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Tinned Sardines and Putrefied Yellow-fin in Equatorial Guinea: Regimes of Food in the Novels of Donato Ndong-Bidyogo

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Abstract

In his semi-autobiographical novels, *Las tinieblas de su memoria negra* (Shadows of your black memory) and *Los poderes de la tempestad* (Power of the storm), the Equatoguinean writer Donato Ndong-Bidyogo describes a boy's, and then the man's, life in colonial and postcolonial Equatorial Guinea, Spain's only sub-Saharan colony. This paper argues that the numerous descriptions of the food encountered by the protagonist immerse the reader in four different worlds: that of his Fang ethnic group in the Hispanic colony; that of the colonial priests and *emancipados* of the protagonist's youth; then the horrors encountered under the cruel postcolonial tyrant, Macías Nguema and finally his recollections of life in exile in Spain. A taxonomy on how food and meals are used in fiction is presented in order to evaluate how Ndong-Bidyogo's use of food in his novels might fit into such a scheme. Finally, it is suggested that food may make a more regular appearance in the semi-autobiographical novel than in other fiction.

Keywords

Equatorial Guinea; Literature; Food; Donato Ndong-Bidyogo

Introduction

This paper focuses on two novels by the Equatoguinean writer Donato Ndong-Bidyogo (1950—), *Las tinieblas de su memoria negra* (1987) and *Los poderes de la tempestad* (1997), where food plays an important role in the narrative. I shall argue that it is through numerous encounters with food at various times in the protagonist's life that the novelist immerses the reader in the very different colonial and postcolonial worlds envisaged in the novels. There are a number of ways in which foodstuffs and meals may be used in fiction and I will set out below how Ndong-Bidyogo's novels might fit into a taxonomy of food in literature. Ndong-Bidyogo's novels have been described as "semi-autobiographical" and this paper will also suggest that it is in such fiction that food and meals, based on the author's memories, make regular appearances.

A taxonomy of food in fiction

Only a brief outline of a tentative taxonomy of food in fiction is presented here, with the aim of providing a framework into which Ndongo-Bidyogo's use of food in his novels may be placed.

Food may, or may not, make an appearance in a novel: the Romantic writer often had other concerns, and their protagonists go through life without any mention of food. However, there is a rich, varied, and rapidly expanding literature exploring food in prose, poetry and the theatre. *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Food* (2018) includes forty-three articles exploring this relationship in many ways, in different cultures and times. For example, Kevin Bourque looks at the eighteenth-century novel and chocolate, while Jennifer Brown explores foodways in the six thousand or so "slave narratives" published in the years before the American Civil War.

The culinary novel, which includes recipes, such as Laura Esquivel's, *Like Water for Chocolate* (1989) or Calixthe Beyala's *How to Cook your Husband the African Way* (2014) is one way of incorporating food into fiction. These works might be seen as the first strand of a tentative taxonomy of food in literature.

Jeff Birkenstein has focused on the representation of what he terms "Significant Food" in literature. He argues that "Significant Food in fiction is food used as a significant plot or other substantial narrative device, where the important concomitant cultural signifiers related to nourishment and the table – or the absence thereof – assume a crucial narratological role" (Birkenstein 2011, 79). Birkenstein examines the fiction of Raymond Carver, showing, for example, how food in his work is used in various ways to explore the relationships between characters in his stories. He compares *Errand* by Carver with Chekov's *Lady with a Little Dog* to demonstrate how Significant Food may function "as an index to character" (2011, 83-84). In another paper, Birkenstein illustrates this by referring to a short story by Lara Vapnyar, *A Bunch of Broccoli on the Third Shelf*, which is about the relationship between a husband and wife. We are told "This wilted broccoli, both appreciated and reviled, sums up their marriage" (Birkenstein 2015, 205). The second strand of a taxonomy of food in fiction might therefore be where the introduction of food and meals assist the reader in understanding the relationships between various characters encountered in the text.

This is in contrast to the use of food in a number of Nigerian novels explored by Jenni Ramone, who has argued that "eating out of a common plate signifies solidarity, kinship and community in Nigeria" and that "the common element in all the texts considered here is resistance, but although the resistance narrative emerges as a defiant response to the ongoing impact of colonialism, these also chronicle grief as the texts foreground the loss of shared food and eating practices" (Ramone 2018, 192). This use of food and the meal as a signifier for a major cultural or political change, not just as an indicator of the relationships of the characters in a text, would be the third strand of a taxonomy of food in fiction.

In some works of fiction, accounts of food consumed may be used by the writer to reflect changes of location or environment. One example is explored by Lorna Piatti-Farnell in her analysis of Katherine Mansfield's fiction (2012): when Mansfield's writings are set in New Zealand, engagement with food is presented in an optimistic light, while a much bleaker view of eating emerges when they are set in Europe with the background of the First World War. Similarly, in the Zimbabwean author Tsitsi Dangarembga's (1988) *Nervous Conditions* there is a marked contrast between Tambudzai's life when she is in her Shona family homestead and later when she moves in with her rich, head-teacher uncle, Babamukuru, in order to attend a mission school. With her uncle's family she has tea (with the use of a tea strainer) with lots of biscuits, cake, and jam sandwiches, whereas at home with her own family, cake is only had at Easter and Christmas and "at home we boiled the milk up with the water ... and then added the tea leaves" (1988, 72-73). The food is incorporated into the fiction predominantly in order to set the scene for different locations and times in the narrative, which helps immerse the reader in these particular worlds. This is the fourth strand of a suggested taxonomy.

Other interventions of food into fiction, such as that produced and consumed at feasts or carnivals, or concerns about obesity, body image and eating disorders will also occasionally interweave with the four strands outlined above. Furthermore, these four strands will clearly overlap in many works of fiction. Tsitsi Dangarembga, as well as the scene-setting noted above, also uses detailed descriptions of meals to explore complex relationships among her characters and to reflect on major cultural and political events. In *The Book of Not* (2006), a sequel to *Nervous Conditions*, Tambudzai is now attending a girls' boarding school where the majority of the girls are white. This is set during the violent struggle for Zimbabwe's independence. At a lunch in the school dining hall, there are long passages in the text contrasting the superior "tuck" brought into the school by the white students with the food brought in by the few "Africans" attending the school. This meal is used to illustrate both the complex relationships between the individual girls and the wider cultural and racial tensions exacerbated by the war (Dangarembga 2006, 35-47). In this chapter of Dangarembga's novel we have a complex mixture of strands two and three of the suggested taxonomy.

Equatorial Guinea: a brief historical review

A brief historical review of Equatorial Guinea is needed to set the scene for an informed reading of Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo's novels. Equatorial Guinea was Spain's only sub-Saharan African colony and it was granted independence in 1968. The colony consisted of part of mainland Africa, known in colonial times as Río Muni and now as "Región continental" together with the island of Fernando Poo, now known as Bioko, the distant island of Annobón, and the smaller islands of Corisco, Elobey Grande and Elobey Chico. The capital, situated on Fernando Poo, was called Santa Isabel during the Spanish colonial period but is now named Malabo. The majority of the population

of Equatorial Guinea is made up of various clans of the Fang ethnic group who were originally based on the mainland. Then there are the Bubi from Fernando Poo and various coastal ethnic groups on the continent such as the Combe and the Bujeba. An Anglophile Creole population, the Fernandinos, speaking *pichín*, a pigeon English, also mainly live on Bioko. This group which had its origins in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Nigeria, as well as among freed slaves, was important economically up to about 1936 (Liniger-Goumaz 1989, 13). The small population of Annobon, the Annobonese, speak a Portuguese Creole.¹

After independence in 1968, the country first came under the rule of an African tyrant, Macías Nguema. There were in reality few real tyrants in postcolonial Africa, with arguably only Jean-Bedel Bokassa of the Central African Republic joining Macías in such a classification (Decalo 1985, 209-37). In Equatorial Guinea, many opponents as well as intellectuals were killed and tortured, and a large Equatoguinean diaspora developed in Spain, and in nearby Gabon. Following a military coup in 1979, Macías was executed and his nephew, Obiang Nguema, began a long period of authoritarian rule. Although less tyrannical than his uncle, he has remained in charge until the present day (2020).

A period of relative prosperity had marked the period prior to independence when the Francoist regime in Spain had attempted to build a model colony in Africa, for example, by subsidizing commodities such as cacao. The island of Fernando Poo, and the Bubi population there, had a relatively high standard of living compared to many other parts of Africa. The economy collapsed under the rule of Macías Nguema. Since then, Equatorial Guinea has become one of the major African oil producers with large revenues. However, the kleptocratic Obiang regime has not spent much of this income on providing services for the people, so that great wealth coexists with absolute poverty. Equatorial Guinea is a good example of the downside of neo-liberal economics.

The emergence of a national literature in Equatorial Guinea

The literature of a postcolonial state is clearly important in the emergence of a national culture and identity. Literature is a vital contributor to the development of national identities and Patrick Chabal is surely right in claiming that “modern literature is best understood historically as one of the most important forms of cultural output in and through which a nation-state comes to be identified” (Chabal 1996, 4).

In general, the postcolonial African writer seems to have emerged from amongst the favoured colonial elite. In the case of Equatorial Guinea, these were the *emancipados*. The system of emancipation had been developed by previous Spanish

¹ For further outlines of the history of Equatorial Guinea see Max Liniger-Goumaz 1989, Mariano de Castro and Donato Ndong-Bidyogo 1998; Randall Fegley 1989; Ibrahim K. Sundiata 1990.

regimes, but it was finally honed during General Franco's dictatorship. The "natives" were divided into two groups; *emancipados* (full and partial) and *no-emancipados*. Full *emancipados* had the same rights as Spaniards, except that under local laws in the colony it was illegal for a black man to have relations with a white woman: on the other hand, a white man could marry a black woman and have concubines, girlfriends or *miningas*. To be an *emancipado* you had to be twenty-one years old, possess an academic title or professional qualification, to have been employed for at least two years in an industrial or agricultural property owned by a Spaniard, with a minimum salary of 5000 pesetas a year, or, as an alternative to this stipulation, to be employed by the state on a certain grade in the colonial service. You also had to be a Christian, preferably a Catholic. It was therefore easy for the *Patronato de Indígenas*, the organisation which controlled the system, to exclude anybody who might cause trouble. Once you obtained your *Carta de Emancipación* (Emancipation Card) you could set yourself up like a white person: for instance, you could buy and consume olive oil and bread and take alcoholic drinks in the same bars as the whites (Ndongo-Bidyogo 2019, 78). You became an honorary Spaniard, pure enough to partake of the bread and wine of the Catholic faith.

Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo in his *Antología de la literatura guineana*, published in 1984, made the first serious attempt to assemble a corpus of Equatoguinean literature. In the introduction, he constructed a framework for the study of the literature which has formed the basis for most subsequent reviews: the journalistic emergence of writers during colonial times and a few works approved by the Spanish colonisers; the appearance of some literature in the Equatoguinean diaspora and finally a period of at least some progress in the 1980s under the auspices of the *Centro Cultural Hispano-Guineano*, a Spanish-supported cultural centre in Malabo. In a later and more comprehensive anthology published in Spain in 2000, Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo and Mbaré Ngom establish a similar chronology: *Situación Colonial y Creación colonial, Los años del silencio* (The years of silence) (1969-1979) and finally *La Literatura Guineana Después de la primera Dictadura* (Guinean literature after the first dictatorship) (1980-1999).

In reviewing the literature of Equatorial Guinea, Benita Sampedro Vizcaya proposed that there should be a "re-evaluation of the colonial library and archive that re-inscribes local agency." She argues that the orthodox archive should be widely questioned to unveil "the ways in which archives – both physical and conceptual – construct, sanctify and finally bury a variety of pasts" (Sampedro Vizcaya 2008, 242). This will have been noted in M'bare N'gom and Gloria Nistal's (2012) expanded and updated anthology, which includes many songs, myths and stories from the major ethnic groups of the country. However, these anthologies fail to include many, and also undermine, works by women writers, reflecting the patriarchal, colonial and postcolonial environment in Equatoguinean literary studies and publishing (see Sampedro Vizcaya, 2020). A further recent anthology by Juan Riochi seeks to correct

this bias (2019). These anthologies reflect an exceptionally rich and varied literature from this relatively small, Spanish-speaking African nation, and also present an increasing corpus of writings since 2000 (see Lewis 2007, 2017; Rizo 2012).

In contrast to Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo's novels, as we shall see, one of the best-known Equatoguinean novels, María Nsué Angüe's *Ekomo* (1985), has little focus on food, and this is characteristic of much of the literature from Equatorial Guinea, as can be seen, for example, in the numerous extracts of poetry, prose, and theatre in the various anthologies discussed above. One small exception is seen in Joaquín Mbomio Bacheng's *El Párroco de Niefang* (1996) where there are descriptions of the exuberant, tropical spectacle of the Guinean market and the purchase of the simple foods that make up much of the Equatorial Guinean's diet. By contrast, in some late colonial and postcolonial literatures, that of Angola for example, food makes a regular appearance (see Cusack 2010).

As noted above, this paper focuses on two of Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo's well-known novels: *Las tinieblas de su memoria negra* (1987, 2000) translated into English by Michael Ugarte and published as *Shadows of your black memory* (2007) and *Los poderes de la tempestad* (*Powers of the storm*) (1997).² These novels were planned as the first two parts of a trilogy; the third novel has not yet been published (2020). In these novels, an unnamed boy, then man, encounter four different culinary spheres: the food of "pre-colonial" Africa, inflected of course by the crops imported from the Americas following the Encounter in 1492; the food of colonial Spain and the *emancipados*; the impoverished and putrid diet of the years of the Macías tyranny, and finally memories of the Spanish gastronomy enjoyed by members of the Equatoguinean diaspora in Spain (often referred to as "The Peninsula") during the 1970s. Thus, the boy recalls both the home cooking of his relatively prosperous Fang family in the late colonial period, and the food of the priests and the *emancipados*. In *Los poderes de la tempestad* the putrefied and nausea-inducing dishes encountered by the protagonists typify the horrors of the independent country under the Macías tyranny, while glimpses of the richness of both his homeland's culinary culture and that of the Equatoguinean diaspora in Spain are presented in contrast to such horrors. Food is a unifying element in these two novels. However, *Los poderes de la tempestad* is unlike, for example, Lucia Laragione's play *Cocinando con Elisa* (1999), which has been imagined as an allegory of the Argentinean dictatorship (1976-1983). In the play, as Ariel Strichartz has argued, the "act of cooking ... represents the torture and murder committed during the regime" and the "space of the kitchen, long associated with nourishment and familial intimacy ... appears an unlikely setting for state-sponsored violence" (Strichartz 2005, 92). In *los poderes de la tempestad*, the protagonist has to survive the horrors of the tyranny himself and the reader does not have to imagine where and when the story is set. I would argue however that the protagonist's

² The quotations from *Los poderes de la tempestad* have been translated into English by myself. I have used the Del Bronce 2000 edition of *Las tinieblas* in this article.

encounters with the horrific cuisine resonates as a kind of allegorical vision of the cultural hell of the period.

Las tinieblas de su memoria negra

In *Las tinieblas de su memoria negra*, Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo tells of the life and tribulations of an unnamed young boy, referred to in the novel as “the boy”, growing up in a village in the continental part of the colony, Río Muni. In both the novels discussed here, the narrative voice interchanges between the first person and the familiar third. Great long sentences merge into long, sparsely punctuated paragraphs, in a long stream of consciousness. Michael Ugarte in a “Note on Translation” argues that “Ndongo-Bidyogo’s use of both the first and second person attests to the intricacies of memory, as he creates an interior dialogue within the protagonist’s psyche, a conversation between his present self, living in Spain and his past self as a lad in the environs of colonial Bata” (Ugarte 2007, 170).³ In *Los poderes de la tempestad* this device continues, with the additional layers of memory allowing an even more complex conversation.

Las tinieblas de su memoria negra is set in the era prior to independence and during the period of intense Hispanicization that was characteristic of the colony during the later Franco years and clearly reflects the experiences of the author during this time (N’gom 2000, 66-71). The book commences at the seminary of Banapá, just outside the colonial capital of Santa Isabel. The boy, now a young man, has completed his studies in the colony and is telling the old rector of the seminary that he has decided not to become a Catholic priest: “*Reverencia, Africa no necesita únicamente sacerdotes. En mis país – continué medroso, humilde – apenas hay médicos, ingenieros, abogados...*” (“Africa does not only need priests, father. In my country, I continued timidly and humbly, there are barely any doctors, engineers, lawyers ...”) (Ndongo-Bidyogo 2000, 17). The chapter ends with the author sitting, on a cold rainy autumn day, in “the great city”, deciding to recall the memories of his childhood.

The unnamed boy is the son of an *emancipado* of a Fang family living in Río Muni. We are told that “[*m*]i padre había abandonado, a la vista de todos pero imperceptiblemente, la tradición para insertarse en la civilización” (“It was clear to all, although no one said so, that my father had abandoned the traditions of his people for the sake of civilization”) (2000, 21). At that time, as mentioned above, very different food was eaten by the *emancipados* and the *no emancipados*, who were thought of as if they were children. In the stratified colonial society, food defined an individual’s position in the hierarchy, so that olive oil meant emancipation and palm oil signified compulsory labour in the colonial plantations. Food and drink were an important part of the coloniser’s identity and when the colonised were admitted as honorary

³ I have used Ugarte’s translation into English. The page numbers in this article are taken from the 2000 *Del Bronce* Spanish edition.

Europeans they were granted permission to partake of the same imported food. In the novel we come across the food of the Spanish rulers, mostly the priests and the *emancipados*, and the food of the “country” eaten by the non-emancipated inhabitants. Much commentary on African literature focuses on the struggle between the African indigenous cultures and Western “modernity”. Thus, on the back cover of the Del Bronce edition of *Las tinieblas* we are told that “...se nos muestra la realidad de un país que se encuentra a caballo entre los demonios del pasado (las supersticiones, los ritos de iniciación, el racismo...) y la voluntad de entrar definitivamente en el siglo XXI junto al resto del mundo” (“it shows us the reality of a country which finds itself straddled between the demons of the past [superstitions, initiation rites, racism] and the willingness to definitely enter into the XXI century alongside the rest of the world”). Marvin A. Lewis writing about this novel similarly argues that “its basic theme is the impact of Spanish colonialism upon Equatorial Guinea and the cultural resistance in that society” (Lewis 2007, 139). As we shall see, food is very much at the centre of these tensions.

Remembering his life in Río Muni, the protagonist recalls how the local priest, Father Ortiz, offers him the temporary privilege of eating dinner with him, some “*gallina frita en salsa de tomate enlatada y aceite de oliva, sardinas en conserva, galletas, y a veces hasta pan*” (“fried chicken with tinned tomatoes and olive oil, canned sardines, cookies, and sometimes even bread”) (Ndongo-Bidyogo 2000, 23). The boy learns to eat with his mouth shut and with a knife and fork, along with reciting the mass and above all “*a ser como los blancos: educado, cortés y distante*”. (“to be like the whites, educated, well mannered, and distant”) (2000, 24). He tries to avoid eating meat on Fridays, like a good Catholic (2000, 35). The Reverend Father, the old rector of whom we learn in the first lines of the book, and who is in charge of the seminary in Santa Isabel, clearly has a similar diet “*Su boca exhalaba un indescriptible olor, mezcla de ajos, perejil y tabaco de pipa*” (“His mouth exhaled a unique odour, a mixture of garlic, parsley, and pipe tobacco”) (2000, 11).

In his life back in Río Muni, the boy, who was now Father Ortiz’s altar boy, is taken through the jungle on the priest’s motorbike. The boy regrets not having worn long trousers as the grass scrapes his skin. Father Ortiz teaches him to recite the Mass in Latin (2000, 23). In school, the teacher, Don Ramón, using his whip made from *melongo*, an aquatic plant (Ugarte 2007, 174), teaches the class to “*voy junto a mi madre España caminando hacia Dios...*” (“I go forward with Mother Spain and onward to God”) (Ndongo-Bidyogo 2000, 25). The boy also carries out the instructions set out in the *Little Prayer* book (*el Oficio Parvo*), including the injunction to say three Hail Marys before and after meals. The children are told how the Spanish, chosen by God as a superior race, came to liberate the natives from walking about naked, showing private parts and eating human flesh (2000, 30, 32). Thus, eating with a knife and fork, having olive oil and tinned sardines, and saying his Hail Marys, he was destined to be an honorary Spaniard saved from uncivilised cannibalism.

The boy's father threw his lot in with the colonisers, but his Uncle Abeso remains firmly opposed to the Spanish and is still a "heathen", a polygamist – and chief of the clan. The day before the boy is going to be circumcised according to Fang ritual, he notices, and wonders why his father is being kind to him, allowing him to have all the baked fish that his grandmother has cooked especially for him. It is served with *contrití* (lemon grass, *contrití*, being a local rendering of the English for "country tea") (Ndongo-Bidyogo 2000, 37; Quilis and Casado Fresnillo 1995, 381). Later the boy is bathed in a strange, thick, reddish boiled-bark bath and then left so that his skin dries in the sun. He is dressed in his *clote* (a percale cloth) and instead of the usual tapioca, or yams, or delicious palm oil soup, he is given a cup of rare tea, tasting first sweet and then bitter. This has a strange effect: his body felt weightless and he feels free of all worries. When his Aunt Te gives him more tea next day, the day of his circumcision, he again feels a certain laxness, and a dreamy feeling (2000, 41). He was not supposed to eat since the night before and the tea seems to make him forget his hunger, although at one stage he thinks of picking some pawpaws. The story then tells of the alarming circumcision ceremony, his blood draining into the soil as the boy becomes a man in his Fang tribe.

By the time that he was eight years old, the boy knew Father Claret's catechism by heart and his favourite book was his *Camino recto y seguro para subir al cielo* (Ndongo-Bidyogo 2000, 56) (Straight and sure path to Heaven).⁴ At the age of nine, he is told he is to receive his first holy communion. The day before the ceremony, he is told not to eat or drink anything until after Mass the following day. However, he wakes up early in the morning and notices that the whole house smells of roasted goat, duck, rice and tomato sauce, yams, and tapioca, while the aroma made its way into his nostrils and almost down to his stomach. Saliva was dribbling from his mouth. He then finds himself fully awake in the kitchen and "*Y me desperté totalmente en la cocina con la boca llena de carne de oveja, chupándome los diez dedos chorreantes de grasa, y sólo entonces me di cuenta de que acababa de atracarme de gallina en salsa de cacahuete, de arroz con tomate y de pato, de todo cuanto había encontrado a mano*" (Ndongo-Bidyogo 2000, 81) ("with my mouth filled with lamb meat, licking my ten greasy fingers, and then I realised that I had just devoured some chicken in peanut sauce, rice in tomato sauce, duck, just about everything I had found in the kitchen"). He also finds he has a terrible thirst and drinks some water as well. The next day, he is worried about the mortal sin he has committed. During the long ceremony he cannot prevent himself from peeing in his pants, and finally vomits all he had eaten the night before – and the communion wafer as well. He is in disgrace, as his friends smirk and laugh at him, while his poor father avoids him for a long time after (2000, 86).

⁴ The Claretians, founded by St. Anthony Mary Claret, were the main Catholic missionaries in Equatorial Guinea during the twentieth century. Claret's catechism was used to teach the doctrines of the Church, in the form of questions and answers, to children and converts.

A similar story is recounted in Frank McCourt's contemporary semi-autobiographical *Angela's Ashes*. This is set in Limerick, in Ireland, in a very different, but still fiercely Catholic country, where the candidates for their first Holy Communion are told they must not, under any circumstances, "touch the host [the bread], even with their teeth ..." (Maher 2018, 220). The protagonist here, Frank, is full of nervous excitement, just like the boy in Río Muni, and when he heads for his grandmother's special breakfast after the ceremony, he vomits up "the body and blood of Jesus" (Mccourt 1997, 143).

Most of the food eaten by the boy's family in Equatorial Guinea is that which is eaten by the Fang tribes. As usual in Africa, it seems to be the women who grow most of the food – we learn about his "poor mother" working in the fields from dawn to dusk, planting manioc, gathering peanuts and plantains, grinding *bambucha* (a staple dish of the Fang made with manioc leaves, date pulp, palm oil, hot peppers, cocoyam (*malanga*) and other greens) (Ugarte 2007, Glossary 172); planting yams and cutting down palm trees (Ndongo-Bidyogo 2000, 73). Elsewhere, we learn of the food eaten at home in the Fang village: yams and "*la sabrosa sopa de aceite de palma que tan bien preparaba mi madre*" (2000, 38) ("the tasty palm oil soup which my mother prepares so well"). While the women grow vegetables, the men go hunting, a very common division of labour in traditional African societies. Thus, the boy accompanies his uncle Abeso looking for animals to eat in the woods, either catching them in traps or shooting them with a rifle. The hunter part of the traditional Fang "hunter-gatherer" society is pictured here, with its rich range of different bush meats available for consumption. Antelopes, porcupines, toucans, boars, squirrels, rabbits, even elephants and monkeys seem to be included in this haul, although no one is allowed to touch an alligator – a tribal taboo (Ndongo-Bidyogo 2000, 89-90).

Meanwhile, when the boy's father brings his coffee and cacao beans, which he has grown and gathered, to Don Santos Casamitjana, he is given food in return: rice and salted fish, cans of preserves as well as fabric, but never money (2000, 102-103). Here the boy's father's produce is being exchanged for some of the coloniser's food so, presumably, his family also partook of these Hispanic provisions alongside their African produce. We also learn that the adults have a frugal breakfast consisting of some leftovers from the previous night, before they leave for the back-breaking work in the coffee and cacao plantations. They work in the fields all day and do not return until the sun is behind the tallest trees (2000, 105).

We are given one other glimpse of the colonial foodways of Equatorial Guinea. The protagonist is sent to a mission school in the district capital, surrounded by coffee groves in which the children work harvesting the beans. In charge of them is Father Remigio María Echenagusia, known by the boys as *Ojo Picante* (Hot Eyes). Every Thursday they set off together in a Peugeot lorry to get food for the boarders. *Ojo Picante* would be given gifts for his "services" which would consist of taking confessions, providing baptismal papers, etc. In return, the recipients of these favours

would fill the lorry with “*sacos de yucca y de malanga y los racimos de bananas y de plátanos y los cestos de cacahuete y algún trozo de abamecono y de pescado ahumado ...*” (“sacks of manioc and *malanga*, bunches of bananas and plantains, baskets of peanuts, pieces of salted fish and smoked fish...”) (Ndongo-Bidyogo 2000, 118).

Back in the school, the women and girl boarders served an insipid peanut soup, every day, except Sunday, when a bit of salted fish would be added. The boy complains to his father about the dreadful food, but he is told to put up with it. Then one day when he has just peeled a piece of manioc, he finds a huge centipede in it “*grande y rojo como un langostino cocido*” (“large and red as a cooked lobster”). The boys scream and retch. The protagonist notes “[*m*]is vómitos se mezclaron con os de mis compañeros de mesa, así estaba el insecto en medio del plato de latón téticamente momificado en medio del envuelto, destacándose su color en la blancura que lo rodeaba”. (“[*m*]y vomit was the same as everyone else’s at the table, the insect in the centre of the brass plate like a gloomy mummy wrapped in yucca, its colour contrasting with the whiteness”). *Ojo Picante* insists that the boys eat up, but they refuse to do so. Our protagonist then wonders “*si sería el primero fang en la historia de nuestra pueblo que comería ciempiés ...*” (“whether I would be the only Fang in the history of my people to eat centipede ...”) (Ndongo-Bidyogo 2000, 123).

In this novel Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo gives us a clear insight into the culinary world of late colonial Africa, where the Hispanic foodstuffs and the food of the *emancipados* is intertwined with the staple diet of Central Africa. It represents the same struggle between the ancestral world of the Fang and modernisation, “the cultural fissures of his native land”, that characterise the novel overall. However, the food is perhaps the most potent ingredient for allowing the reader to inhabit this world with all its tensions, as the reader’s imagined gustatory experiences accompany the boy’s meals.

Los poderes de la tempestad

In *Los poderes de la tempestad* (1997) we pick up the story of the boy years later when he has completed his studies in Spain. He is now a qualified lawyer and he is returning to his homeland to offer his services to his country, bringing with him his wife, Ángeles, and his young daughter, Rut. The protagonist seems to be naively unaware of the horrors awaiting him and his family. Under the Franco regime, all news and comments about the former colony were *materia reservada*, so that even mentioning Equatorial Guinea was a violation of Spain’s official secrets act (Fegley 1989, 72). In reality the members of the diaspora, and Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo, would have been very much aware of the situation, most of them having fled from the regime. On landing at Malabo airport, the family’s luggage is soon rifled through by the militia men and women. Ángeles is sexually assaulted by one, Ada, who reappears later in the story (Ndongo-Bidyogo 1997, 40). Amongst the shirts and soap, the militia find tins of sardines: where the returning son of an *emancipado* brings the food of the colonial priests back to his

homeland. After the trauma of the airport, and several roadblocks, the family arrive at the home of his cousin Mbo in the capital. There, in the entrance to his house, they are greeted by the “*vaho putrefacto*” (putrid effluvium or vapour), which we are told is a prelude to all the disappointments of the adventures to come (1997, 38). The smell wafts from a stew being prepared by Mbo’s wife, Avomo. At the stove, surrounded by small children, she is cooking a “*sopa de palmiste*”, palm-nut soup with some smoked fish. The smell did not coincide with the protagonist’s distant memories of his mother’s soup and he thinks that times must have changed irrevocably. Avomo explains that the fish, that she has smoked herself, was rotten, “*ese jurel que nos venden los rusos*” (“this yellow-fin sold to us by the Russians”)—during the Macías dictatorship the country was allied to the Soviet bloc. Avomo compares this with the good fish that could be caught in the seas around Equatorial Guinea, but the yellow-fin is all that is to be had (it should be noted that *bangá* soup may contain meat and shrimp as well as fish (Cusack 2004, 144)). The nauseating smell of Avomo’s soup is so different from his mother’s palm-nut soup, “*esec melen tan sabroso, y te acordaste que los isleños le llamaban ¿bangá sup?*” (“*esec melen* so tasty, and you seem to remember that the islanders call it *bangá sup?*”) (Ndongo-Bidyogo 1997, 39).

For a brief moment, the horror is lightened as cousin Mbo gets the visitors to meet the lieutenant in charge of the encampment where he lives. Entering a small room, they see beer, cognac, wine—all Chinese—and also what appears to be a plate of sliced York ham, also Chinese. Buzzing around the ham are a number of “*moscardones*”, botflies of a shining, iridescent green colour—and with horror our protagonist realises that he cannot refuse the offering (1997, 42). After a far too long celebration drinking bottles of warm beer, wine, and cognac, they turn to local brews, the *topé* (palm-nut wine) *malanga* (from sugar cane with added roots of *Garcinia kola*, the *oñeñ* tree) (Quilis and Casado-Fresnillo 1995, 418-9, 465) and the mysterious *mongorcóm* (Ndongo-Bidyogo 1997, 43). It is through the descriptions of the food here that the reader gains a feeling for what the Guinean world of Macías Nguema is really like—and also glimpses of the happy days of the man/boy’s recollections of his home in colonial times. The following evening, they refuse another offer of palm-nut soup with putrefied smoked fish and Ángeles improvises a meal based on “*embutidos*” (salami) and the tins of sardines that they had saved from the militias, which they share with the six of his cousin’s children (1997, 45). Living with his cousins proves impossible and they escape from the smell of nauseating fermented yucca (manioc) and move to a hotel. There is little food in the hotel, a single bottle of Chinese brandy and bottles of Chinese beer and some rolls like gigantic *magdalenas* (Spanish lemon cupcakes) displayed on a little plate in the form of a pyramid, as well as some canned meat (1997, 61). In the morning they have a rather sad breakfast of rolls and salami and the protagonist thinks of what he is missing: bread, butter and jam as well as a “*café con leche, el chocolate con churros, o un té, o simplemente contrite*” (“a coffee with milk, a hot chocolate with churros, or a tea, or simply a “country tea”, lemon grass tea”) (1997, 63). Here the protagonist, faced with his dismal breakfast in Macías’s hellhole, is thinking back to the breakfast of the

land of exile, the land of the Equatoguinean diaspora, the breakfast of the café in Madrid, Valencia or Barcelona. And yet again, he is thinking of another world—that of his boyhood in Río Muni and having *hierba limón* with his mother. The tale continues with numerous references to food and drink, the Chinese brandy and beer, the *malamba* and *mongorcóm*—infested with cockroach eggs (1997, 117). Yet a tropical abundance of fruit and vegetables is available in the centre of town, as well as the Russian yellow-fin, and little bottles of palm oil (1997, 123).

There seems to be only one café-bar in Malabo where he can get some decent food: the American bar run by a little old Spanish man and his wife who had remained in Equatorial Guinea when some of the other eight thousand Spaniards fled in the months that followed independence. There he is even able to get some milk and a cheese sandwich for Rut, and some more *magdalenas*. This is where the important men of Malabo are able to eat bread and drink Spanish beer without being accused of complicity with imperialism (Ndongo-Bidyogo 1997, 123-5). The old man prepares canapés with slices of bread and chorizo, small sausages, and thin slabs of a discoloured ham made mouldy by the damp. The American Bar is a form of haven with its Spanish food, but the ghastly world outside is infiltrating it.

Rather unexpectedly, and after many tribulations, the family manage to get a flight to the mainland or Río Muni, to visit the man/boy's parents whom he had last seen when he left for the seminary as recounted in *Las tinieblas*. On arrival in Bata they soon discover there is nothing to eat—except in the *chiringuitos* (small enterprises, bars) in the markets—but these could not be considered because of the flies, the dirt, and the strong and disagreeable smells (1997, 165). There is no food in the silent town, and they pass the night hungry. Next day, they have better luck as they sit on a surprisingly clean bus ready to depart for the interior and are able to buy some fresh oranges, bananas, and mangoes. He would have liked Ángeles and Rut to try some of the other food on offer, for example, some *atangas*—the fruit of the atanga tree, *Pachylobus edulis*, a tree that bears cylindrical, hard, purple fruit with a large pit, usually boiled (Ugarte 2007, 172). There were also plantains, papayas, pineapples, avocados, *malangas* (cocoyams), sweet potatoes, cola nuts, supposedly aphrodisiacal, and *maculas*, fritters of banana and manioc fried in palm oil and other little piles of exotic products, unfortunately covered in flies (Ndongo-Bidyogo 1997, 166). Here yet again, the author/protagonist is recalling the food of the Fang tribe of his youth.

It is not long however, before the very present culinary world reasserts itself, as a *motoboy* arrives—an assistant to a driver of a lorry or bus (Quilis and Casado-Fresnillo 1995, 428). He is carrying a basket made out of *melongo*—a plant used for making baskets—from out of which wafts the strong smell of smoked fish (Ndongo-Bidyogo 1997, 167). They board the bus and travel through “el Continente”, observing as they pass through it the many glimpses of abundant tropical fruits and vegetables. Things take a quick turn for the worst when they return to Malabo. Our protagonist is thrown in prison and Ángeles and Rut presumably are allowed to return to Spain. While in

prison, our “hero” is forced to work in the remnants of the cacao plantations which had provided a period of prosperity at the close of Bioko’s colonial past. Many Nigerians had worked in these plantations but were driven away by the Macías regime. The man/boy’s relatives bring him food in prison and he grows accustomed to eating anything, however dirty, however infested with small insects and germs, as we are back to the “*esec melen con jurel podrido o envuelto de cacahuete o salsa de chocolate picantosa con yuca, o simplemente una crema de malanga o unas bananas o unos plátanos maduros ...*” (“palm-nut soup with putrid smoked yellow-fin, peanuts wrapped in banana leaf or some other tropical leaf, a piquant chocolate sauce with manioc, or simply a cocoyam puree or some bananas or ripe plantains ...”) (1997, 286). At the conclusion of the novel the Fang protagonist manages to escape with the help of a Bubi and an Annabonese, Ndongo-Bidyogo here offering a model of ethnic solidarity (see Lewis 2007, 145-147). In the lead-up to this conclusion, the reader has experienced the real dread involved in living through Macías’s reign of terror. This is done through the author’s skilled deployment of the consumption of food by the protagonist.

Conclusions

As we have seen, food is a vital element of Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo’s two novels. The author uses four inevitably interrelated, yet different culinary spheres into which to insert the reader: the pre-colonial world of the tropical forest—that of the Fang tribes of Río Muni—a world of tropical abundance and happy memories of childhood and food prepared by his family; the food of the colonial Spanish—the food of the *emancipado*—the honorary Spaniard assimilated into Spanish civilisation; then we enter the horrors of Macías’s tyranny and the absent or putrid food of the time, with impoverished versions of Fang culinary culture appearing in relations’ houses or brought into prison; lastly the food of exile in Spain is recalled—the food of the Equatoguinean diaspora—drinking hot chocolate and eating churros back in the Peninsula.

How then do these two novels fit into the suggested taxonomy of food and fiction? The regimes of food encountered would arguably be best located in strand four. Ndongo-Bidyogo uses food and meals in a relatively simple way. While he does not use meals in any extensive way to explore the relationships between the characters in the novels, he does, nevertheless, fondly recall his mother’s palm nut soup, which helps define his relationship with his mother: we have here a small overlap with strand two of the proposed taxonomy. Ndongo-Bidyogo, as the son of an *emancipado*, an ex-seminarian, and someone who has been spent most of his life exiled in Spain, does not use food as a symbol of resistance to the coloniser as Jenni Ramone has argued is the case in many Nigerian novels. Rather, he seems to remember fondly, again, the coloniser and Father Ortiz’s tinned sardines.

Birkenstein points out when exploring two collections of short stories by immigrants to the United States, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Arranged Marriage* (1995) and Lara Vapnyar's *Broccoli and Other Tales of Food and Love* (2008), that the food in this fiction is "the primary cultural representative of both conflict and potential integration between old and new worlds" (Birkenstein 2015, 198). In Ndongo-Bidyogo's novels foods are used as "cultural signifiers", successfully conjuring up the ambience of each section of the novel in which the reader is immersed. Ndongo-Bidyogo, and his protagonist, appear to move smoothly between the "precolonial" world of his Fang tribe, the Spanish colony and life in the "Peninsula". In so far as conflict is suggested by the food encountered, it is in Macías Nguema's tyrannical Guinea, where, for example, the protagonist, by then used to the ways of life in Spain, is horrified at the botflies buzzing around some ham (Ndongo-Bidyogo 1997, 42).

Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* has been described by Eamon Maher (2018, 218) as a "largely autobiographical account". As well as the Communion ceremony mentioned above, McCourt describes, for example, the atrocious diet of the children who are "especially attracted to luxuries such as sugar and sweets" (Maher 2018, 220). In *Angela's Ashes*, in Katherine Mansfield's fiction, in Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* and in Ndongo-Bidyogo's novels discussed in this paper, the fact that these are all semi-autobiographical accounts strongly suggests that the authors find that their own individual memories of food are particularly important in creating varied worlds through which the reader moves in their novels. These are also novels where the food of childhood is often recalled, suggesting the particular potency of such memories. These authors, as Ugarte has suggested with reference to Ndongo-Bidyogo, are in a conversation between their present selves and themselves as a child, or as a younger self. This conversation with their memories is the central focus of these works, rather than the use of food and meals to represent the development of relationships, or tensions, between other characters.

African literature, more widely, especially if there is an autobiographical element, must present a rich source for further literary food studies.

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