

2011

Review of: Michael Ugarte, *Africans in Europe: The Culture of Exile and Emigration from Equatorial Guinea to Spain*

Aitana Guia

University of Guelph, aguaia@uoguelph.ca

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.asphs.net/bsphs>

Recommended Citation

Guia, Aitana (2011) "Review of: Michael Ugarte, *Africans in Europe: The Culture of Exile and Emigration from Equatorial Guinea to Spain*," *Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies*: Vol. 36 : Iss. 1 , Article 25.

<https://doi.org/10.26431/0739-182X.1078>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.asphs.net/bsphs/vol36/iss1/25>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Association for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies* by an authorized editor of Association for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies. For more information, please contact jesus@udel.edu.

Ugarte, Michael. *Africans in Europe: The Culture of Exile and Emigration from Equatorial Guinea to Spain*. Studies of World Migrations. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010. 205 pp.

This thorough study of the writings of migrants in Europe fills a gap in a much understudied area of history and cultural studies. Ugarte's focus is the literature of Equatorial Guineans and their thoughts on gender, colonialism, and the construction of a national culture for Equatorial Guinea. Ugarte highlights their contributions to Spanish-language letters in the late- and post-colonial periods, under the dictatorships in Equatorial Guinea of Francisco Macías (1968-79) and Teodoro Obiang (1979-present), despite what the writer Justo Bolekia called Spain's "afrophobic intellectual circles" (157). Because major publishers have ignored Afro-Spanish cultural life, acknowledgement of it in the history and literary traditions of Spain has been scant.

One is tempted to say that this is changing. After all, the Moroccan-born Najat El Hachmi, author of *L'últim patriarca* (The Last Patriarch), won the 2008 Ramon Llull Literary Prize. Ugarte claims that authors like El Hachmi and the Equatorial Guinean Guillermina Mekuy, author of *El llanto de la perra* (The Cry of the Bitch), are still big exceptions. While a small crack is opening, postcolonial and migrant writing is still falling largely on "deaf ears" in Spain (158). Even the trickle that is emerging is being treated with a certain disdain. El Hachmi's publisher Planeta and Mekuy's publisher Plaza & Janés chose to market their authors with considerable focus put on their visible ethnic features. Both covers featured prominent colour photographs of the authors' faces and both stories were about dysfunctional migrant families with offensive views on gender and sexuality that echoed ethnic stereotypes the Spanish public has become used to hearing about in the mainstream media.

Unlike other similar recent studies of Equatorial Guinea, such as *An Introduction to the Literature of Equatorial Guinea: Between Colonialism and Dictatorship* by Marvin A. Lewis, *Africans in Europe* focuses particularly on the experience of emigration and exile. This is because, the "line separating emigration/immigration (the economic) and exile (political) is blurred in the light of the political economy of most African countries in the postcolonial period: abject poverty enabled by corruption and political repression" (135). Ugarte

invents the neologism *emixile* to describe the common experience of emigrants and exiles from Equatorial Guinea. While the concept of *emixile* suits the experience of migrants from Equatorial Guinea, it may not be applicable to other contexts because it downplays the dimensions of immigration and diaspora that also characterize human movements elsewhere.

Ugarte discusses how *emixile* writers engage in their works with concepts like *négritude*, a political and literary movement that promoted African pride and a common black identity by those writers and political activists who had been forced out of their countries. Donato Ndong-Bidyogo, author of *El Metro* (The Subway), *Los poderes de la Tempestad* (The Powers of the Tempest), and *Las tinieblas de tu memoria negra* (Shadows of Your Black Memory) criticizes *négritude*'s never-ending pursuit of black and African authenticity and its difficulties in accepting its own limitations vis-à-vis Western culture, particularly in the apparent nonexistence of a written language in Equatorial Guinea. Ndong-Bidyogo defends instead *postnégritude*, "the construction of a national culture directly rooted in universal culture, without having to compensate for the harsh consequences of having awakened from alienation" (32). In the case of Equatorial Guinea, this is a task for Ugarte's *emixiles*, those intellectuals and interpreters mostly working outside of the homeland who have been long-term residents in Spain.

Ugarte uses W. E. B. Du Bois' "double consciousness" to show that "otherness makes for an awareness of a divided self and a double-consciousness that provides a major impetus for writing and other forms of cultural expression" (15). In the hands of exiled writer and journalist Francisco Zamora, being able to look at oneself through the eyes of others makes for a playful book-length essay, "Cómo ser negro y no morir en Aravaca" (How to be black and not die in Aravaca). After the racist murder of Dominican immigrant Lucrécia Pérez Matos in Madrid in 1992, Zamora sets to write an essay that goes beyond the murder to discuss the social, cultural, and historical relations between Spain and its former colonies and how Spaniards are oblivious of their own racism.

"Gendering *emixile*" discusses the representation of women in Equatorial Guinean literature and argues that women, in works such as Ndong's *Tinieblas*, "stand more as symbols than as individuals" (136). Women are symbolic representations of the Mother Africa myth and their victimization is that of the continent. Ugarte explains that "the mother trope is so pervasive in its symbolic evocation of a lost home that one must ask where the Equatorial Guinean writers are who transcribe women's exile-emigration experience in ways that expose women as women and not as myth" (142). Perhaps the only weakness of Ugarte's monograph is that it does not discuss Mekuy's *Llanto* in its own merit, rather than

as an example of the Spanish publishing industry misappropriating African women. Mekuy is one of the few female authors studied in this monograph. In her work, she reclaims agency for African women as women and not just as symbolic representation of home and loss. Had Ugarte broaden his *emixile* focus to incorporate immigration and diaspora, he would have valued Mekuy's work as an example of second generation migrant literature characterized by the author refusing to deal with race and ethnicity and even reproducing denigrating sexual stereotypes of black women.

The strengths of this monograph outweigh its minor weaknesses. Ugarte's refined prose, playful ideas, and timely and pertinent subject matter highlight the value of Equatorial Guinean *emixile* writers for understanding global migrations and cultural cross-fertilization.

Aitana Guia
University of Guelph