a European because her country needed a woman writer who could describe their culture” (Decosta-Willis 286). Therefore, she breaks the tradition of silence by contributing to the literary production and more, by revealing some traditional practices that oppress women in the Fang society. She portrays the vicissitudes of the life of Nnanga, faithful woman in the fight for her identity as a human being and as a woman. María Nsué Angüe’s preoccupation was not to affirm rigid identities in Ekomo, rather, her novel examines themes of colonization, patriarchy and ethnic identity in a hybrid fashion by focusing on the moments of encounters in so-called “liminal spaces” (Bhabha, 1994), the moments when identities compete. Nsué Angüe demonstrates through the

narrative of her protagonist's fight for freedom that identities do not exist in isolation rather in constant interactions, and redefinitions.

As the critic Mary E. Modupe Kolawole(1997), points out, much of African womanist literature has been concerned with change, overtly or covertly. Indeed, as García-Alvite observes: "the very process of literary creativity as an aspect of African women's cultural production is about change" (118). In this vein, the protagonist of Nsue Angue's novel, Nnanga, challenges her village and the readers to actively serve the nation by confronting patriarchal power and laws, and by working towards the country's liberation, in short and long terms. Nnanga's story represents therefore, the fight for freedom in a universe that imposes many restrictions. By retelling the history with the perspective of Ekomo, a male character, the author is able, inside the norms of that world, to take a critical and legitimate look at its patriarchal structure. Ekomo, the name of the protagonist of the novel, is not only the story of this character, hit by the fatality of destiny for his breaking of ancestral rules; it is also that of Nnanga, his wife, and the Fang people. In a village located in the heart of the Guinean forest, supernatural signs announcing a tragedy appear one morning, striking the wanders of the elders and the entire community. Then, begins a long journey for Ekomo and his wife, both, carriers of the wisdom and the science of their ancestors, but without defense against the new world incomprehensible, and sometimes hostile to them. The couple desperately seeks help for Ekomo who brought back a swelling infected leg from the city. Nnanga and her husband go from African witchdoctors (who communicate with the invisible world), to modern hospitals (where European doctors seemed realistic and cold), without finding any salvation for this mysterious disease. To save her husband, Nnanga crosses all the obstacles and taboos,

imposed by her education, both African and Christian. After her husband's death in a foreign country, Nnanga's ultimate "sacrilege" was to prepare his body for burial. Nnanga, the true protagonist of the novel, tells the story with a simple voice enlightened by the story of their childhood and their tumultuous love affair. Ekomo, son of the exorcist, beautiful and dominating, and Nnanga, the dancer inspired by the dove of fire, sometimes violent, but subject to the rites of her community, are a couple out of the ordinary.

This novel, not only strikes out the conflict between tradition and modernity in a society in the process of change, but also questions the condition of the Guinean woman in a traditional patriarchal universe in the Bantu society. Equatorial Guinea, just like many other countries in Africa, was a handicap to the emergence of feminine voices due to boundaries set by patriarchy, then colonial and neocolonial systems. Women's space and roles were limited. Although they were in charge of the transmission of tradition, they did not participate in decision-making. They did not know where their husband went daily, or sometimes, the wedding date of their daughter. Throughout her life, a woman was subject to her father's will, despite the fact that after marriage, she had to obey her husband. The depiction of women in early fictional works supports this position. Sembène Ousmane clearly defines the traditional African woman in his novel Les Bouts de bois de Dieu (*God's bits of Woods*) (1971), through the character of Niakoro, as submissive, quiet, passive, with no right to be in public places, not questioning gender role (17-18). Tsitsi Dangarembga indicates in Nervous Conditions (1990), four places reserved for women including the kitchen, the room, the river, and the farm (15). In Ekomo, María Nsue Angüe adds another place: the "Abaha" (or "abáa"), the common house of the village

where men discuss serious matters and women listen, very quietly when invited (10). The colonial system also brought new values based on the monetary gain, replacing values for collective utilization. The colonial educational system made greater efforts to educate boys, assuming that they constituted the elite prepared to serve the colonial administrator. At the same time, the traditional system viewed education as superfluous for young girls who are called to be dutiful wives, and caring and loving mothers. Because of the space limitation and specific role-play, the men were introduced to the new value system while women were still living in the traditional system. Women became more powerless and voiceless. They had almost no role in the political or social debates, and their silence was noticed even more in the literary production.

Critics have tried to put Anglophone and Francophone African women writers in two major categories. The first group also called “consecrated writers” includes Aminata Saw Fall, Mariama Bâ, Flora Nwapa, Ama Ata Aidoo, Buchi Emecheta or Bessie Head, while the second group, also called “emerging writers”, may include authors like Tsitsi Dangaremba, Amma Darko, Calixthe Beyala, or Leila Aboulela, to cite just a few. María Nsue Angüe, author of Ekomo (1985), and one of the pioneer women writers in Equatorial Guinea, Africa, belongs to the first generation of African women writers, also called the generation of the “mothers” (López Rodríguez, 2008). She is one of the first female scholars in Africa who, known to be best conveyers of oral tradition, were encouraged to perform and put this richness into writing. The role of storyteller has been María Nsue Angüe’s most public role in TV programs and cultural venues in Equatorial Guinea for the last few years, while women in other ethnic groups within the country may

assign a totally different traditional gender role to women. The Fang community has kept the tradition of female storyteller.

The first African female scholars have obtained advanced schooling in the European colonial system, especially the French, British, or Spanish systems. In a conversation with M'baré Ngom, Nsué Angüe clearly acknowledges the complex identity of such writers. She defines herself as being fifty percent pure African and fifty percent Spanish (Decosta-Willis 295). She insists that when she writes, she has her own way of seeing and judging things, which could be interpreted in Ekomo as an attempt to add a voice to the construction of national identity. She slowly comes out of the silence perceived differently by many critics.

Some people find the silence oppressive therefore, not well for a healthy body. Others find in the silence itself a different kind of speech to be listened to, or perhaps a strategy for resistance: "Silence can be a plan [...]. Do not confuse it with any kind of absence" (Rich 17). However, in the case of African women, silence was not a plan. It was not a strategy but a sign of rejection and exclusion from the privileges of public spaces and literacy. Silence was a sign of fear, subject to restrictions in pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial Africa. A Dutch critic, Mineke Schipper (1985), who has been one of the most active in opening the field relies on the metaphors of voice and silence in her chapter on Africa in a volume that she also edited: Unheard Words: Women and Literature in Africa, the Arab World, Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America. For Schipper, oral literature can be considered silence when written is being spoken. She begins her study with a list of proverbs from many poets in Africa, all of which cast women in subordinate roles throughout Africa. The Beti proverb: "Women have no

mouth”, serves as the dominant metaphor for the condition of women’s written literature throughout Africa. Schiopper’s argument seems insufficient as a step toward the contextualization of the field, because of the variety of patterns in Africa. However, it is necessary to notice this pattern of oppression. In this context, the writer has a significant role to play as a mediator and arbiter for the redemption and salvage of a culture at risk, but also a reporter and rescuer of those who have no voice as Aimé Césaire (1971), defined the African writer. María Nsue Angüe plays this role. She gives a voice to Nnanga and those who are trapped in the modern discourse of dialectic opposites such as death and life, presence and absence, past and future, introduced by the complex relationship between tradition and modernity.

As novels by African women like Flora Nwapa, Ama Ata Aidoo, Mariama Bâ, María Nsue Angüe, Trinidad Morgades Besari, and much more, find a wide reception among literary scholars, Okonjo warns against extrapolating from the patriarchal framework of African societies, a reductive view of subordinate women, a “distorted picture of the “oppressive” African man and the “deprived” African woman” (45). In the same direction, when commenting on Western feminist perspectives on Emecheta’s The Joy of Motherhood (1979), Salome Nnoromele writes: “I find it troubling that even as African women are beginning to speak for themselves and to write about their lives, the popular misconception of African women as slaves brutalized and abused by a patriarchal society, still overwhelmingly defines Western critical attitudes” (178). As anthropological work is brought to bear on the themes in the novels, it is difficult for the postcolonial feminist critic to overlook the entangled gender relationship throughout time and space when analyzing the African fiction, especially in the case of what is often labeled as African

“feminist” or “womanist” fiction. When it comes to West African fiction, Ekomo by María Nsue Angüe is perhaps the best example of complexity of feminist readings. In an interview with M’baré Ngom, María Nsue Angüe herself describes her novel Ekomo as a “panaroma” (296) of a Fang life in Equatorial Guinea, but dismisses the reading of the work as a prototype of the nation or as an anti-colonialist tract. She believes that her novel should be read as the voice of an individual and expresses discomfort (just like her compatriot Trinidad Morgades (García-Alvite, 2011), with the label of feminism due to its Eurocentrism. She stresses her multiculturalist perspective as a writer in exile, one who has her own way of seeing things because she is one hundred percent her own person, crossing the boundaries of her “Africaness” and her “Spanishness” (295).

This comment demonstrates Nsue Angüe’s intention to reject rigid dichotomy between the local and global insight used by postcolonial intellectuals who try to place themselves in the “between-two-worlds” frame. She also refuses to indoctrinate the reader with a particular and well-defined perspective on feminism, Equatoguinean identity or “Africaness”. Her anti-colonial attitude was already advanced by Vicente Grannados in his Prologue to the first edition of the novel when he suggested that in the work there is an “ausencia de sentimientos anticolonialistas” [absence of anti-colonialist sentiments] (13). Looking at the careful treatment of the Fang culture in Ekomo, critics have begun to inquire into the postcolonial perspective of its novelistic ethnography. Adam Lifshy, for example, has assailed Vicente Grannados’ anticolonial suggestion. He points out certain textual or fictional facts such as the “extended lament of the death of longstanding tribal and continental orders” (183), which lead to the clear interpretation of the novel’s attack on colonialism. One can easily situate (by mistake perhaps), Nsue’s work within the

context of ethnographic representation to which it in many ways belongs based on the primary modes of this opposition to the Spanish hegemony, the nuanced depiction of Fang village life outside the colonial metropole, and the epic journey into the forest. Ekomo is a novel that demands to be read as a chronicle for social forces such as colonialism and patriarchal oppression, as well as a particular treatment of questions of subjectivity, individual expression, and aesthetics.

The initial chapter locates the novel's setting in a rural village ruled by an elder in compliance with ancestral laws. From the beginning, the reader is exposed to the psychology of the "I" living in a constant state of anxiety created by the vicissitudes of daily experience. The dichotomy between male and female is already noticeable when early on in the novel, the elder is called upon to judge the adulterous adventure of a woman named Nchama, which catches everybody's attention in the village: "For the adulteress, fifty lashes on the behind. And [...] for the adulterer, two goats; thirty thousand bipkwele and a hundred and fifty lashes. Because the woman is like a child. She has no conscience of loyalty" (Nsué Angüe 11). Although the sentence inflicted by the elder in the novel is contrary to the traditions of the Fang people usually more severe toward the adulteress (Ocha'a Mve Bengobesama, 1981), the differing attitude toward male and female behavior portrays a dichotomy well established. This conflict "will lead to resistance by women who are eager to renegotiate their "place" in the Fang society" represented in Ekomo (Lewis 127). The narrator, "I", quickly recognizes her insignificant role and place which the society has attributed to her. She defines herself as a "shadow", a "worthless being before the surrounding events" (Nsué Angüe 14). This "I" could refer to any human being choked by bitterness and incapable of being the owner of his/her

destiny (Lawo-Sukam, 2010:70). The reader is prepared to encounter a distressed character, Nnanga, or a people, torn by the difficult situation of having to make a choice, just like a lost person at the crossroads. What she has left is emptiness and nothingness, and the reader plays the role of a witness or comforter. “I” expresses the bitterness in these words:

Un poignard s’est cloué dans ma poitrine. Descendant en flocons morts, les ténèbres et l’obscurité de la nuit sont tombées sur moi plongeant mon corps transpercé dans le néant. Je suis prisonnière, étouffée par l’angoisse de l’inconnu. Malgré mes efforts pour réaliser si je suis vivante ou morte, tout ce que je peux discerner sont les aboiements des chiens quelque part dans la nuit. (7)

[A dagger has nailed my chest. Descending as dead flakes, the darkness and the obscurity of the night have fallen on me, plunging my pierced body into the emptiness. I am a prisoner, smothered by the anguish of the unknown. Despite my efforts to realize whether I am alive or dead, all that I can discern is the barking of the dogs somewhere in the dark.] (My translation)

María Nsué Angüe discloses the mind of a character aware of the nothingness and hollowness that surround her life. In order to survive, she will have to break boundaries, through a complex relationship between time and space, as well as presence and absence. She overcomes the spatial limitation placed on women, using the joyful memories of her past to escape from the hostile reality of the present. Nnanga feels trapped in the present and rejects the reality, deviating from the social, political, and natural norms. She remembers her past as a young girl when she refused to marry the man her father had reserved for her; she joins the dance group without the parents’ consent, acting beyond

the family norms. The only way for Nnanga to rediscover herself and to affirm her identity is to remember her childhood and the beginning of her relationship with Ekomo in order to heal the present. She uses her mind, her body, and her spirit to fight the oppressing present. As a strategic plan, María Nsúé Angüé discloses the outward and inward journey of Nnanga. This strategy, typical to African women writers as Annis Pratt noticed, helps her escape and withdraw into unconsciousness, “for the purpose of personal transformation” (177). The final point of the novel confirms this position. Nnanga has broken some boundaries as she maybe judged throughout her journey, in order to overcome challenges and to break the curse. She has made her voice heard using the counterpoint of intimacy and distance through the use of the first person, not in the mode of Camara Laye’s L’enfant noir, or Mariama Bâ’s Une Si longue lettre. For this reason, María Zielina Limonta compares the novel to Ngugi Wa Thiong’o’s Devil on the Cross and Birago Diop’s Contes d’Amadou Koumba, which seek to “decolonizar la mente de sus lecturas a través del uso deliberado de la oralidad, y al mismo tiempo conservar la estética Africana” [decolonize the minds of their readers through the deliberate use of orality, while maintaining an African aesthetic] (93).

The voice and life of Nnanga represent the complex definition of identity at the crossroads of traditions and modernity in this Guinean society. Nnanga’s reactions to different situations make her appear as a rebellious character, a symbol of the “negator” (someone who says no to established order). Nnanga does not seem to represent the woman portrayed by the elder of the village as a child who does not know the gravity of a crime. According to the elder, a woman has no personality; therefore, she acts according to the direction of the wind, without thinking (Nsúé 11). Nnanga is aware of the gravity

of her situation. She knows the difference between the past and the present, with an idea of the future of her village and that of Equatorial Guinea as a whole. She views Nfumbaha as the future of Africa. Although his death, just like Ekomo's, made him seem like one who has no control over destiny, Nfumbaha was the one on whom the Fang people counted for solving tomorrow's hardships (99). The death of Nfumbaha is a terrible loss for the future of Africa because of the shifting views required by the change process. As part of this society, Nnanga knows that the move forward is obvious and the old world has almost passed. She defines the new African, full of promises in these words:

L'Africain d'aujourd'hui s'intéresse à d'autres choses. Il a d'autres problèmes, d'autres dieux, d'autres croyances et est en train d'abandonner lentement sa tradition, influencé par cette vague qui traverse tout, cette fièvre du lendemain, tombée comme une épidémie sur l'Africain d'aujourd'hui. (42)

[Today's African has other interests. He has other problems, other gods, other beliefs. Influenced by this universal wave and this epidemic fear of tomorrow, he is slowly abandoning his tradition.] (My translation)

Nnanga knows that this conflict is not simple; therefore, everyone's preparation and contribution are necessary. Self-transformation and empowerment become essential in order to participate in this continuous battle. This may also explain her introductory cry, allowing her to acknowledge her weaknesses and her confusion in the new environment. She begins to question her identity, seeking a better understanding of who she is, what she needs, and what she can do.

A misunderstanding between the “self” and the environment (made of the culture and established rules) may lead to the reading of Nnanga’s acts as rebellious. She comes from a Christian family in which the traditions still have a heavy weight. Her husband, Ekomo, is the son of an exorcist, a well-respected figure in African traditions because of his ability to communicate with dead. Guardrails surround Nnanga’s journey in these two environments. Her dance career and the terminal illness of her husband also force her to go beyond the initial limited space. As a conscious character, Nnanga’s journey through the quest of identity and liberation becomes complex because of a discontinuity between the culture of her home and the culture of others discovered throughout her journey. At the same time, there is a mismatch between her consciousness and the world’s guidelines. Ekomo’s illness helps Nnanga to discover new places and new lifestyles. She learned new answers in order to respond to daily needs.

The behaviors of this protagonist are based on her determination to free herself from any form of oppression. She clearly understands her position at the crossroads between tradition and modernity, between life and death, presence and absence. Therefore, she brings solutions to her needs, not according to an established guideline, but according to relationship among various factors including the culture (background), the reality of the situation, the environment, and her understanding of the world. What some may consider rebellious may simply be a misunderstanding, bringing about a redefinition of race and gender, especially in a patriarchal society where privilege and power are limited to a certain group. In the case of Equatorial Guinea in general, the Fang are known to be the ruling ethnic group during the absolute reign of Macías Nguema as well as that of Obiang Nguema.

In her culture, Nnanga was used to many restrictions. She grew up in this society where the will of the girl is not taken into account. She is also excluded from a part of family authority but she benefits from dignity and social status of her husband (Deswante 152). A new look concerning the woman status and role-play pushes María Nsué Angüe to create a character who fights for dignity. She thinks, just like Deswante, that "the virtue lays on reasoning and the passions raise irrational one" (162). This attitude may explain the decision of Nnanga to speak up when her husband died. She broke the taboo and disturbed the funeral rituals.

Nnanga was accustomed to the directive that women stay silent and men speak. In the event of death, women cry the dead and men prepare the body for burial. The reality she is facing does not allow her to function within this pattern. She has to make ultimate sacrifices to bury her husband. Men are watching her in this town and she has to act quickly before the hospital administration penalizes her for infecting other patients. Nnanga chose to give a proper burial to her husband, building a coffin and digging a grave. These are men duties and constitute an abomination in her culture when performed by a woman. But she was alone in a foreign land playing the role of a caring mother as she promises herself:

Ekomo maintenant dépend de moi, comme dépend un enfant du lait maternel. Je capte son regard et sans lire une question. Ne sachant que lui dire, je peux seulement répondre que lui, mon fils, ne mourra pas sans sa mère à son côté. Je l'accompagnerai et une fois les deux face à la porte du ciel, j'aborderai le Seigneur et crierai avec une voix de mère :

-Ouvre-lui, mon Dieu, ta porte, je suis mère, et lui est mon fils ! (Nsué Angüe 204-295)

[Ekomo now depends on me, as a baby depends on maternal milk. I capture his look without reading a question. Not knowing what to say to him, I only can reply that he, my son, will not die without his mother at his side. I will accompany him and as we both face the door of heaven; I will approach the Lord and will scream with a voice of a mother:

-Open your door to him God, I am the mother, and he is my son! (My translation)

Nnanga cannot break this promise. As a mother, she cannot abandon her “child”. She goes beyond the initial (sometime temporary) role of a wife to become mother (a permanent binding). During this difficult moment of her life, she is traveling with Ekomo, the only witness who could understand and justify her behavior. In many occasions, Nnanga’s acts portray cultural dislocation, not with the intention to defy the traditions, but to find a way through the complex reality. A typical consequence of this dislocation is a change in one’s life and a new reading of a culture. Difficult circumstances have made Nnanga more independent and she was able to challenge her potentials. She has learned to connect identities, through the journey that helps her connect spaces and histories (Bhambra, 2007).

Raised as a girl in a protestant family, she has to sacrifice her faith in order to save her husband whom she dearly loves. Love is one empowering element that she needs. She consequently refuses to live with the man that her parents have chosen for her and runs away with Ekomo on her nuptial night because she loves him. Now that she feels trapped and cannot live without Ekomo (14), Nnanga is ready to do whatever it takes to regain

the love she lacks, since Ekomo, enchanted by a witch prostitute in town, has abandoned her. She knows what contributes to her emancipation and what oppresses her. Love is one of the elements missing in her life to make her feel like a woman. Nnanga accepts to participate in the sacred dance, practice that seemed bizarre to her at first because of the sexual ritual involved in it. “It is not a sin tonight” (29), her mother-in-law said. It is love.

C'est l'amour, l'amour éternel, universel. L'amour dont tu as besoin cette nuit et toujours. L'amour dont a besoin tout homme pour se sentir homme. L'amour dont a besoin toute femme pour se sentir femme, l'amour dont a besoin un fils pour se sentir fils, l'amour dont ont besoin les dieux pour se sentir dieux. (30)

[It is love, eternal, universal love. Love that you need tonight and always. Love that a man needs to feel man. Love that a woman needs to feel woman, love that a son needs to feel son, love that the gods need to feel gods]. (my translation)

Before entering into the hypnosis of this ritual, Nnanga has a clear idea of the choice she is about to make. She crosses beyond the boundaries of morality and perversity as her parents may think, but just to acquire an identity in this patriarchal society. The sacred dance is one of the unspoken practices in the Fang society that draws men and women more closely than any other activity. It involves sexual activities beyond the boundaries of age, gender, class, time, and space. This is the best time when the quick and the dead also interact. The sacred dance can be conceived as symbolic of magical binding and unbinding of natural and supernatural forces in this society (Cox 109). Nnanga overcomes her sexual fears, because of her hope for a better future. Her mother-in-law convinces her that this sacred dance practiced once a year will bring her joy by redefining her identity as a woman, a wife, and a mother, things that match her desire.

What she hopes for and desires, conflicts with the customs or the social organization.

She breaks the taboo at almost each step of her life. Twice when her husband dies, Nnanga violates the tradition. She acts upon desires that do not conform with her confined social functions in a limited space. Despite the disapproval of the entire village, she decides to cut short the mourning period, which has to be observed sitting down.

Nnanga uses her body as a weapon to resist oppression. Therefore, she refuses to be incarcerated and rises to resume her daily activities. Although she agrees to cut her hair as a sign of grief, she refuses that it be gathered up as requires the tradition. As her hair falls off, Nnanga thinks of her destiny and she lets out a victory cry, a woman's last cry on being born of this earth (Nsué Angüe 228). She refuses to carry out certain rituals and her call for rebellion can be perceived as a reappropriation of her body in particular and the female body in general.

Nnanga's psychological revolution is the one that helps her understand who she is and what she wants. She stands up for herself since everyone has the responsibility to solve his/her own problems (161), and fights against things that can oppress her. Nnanga is acting outside acceptable boundaries. Although the idea of dislocation can be both empowering and disempowering, her attitudes converge not toward subversion but a negotiation of social identity. In the midst of distress, Nnanga needed to voice her pain. She needed to act, not as a way to deny the present, but as a means of moving toward the future. Her memories feed her ongoing confidence in Ekomo's faithfulness and her own self-esteem. She renews hope, and her actions are based on her own perception of the universe. There are social, political, and economic factors for which she cannot be blamed, despite the fact that her choices bring difficulty to all. The basis of her choices is

for a better tomorrow. She has a view on the future of Africa and her voice challenges the nation. Her life tries to shape the image of changing mode of existence in which women play a significant role. Her final hymn is symbolic of change to the better.

Although María Nsué Angüe's primary intention was not to criticize her culture, as she reveals in a conversation with M'baré Ngom (2003), the disclosure of all the issues in the patriarchal society draws the reader's attention. Her novel, Ekomo, was published at the time when the revitalization of the Guinean culture was necessary. The need of this culture was confirmed by the building of the "Centro Cultural Hispano-Guineano" in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea, in 1982. The center was extensively financed by the Spanish government, controlled and often directed by the former metropolis. The true first Centro Cultural Guineano, fully financed by the country itself, was opened in 2011.

María Nsué Angüe ceases this opportunity to come out of the silence and expose some of the practices and beliefs in the Fang tradition that were unspoken and unknown to the world. She questions the foundations of the patriarchal society and its effects on the construction of identity. Some of the issues she raises include the powerless social status of women, the discriminatory role-play, the brutal treatment of widows, the harsh conflict between tradition and modernity, to cite just a few. Reading this novel with a multicultural lens, an outside reader may view the disclosure of the patriarchal Fang society as a mean for the author to bring new lights, to contribute to a new social, political, and personal transformation within Equatorial Guinea (already torn between colonialism and neocolonialism or "nguematism"), and all the other African countries who were experiencing almost the same torments.

The novel presents an encouraging consciousness as it develops in and through the writing of the past. It confronts the reader with a clear case in which the construction of gender and identity affects men as well as women. The tribulation of Nnanga after the death of Ekomo is an indication that it is time for a revision of role-play and gender definition, a time for a revision of the social organization and other practices in the patriarchal society. When Ekomo becomes very sick, his last moments take place in the city where gender roles are “topsy-turvy.” He becomes totally dependant on his wife. Nnanga, rather than a man, digs the grave, looks for a coffin. In God’s Bits of Woods, Sembène Ousmane shows the same scenario in contemporary Senegal when, during the strike of the railroad workers, men, rather than women collect water (203), and the triumphant women, rather than men stride on clothes, spread on the ground before them where warriors tread in time past (210). The new social and political consciousness of women goes out of the domestic gender role through a process of trial in some cases, or the disclosure of hidden practices. One of the most obvious intricacies of Fang traditions displayed in the introductory pages of the novel is adultery. In the Fang society, differing attitudes toward the punishment of male and female adultery raise serious questions. As described in some detail by Constantino Ocha’a Mvé Bengobesama in Tradiciones del pueblo fang (Traditions of the Fang People) (1981), quoted and translated by Lewis Marvin as follows:

[Among the most serious “sins” a wife can commit, adultery warrants special attention [...] Naturally the illegitimate and immoral nature of that love made it hateful and deserving of the most cruel punishments that could be inflicted upon a woman: they undressed the adulteress and tied her to the anthill called engokom

so that the irritating stings of the parasites would torment all of her body, including area, exposed on purpose at their mercy. This way, they pulled from her confessions about other sexual immoralities committed in her marriage, that she normally would not have consented to reveal. The severe punishment lasted until the exhaustion of the guilty one]. (63)

María Nsué Angüe purposely inserts this story in the middle of a serious moment in the life of the community: there is a supernatural sign in the sky that deserves more attention. In the abaha (or abáa), Nchama, the adulteress becomes the main subject of discussion among the men. She is portrayed as a “shameless” and “disloyal” woman in the group. The only elder who protects this powerless and vulnerable woman in the community, surprises the entire village by reversing the commonly inflicted punishment for adultery. Nchama is less punished because she is just a “woman”, and “the woman is like a child”. While Ekomo struggles to maintain traditional cultural practices throughout his miserable journey, María Nsué Angüe gives a voice to other characters like the elder who, just like Nnanga, does not see the future of Fang women living in this hostile society. Even after Ekomo’s death, Nnanga still remains absent from decision-making for her future. She is punished, just like every widow and has to go through the mourning rituals of beating and isolation longer than normal, despite her declining health. María Nsué Angüe presents the reader with conflicting visions on this issue. On the one hand, the pastor intervening for her liberation represents the progress and the change, rejecting some aspects of the tradition. On the other hand, the elders represent a strong observance of tradition and attachment to the social structures. These two ideologies frame different outlook and perception of the reality at the age of transition. To the strict observance of

traditions, the pastor opposes a moderate vision, based on a logical analysis of the situation. He does not deny the traditions but he calls upon the judgment of the outcome instead of a blind application of arbitrary rules. A variety of perspectives expresses a strong impulse toward democratic reform as the basis for a new vision for national identity. María Nsué Angüe uses the tradition in her narrative in order to make the past continue to nurture the present and the future. It seems so important to negotiate and find a common ground. The narrative of Nnanga's life suggests that problem-solving strategies should be revised. This perspective requires social and personal transformation and the responsibility of all becomes the main ingredient. This also brings about some changes in the contemporary Guinean political atmosphere. The opinion of all people is valuable and worth recording. Nnanga is the voice that challenges the nation. She disobeys the whole village. At the end, she becomes hysterical and speaks out, fighting for women and human rights, especially in Equatorial Guinea dominated by dictatorship. María Nsué Angüe comes out of the silence and questions the foundations of traditional society and well-established systems of patriarchy. Her novel, Ekomo, establishes the truth about women's space and role in the country's struggle for independence. She is known as the first Guinean woman to break the bind of colonial erasure. As Vidro-Wich concludes, "it takes a strong will to fly in the face of enduring and political pressures" (234), especially in Equatorial Guinea in the 1980s. María Nsué Angüe greatly participates in the process of rebuilding identities as complex as that of an Equatorial Guinea. Her novel shows an inclination and advocacy of national problem solving techniques, reinforcing dialogue of cultures. At the intersection of tradition and modernity, the relationship between gender and desire becomes complex. Women's acts

of resistance should be seen not as a means to deny their past but as a negotiation of an identity shaping the new world. The narrative of Ekomo suggests that all voices should be recorded and taken into consideration. All people must have an opportunity to participate in the social, economic, and cultural development of the country if the sense of belonging to national community is to take root among them. This participation remains impossible as long as some people are excluded from the process based on irrational criteria such as gender, class, and ethnicity. Her novel clearly shows that identities do not exist in isolation, rather in constant interactions, redefinitions and (re)creations.

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