

Comics Without Captions

Can a cartoonist help unseat a dictator?

Rowan Moore Gerety

IN AUGUST 2014, TWO ACTIVISTS FROM EQUATORIAL Guinea arrived in Washington, DC, hoping to piggyback on publicity generated by the US-Africa Leaders Summit, a gathering of African heads of state hosted by President Barack Obama. The official agenda included a roundtable with Fortune 500 companies and a White House performance by Lionel Richie. But for Ramón Esono Ebalé and Tutu Alicante, the occasion was a soft-opening of sorts for a comic book taking shots at one of the event's most prominent guests: President Teodoro Nguema Obiang Mbasogo of Equatorial Guinea, the longest-serving dictator in Africa. The book, *La Pesadilla de Obi*, or *Obi's Nightmare*, was illustrated by Esono and written by an anonymous collaborator based in the capital, Malabo. Alicante's role was to help them find an audience. Over the course of three days, Esono and Alicante passed out 300 English copies of the book to aides and bureaucrats on the summit's fringes, hoping to push conversations about authoritarianism and human-rights abuses above the din of billion-dollar investment initiatives and strategic partnerships.

A far more important book launch still awaits him. If all goes according to plan, residents of far-flung towns in Equatorial Guinea's forested interior will soon get to read the book's Spanish version, the first graphic novel ever to be imported in any significant number into the country. The trick for Esono and his distributors—a network of individuals who intend to

hand-deliver copies one at a time—is to avoid being caught.

Obi's Nightmare is a satirical day-in-the-life that imagines what it would be like for Obiang himself, accustomed to unbridled control of his country's economy, to wake up as an unemployed, witless husband in one of Malabo's dreary slums. Early on in the book, drunk after a debauched party in the presidential palace, a clownish Obi drifts to sleep, then awakens to the shrieks of his angry wife, who dispatches him with a kick in the rear to stand in line for water at the neighborhood pump.

For Esono, who was not yet two when Obiang seized power in a coup in 1979, comics are the best and perhaps only avenue to undermine a dictator who has ruled over his country for close to forty years. Whether you want to read or not, whether you're literate or not, Esono says, images can't be ignored. Esono hasn't lived in Equatorial Guinea since 2011. Instead, he has become a gadfly of the internet age, taking the political pulse of his country from some 5,000 miles away, in exile, in Asunción, Paraguay, and circulating his cartoons and commentary on Facebook.

Equatorial Guinea is made up of a cluster of volcanic islands off the coast of Cameroon and a swath of mainland tropical forest carved from the coastline of Gabon, in West Africa. Like an asterisk on the fringes of the French and British empires, it is all that remains of Spain's grandiose eighteenth-century plans for colonizing



West Africa. All the islands put together make up a country about the size of Massachusetts, with a population of 800,000—fewer inhabitants than Jacksonville, Florida.

But Equatorial Guinea is also Africa's third largest oil exporter, trailing only Nigeria and Angola. And oil, more than anything else, has helped cement Obiang's tenure as the continent's longest-standing ruler. Oil comprises close to 90 percent of Equatorial Guinea's GDP, and has given Obiang powerful allies among Washington lobbyists and CEOs in Houston and Madrid. Oil has bought the cooperation of bankers and financed a long-running campaign to burnish Obiang's image abroad; it has paid for the services of foreign mercenaries who advise the president on security; and most importantly, it has allowed Obiang to anchor himself at the center of a vast web of patronage that controls the national economy. With *Obi's Nightmare*, Esono hopes to push his countrymen to see a different president than the one they've grown up fearing, to show the man—whom national radio broadcasts describe as being “like God in heaven”—in all the obscene megalomania his presidency has inflicted on the country.

In Equatorial Guinea, Esono's work was focused on the bottled-up, demeaning experience of living under Obiang's heel, testimony to the plight of Equatoguineans in the grip of a repressive dictatorship. But soon after he moved to Paraguay, in 2012, Esono launched a blog named for an imaginary news network, LocosTV, and began focusing instead on Obiang himself. The government blocked LocosTV—along with another site devoted to Esono's art—almost as soon as it appeared online. Tutu Alicante, a fellow exile and a supporter of Esono who runs the non-profit EG Justice, based in Tampa, Florida, assured me that it remained accessible on government networks: “When you publish something about Obiang, there's no doubt that Obiang is reading it.”

Much of Esono's work today is strident, lewd, political farce, with captions and comic dialogue often provided by a network of anonymous contributors working from within Equatorial

Guinea. “Equatorial Guinea is a country with no media,” Esono told me. Even the state-run daily, in fact, sometimes falls as much as five months behind. “So people use word of mouth; we call it *kongosa*.”

Kongosa came to Equatorial Guinea on the lips of laborers from Nigeria and Sierra Leone who worked in the colonial cacao plantations. In its original form, from the Ghanaian language Twi, the word means “deceit” or “hypocrisy.” In Malabo, it means “gossip.” To protect his sources and obscure the flow of information, Esono has often waited a month or so before publishing revelations online. Even so, LocosTV was not without risk for those in Equatorial Guinea. Much of the country still lives in paralyzing remembrance of the era known as La Triste Memória, or Sad Memory, which dates from the country's independence in 1968 to 1979, during which Obiang's uncle, Macías Nguema, was president. It was a reign of terror that saw a third of the country's population killed or forced into exile. All the while, Obiang served as his uncle's enforcer. At the now-infamous Black Beach prison, he oversaw torture and extrajudicial murder on an industrial scale.

Yet it isn't fear of retribution, but rather the crassness of Esono's work that has driven many of his collaborators away. Esono takes delight in the demeaning possibilities of his medium, often adorning Obiang with feces and extra penises in the wrong places. And while he views this as deadly serious work—art in the service of a cultural revolution—his aesthetic hasn't always jibed with the vision of other dissidents in Malabo, and his network of collaborators inside the country has dwindled from twenty to six in the space of a few years. For now, Esono says, “I'm the only madman at this party.”

DICTATORS AND THEIR INNER CIRCLES HAVE ALWAYS made easy targets for cartoonists. During World War II, in an illustration titled *The History Lesson*, Soviet cartoonist Boris Yefimov drew a cowering, snot-nosed Adolf Hitler standing before a looming Napoleon Bonaparte inside a Moscow shop window, as if to ask, “How could

a little boy like you hope to invade a big country like this?” In Yefimov's rendering, Hitler's right-hand man, Hermann Göring, became morbidly obese, his pockets filled with blood-soaked coins. A 1941 Yefimov cartoon with the caption, “What is an Aryan? He is handsome as Goebbels,” showed the Nazi chief of propaganda as a balding, fork-tailed rodent standing on a soapbox. Hubris, greed, machismo: What finer ingredients for satire could a cartoonist ask for? Obiang and his entourage are especially good for the medium.

The Obiang family has ruled Equatorial Guinea since independence, running the country like a family business. According to the US Department of Justice, Obiang personally controls bank accounts where oil companies deposit royalties paid to the government for operating wells in the Gulf of Guinea, worth some \$700 million in 2012. His younger son Gabriel is Minister of Mines, Industry, and Energy, and his eldest, Teodoro Nguema Obiang Mangue, whom friends call Teodorín, is the country's vice president, and is known by Equatoguineans as the “minister of chopping down trees,” perhaps because Teodorín also owns the only company with a license to export timber. The family has a near monopoly on hotels, telecommunications, electricity, construction, and grocery stores, while the government controls the country's media outlets.

With so much wealth concentrated in such a close-knit family, Obiang has even managed to insulate himself from the volatility of the commodities market. As oil prices tumbled to \$50 a barrel in 2014, Obiang was gearing up to host Africa's Cup of Nations. “Let those who have the means help the poor,” he told reporters just before the start of the soccer tournament. “Myself, I bought 40,000 tickets.”

Teodorín is a bachelor whose extravagant tastes have inspired derisive monikers in newspapers around the world, from “spoiled brat” (*El País*) to “lavish looter” (*The Independent*) and “unruly playboy” (*Mail & Guardian*). A Department of Justice investigation into his US assets lists a \$30 million mansion in Malibu, California, \$494,000 in Michael Jackson mem-

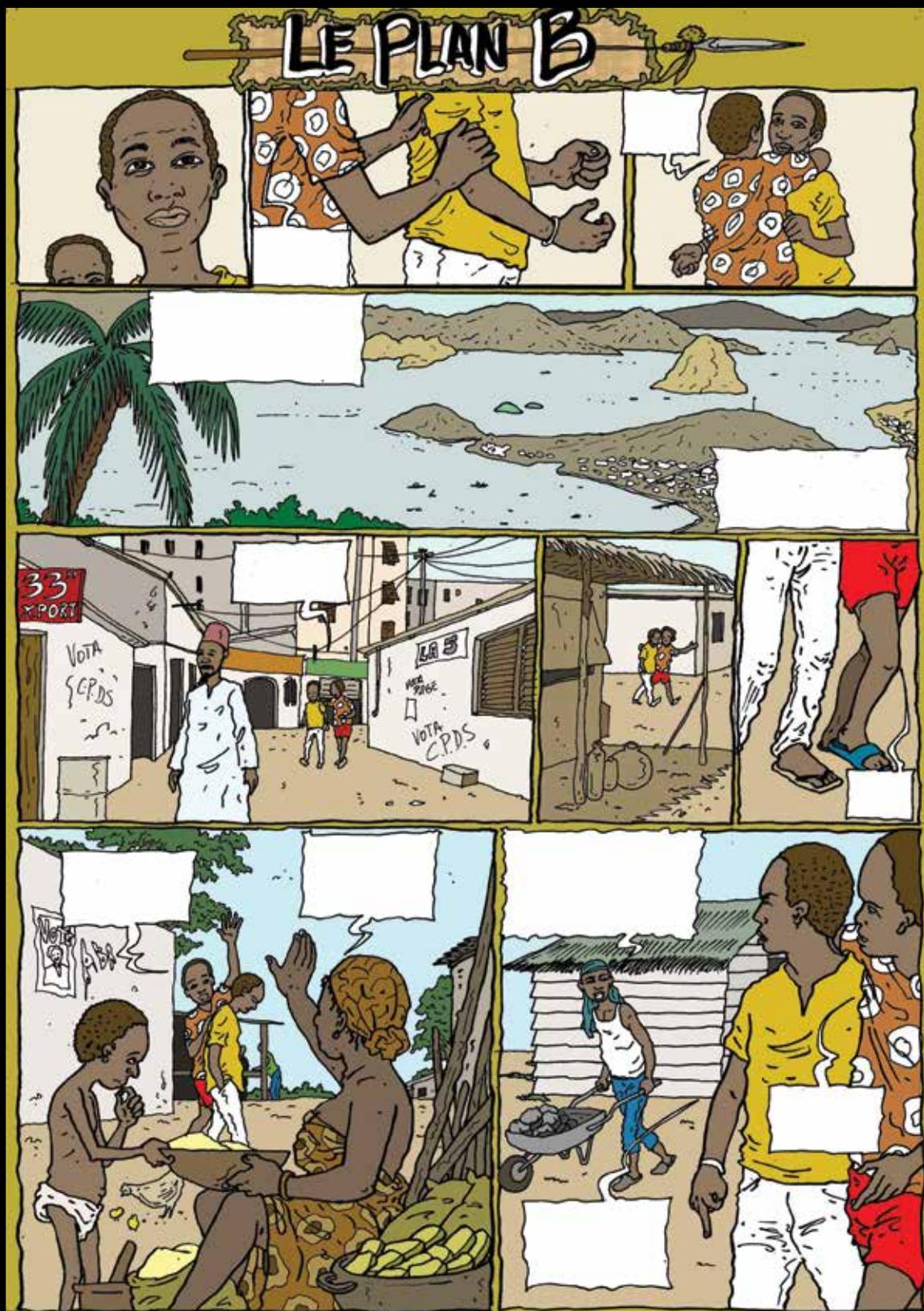
orabilia, and a car collection including “seven Ferraris, five Bentleys, four Rolls-Royces, two Lamborghinis, two Mercedes-Benzes, two Porsches, two Maybachs, and an Aston Martin,” accumulated at a time when his official salary was less than \$50,000 a year. In October 2014, the Department of Justice reached a settlement with Teodorín that allowed him to keep Michael Jackson's crystal-encrusted glove so long as he agreed to forfeit more than \$30 million of property he held in the US.

When commercial oil production began in earnest, in 1995, Obiang's regime was teetering on the brink of irrelevance, an international pariah whose long record of human-rights abuses lacked the mitigating influence of strategic or economic interests for Western governments. The US closed its embassy there in 1995; and after nearly 200 years of colonial rule, Spain had finally become a vocal supporter of multi-party democracy in this former territory.

All the while, the country's economy was in a sustained freefall, crawling along on the residual strength of decrepit colonial cacao plantations. On the island of Fernando Po, once thought to produce the best chocolate in the world, the harvest fell by almost 90 percent in the decade after independence.

Under Obiang, as under his uncle before him, the regime relied on forced labor by political prisoners to beat back the jungle as it gradually reclaimed groves of century-old cacao trees. In 1983, a Spanish diplomatic mission reported on the silver lining this arrangement afforded the dictatorship: By transferring dissidents to labor camps in the mountainous cacao plantations, it could factually claim that “there are no political prisoners in Equatoguinean jails.”

But in 1994, a small company called Walter International struck black gold in the Gulf of Guinea, revealing huge offshore reserves. According to World Bank figures, Equatorial Guinea's GDP grew by an average of more than 43 percent a year over the next decade, with oil representing close to 100 percent of the country's exports. Texas oilmen flocked to Equatorial Guinea by the thousands, and found



other than the Cockroaches?" Esono received death threats on social media as soon as he showed the work publicly in Malabo. Nonetheless, showing it felt liberating. *Even if they succeed*, he remembers thinking, *I don't want to continue to live as a rat.*

Esono's was a childhood of relative privilege in a country where privilege could only be obtained by allegiance to the regime—maintained, in his family's case, through his father's posts in the upper echelons of the civil service—as, variously, director of customs, director of the tax administration, and director of the Equatoguinean Olympic Committee. Nevertheless, Esono maintains that before oil, privilege of any kind was scant.

He grew up as one of the eldest of twenty-seven children (his father has several wives) in the island capital of Malabo, separated from the rural mainland by 150 miles of Atlantic Ocean. He lived with his mother and seven full siblings in the Los Angeles section of the city, a neighborhood of densely packed stucco triplexes built for the families of government workers soon after independence. The houses were crowded and poorly ventilated, and Esono spent his childhood mingling with neighbors in the streets or on the beach. His friends were drawn from every stratum of Malabo's rigid social hierarchy: from a school near the presidential palace dominated by children of ministers and top government officials from the Fang ethnic group—which includes Obiangs and Esonos both—and from the pidgin-English-speaking families who hailed from a second island, Fernando Po, and who worked as waiters, maids, and laborers for the ruling class.

His father was an intermittent presence in the house, spread thin in his attempt to attend to the demands of his work alongside those of such a large family. When he made trips to Spain on government business, he returned with translations of comic books from the US, and volumes of *Mortadelo and Filemón*, a Spanish series parodying the paranoid world of international intelligence operatives. Esono was immediately enthralled. Out-of-town visitors

in his father's orbit soon brought more comics as gifts. He remembers learning to read by carrying comic books to the beach, where he'd sit on the shore matching words to the action in each frame. At school, boys with family and friends in Europe shared their volumes of *As-térix* and Hergé's *The Adventures of Tintin*, and Esono's obsession grew to the point that he stole the books he discovered at friends' houses.

"Black people with fat lips just made us laugh," Esono says now, recalling the colonial images of Africans he absorbed from books like *Tintin au Congo*. "I grew up in a colony! It's only later you start to realize it's racist. Tintin was the same thing as Rambo, the same thing as Schwarzenegger to us."

Esono began to draw superheroes when he was six or seven years old, imitating the shading and coloring techniques he saw in Batman and Spiderman comics and producing penciled versions of characters from Japanese manga. At thirteen, his father told him to stop drawing and start studying. Instead, Esono searched out comics wherever he could, thumbing through the meager collection of European comics in the library at the Spanish Cultural Center in Malabo. It was there, too, that he found the first formal affirmation of his talents, when he entered contests put on by the likes of UNICEF. At sixteen, his hopes buoyed by prizes in several local art competitions, Esono left school and turned to drawing full-time.

The trouble was, there was no such thing as drawing for a living in Equatorial Guinea. It is a country without a publishing industry. There are few books, and no comics to speak of, Esono says, outside the bubble of the French and Spanish cultural centers. In 2009, Esono did an interview for the website *Africultures.com*, which ran under the melancholy headline, "The Solitude of a Caricaturist in Equatorial Guinea." "There aren't really any illustrators in Equatorial Guinea," he told the critic Christophe Cassiau-Haurie. When I asked him about it five years later, Esono revised his assessment only slightly to include a man who picked up the hobby of drawing comics in Spain before returning to live in Malabo. "And even he won't

talk about it,” Esono chuckled. “He makes his living in the oil industry.”

BUNMI OLORUNTOBA, A NIGERIAN POLITICAL CARTOONIST and critic based in Washington, DC, says that all of Africa suffers from some version of what Esono encountered as he tried to turn comics into a profession. As a kid in Lagos, Oloruntoba read American comics that were stuffed into the nooks and crannies of shipping containers used to import secondhand cars and sold from the back of trucks parked at the makeshift markets beneath Lagos’s highway overpasses. He began drawing editorial cartoons for newspapers partly because there was no comic-book industry to turn to.

“There’s just not much economic activity around the medium,” Oloruntoba says. “Once you take it out of the newspapers, that distribution model doesn’t exist in any viable form. It’s not prestigious, you’re not going to make money from it, so it’s a pretty rare thing to do. And the smaller the country, the less of that kind of thing you’re going to see.”

More than eighty years after the first copies of *Tintin au Congo* landed in Kinshasa, the Democratic Republic of the Congo remains, with the exception of South Africa, the closest thing there is to a continental comic-book hub. Originally commissioned by a Belgian newspaper as a kind of colonial propaganda for kids, *Tintin au Congo* also sowed the seeds of a domestic comic-book industry in the DRC, and it continues to sell more copies there than anywhere else in the world. “Even though Hergé’s work has a lot of racist elements to it, the pride of the book—this global phenomenon—it has created a culture in the DRC. No other African country has that,” Oloruntoba says.

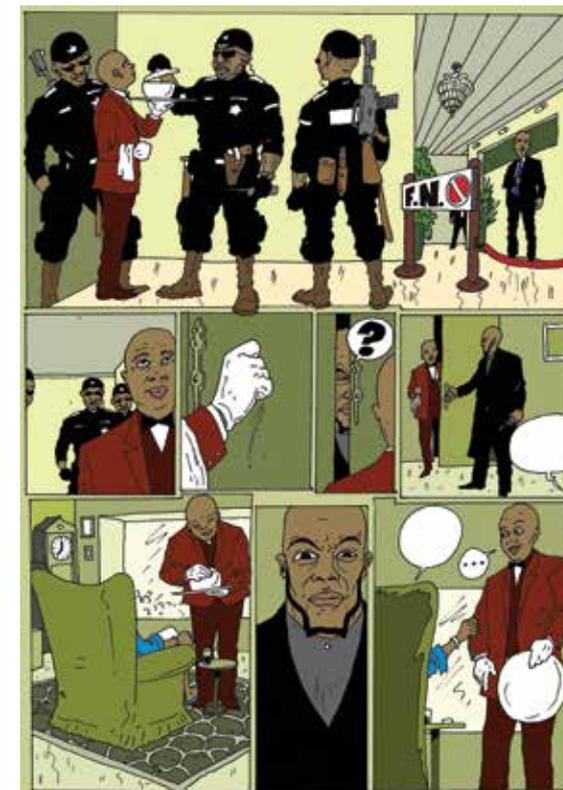
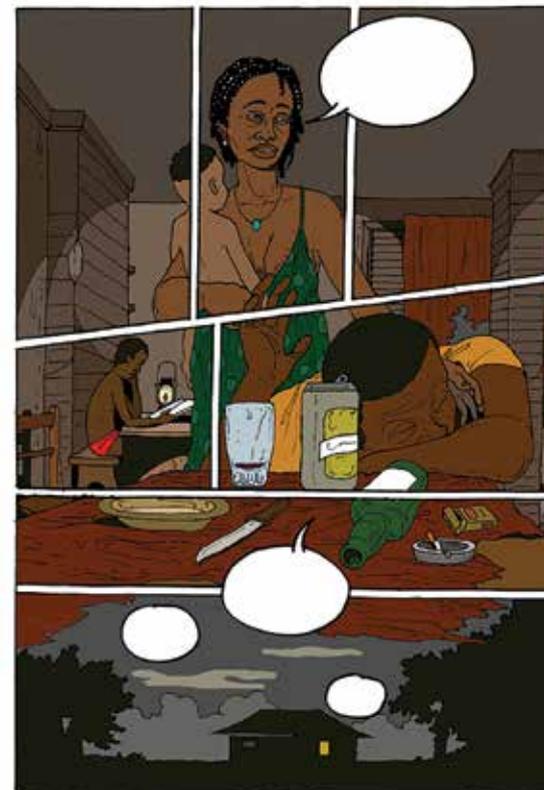
Even in the DRC, the comic-book industry gets its lifeblood from the support of its former colonial overlord. Barly Baruti, the best-known Congolese comic artist, and part of the vanguard of African authors who published graphic novels in the 1980s, served two apprenticeships at Hergé’s studio in Belgium. This kind of pattern can be seen throughout the postcolonial

world: American funding of grassroots activists in Haiti, British support of opposition parties in Burma, French encouragement of dissidents in Senegal. Artists and dissidents so often derive support from the colonial powers responsible for the political dynamics they fight to upend.

Today, a French company, L’Harmattan, still publishes the lion’s share of African comic books, and Franco-Belgian enthusiasm for the art form has been mirrored in patterns of financial support and cultural exchange around the continent. “It makes for a very interesting map,” Oloruntoba says, “to say, okay, in which countries do you see real comic-book activity taking place? When you do not have a comic book industry of your own, those colonial ties that promote comic-book production, they’ve been critical—in who becomes a professional comic-book artist, who gets to travel out and become part of an industry elsewhere, because you need a lot of mentoring and help to do that.”

ESONO LEFT EQUATORIAL GUINEA FOR THE FIRST TIME at age twenty-four, with an invitation to take part in an “African Comics Day” sponsored by the European Union in neighboring Gabon. There, marooned in a sea of artists from Francophone countries, he bonded immediately with Pahé, a political cartoonist from Gabon who shares Esono’s native language, Fang. Pahé’s work was nothing short of an epiphany for Esono. He drew diplomats and soldiers, and used scenes from his own life, in a rural town called Bitam, as a backdrop for stories about corruption and small-town politics. “It was the first time I thought of drawing something other than characters like Tarzan, or Superman,” Esono says.

Esono returned to Malabo resolute that he would no longer “draw bullshit.” Inspired by the clumsy French pronunciation of his first name—Ha-mon, not Ramón—he adopted the moniker Jamón y Queso, or “ham and cheese,” which he still uses today. For a time, Pahé and Esono coedited an online comics magazine called *Parajaka* with the support of the French Cultural Center in Malabo. The aesthetic was



whimsical and slapstick, full of raunchy punch lines and seldom approaching political subjects with more than a quip on the incompetence of the police. Just seven months after its inception, *Parajaka* was cut short by the death of its strongest supporter at the cultural center. When the last issue appeared in March 2006, it still had more in common with the fable-universe of *Astérix and Obélix* than with Esono’s later work.

Esono continued to cast about for a way to turn his art into a livelihood. He got graphic-design work here and there through connections at the Spanish and French cultural centers; occasionally, he managed to do what Oloruntoba calls “development comics,” public-service-minded illustrations that are the mainstay of comic-book artists all over Africa. Esono illustrated a corporate social-responsibility campaign for the oil contractor Bechtel; he provided images for AIDS-education billboards and banners printed by UNICEF. He also painted graffiti murals for bars and restaurants, and enlivened the children’s bedrooms and back patios of bourgeois homes around

the capital with beach scenes and jungle frescoes. In a small country of such concentrated wealth, his résumé inevitably came to include jobs decorating for members of the Obiang family itself.

Esono’s first attempt at a public exhibition in Equatorial Guinea came in 2007, when he asked the director of the Spanish Cultural Center, Gloria Nistal Rocique, for permission to show a fifteen-page spread he called *Los Asesinos de Mi Inteligencia* (*The Assassins of My Intelligence*), an allegory about the sorry state of political expression in Equatorial Guinea. The story follows a teenager without work as he receives a street-level education in the realities of the local economy. Feeding him cigarette after cigarette on a stoop in a Malabo slum, a hustler presents the boy with his options: travel illegally to Spain in search of a better life, or continue to idle away your days in Malabo without hope of employment. All around him, the teen hears muted groans of frustration at Equatorial Guinea’s entrenched political establishment, and catches snippets of veiled conversation reflecting the hustler’s pessimism



about the country: all this discontent, yet no one dares speak out.

Rocique's response came two days later. "We won't be able to use this text," she told him. It wasn't the political content of the piece that offended her, but the errors in spelling. "Part of the mission of the cultural center is to promote the Spanish language," Esono recalls her saying. To show the piece, "all you'd have to do is erase the words and try again." And then there was the matter of the title—*Los Asesinos de Mi Inteligencia?*

The subtext was clear enough to Esono. But he couldn't stomach going along with what he saw as veiled censorship. Spain was an important backer of free expression in the country, but only to a point. The cultural center wasn't willing to "go big," as Esono put it. "If I changed the text, [Rocique] won," he told me. Even so, he wanted badly to be able to show his work in public, so he took the panels home and set to work cutting the text bubbles out with an Exacto knife. "If you try to shut me in, I'll look for a hole to stick my head out," Esono says. Rather than rewrite the text, he simply left the bubbles blank.

At the exhibit, people were baffled to see precise paper cutouts where the text ought to have been. "At the opening," Esono recalls, "people kept coming up to me and asking for explanations." Something was lost, but something was gained, too. Readers reacted viscerally, feeling some of the frustration Esono took such pains to evoke in his protagonists—their incomprehension, their voicelessness.

From then on, Esono embraced the soft censorship imposed on him at the cultural center. He drew a series of comics where imagined dialogue was replaced simply with ovals of blank space. In *Ayoko*, Esono follows a young girl from Benin on her path from primary-school pupil to prostitute. In a dream-like opening sequence, *Ayoko* takes a bite from an apple imprinted with the map of the world, and flies through the clouds on a book that morphs gradually into a bed; we're left to imagine the words exchanged between the girl's madam and the Equatoguinean soldier who refuses to pay for their tryst.

The wrong caption could turn a scene from *Ayoko* into soap opera, but the omission lends a voyeuristic, documentary quality to work that might otherwise come across as noir fiction or *Alice in Wonderland*-style surrealism.

THERE'S A SAYING ON THE STREETS OF MALABO about the way people engage with politics there. "Todos están en su propia esquina," people say. Everyone is in his own corner. Esono's captionless scenes evoke a similar feeling: a startling inability to parse the motivations and passions of others in a world devoid of conversation. For Esono, the muted comics are a commentary on feelings of powerlessness felt beyond the borders of his tiny country.

When he visited Mozambique in 2011, Esono was transfixed and enraged by the plight of Maputenses waiting for minibuses, or *xapas*, downtown. At a handful of stops, orderly queues fill whole city blocks and passengers wait as much as an hour to get a ride home at rush hour. At most stops, though, riders must vie for their spot in a scrum that coagulates at the open doors of any stopped vehicle.

"It's inhumane!" Esono exclaimed repeatedly. "It's inhumane!"

In 2006, he'd enjoyed a brief honeymoon supplying editorial cartoons to Equatorial Guinea's anemic opposition press, *La Gaceta*, which was drafted and printed in Spain when funds allowed. For one, he chose a similar scene, drawing passengers packed into a teetering minibus "like sardines in a can," Esono remembered, with arms and legs protruding from every window. As the minibus rolls to a stop, the driver shouts to a man on the sidewalk, "Go ahead, you can get in!" The caption was untempered Esono: "The government will do nothing for this situation. So what can we do? Either we demand our rights, or we accept that we are sheep." As soon as the cartoon appeared in print, *La Gaceta's* editor approached Esono to say they could no longer work together. "My problem is, unfortunately or fortunately, I have to say it all," Esono says.

The regime's resistance to all manner of social commentary insured that art like Esono's

was without an outlet in Equatorial Guinea. Yet, as he saw in Mozambique, a dignified system of public transit requires more than the absence of a prickly autocrat—it requires a well-funded, responsive government. “Elsewhere, if you have a problem, at least you’ll find someone to listen to you,” Esono said, throwing up his hands. “In Africa, if you have a problem, you swallow it.”

MANY OF ESONO’S MOST DISTURBING WORKS ARE inspired by personal experience. In Maputo, he showed a series titled *Bozales* (“muzzles”) that blends the stark expressions of the black-and-white characters populating R. Crumb comics with the saturated, noir feel of Alan Moore’s *Watchmen*. In each of fifteen panels, elaborate muzzles—complete with tubes, wires, and chains courtesy of the machinery of repression and censorship in Equatorial Guinea—are affixed to the Catholic Church and the Lady of Justice with Esono’s distinctly heavy-handed touch.

One, inked on a rainbow backdrop, shows a muscular, light-skinned man in a garter belt and stockinged sleeves, hands cuffed and hoisted overhead. It’s a portrait, Esono explained, of a good friend in Malabo, the only openly gay man he knew in Equatorial Guinea. Dozens of fish hooks are anchored in the man’s torso, each line marked by a small blank card, awaiting a fitting label. In another, a muzzled doctor holds a ghost-white infant aloft by one foot, the child’s muzzled mother looking on. Soon the newborn, too, will be muzzled for the first time. Once, in Malabo, Esono had a child who was stillborn in the car on the way to the hospital; they were met by brusque, dismissive hospital staff who mutilated the baby’s body as they crammed it into a shoebox. These are the kinds of experiences one must “swallow” in Equatorial Guinea, or in Esono’s case, reproduce as art.

The work Esono produced in his last months in Equatorial Guinea climbed to new heights of raw, artistic anger, and imbued *Dictadores* and *Bozales* alike with a new form of emotional power. But as Esono continued to gain international recognition for his work—by 2011, his

art had been shown in Spain, the Netherlands, Algeria, and Nigeria—his activism inside the country became more and more dangerous. When Esono’s Spanish wife got a job offer in Paraguay, they jumped at the chance to move.

Esono’s political separation from home has hardened since he’s been gone. Though he’s continued to do a measure of graphic-design work for businesses and non-profits in Malabo, he says people there have been unable to send him money directly. In letters, siblings urge him “not to come back home, because they are waiting for you.” Only Esono’s father persists in encouraging his son to repent. “My father still wants me to beg forgiveness and write letters to the Embassy,” Esono says. “I know my family’s been threatened somehow.” At long last, the force of Esono’s activism seems to have outweighed the political protection his father could offer for most of his life at home. In 2013, Esono’s father was summarily dismissed from his post as Minister of Public Administration. While government documents still list Tomás Esono Ava Abuy as a prominent member of the government, Esono’s family tells him that his father has not been working. (He and his father do not communicate directly.) “I think rest will do him some good,” Esono told me, begrudgingly acknowledging that his father’s ouster had to do with his blog, LocosTV.

WHEN IT FIRST APPEARED AT THE FRINGES OF THE US–Africa Leaders Summit in 2014, *Obi’s Nightmare* received favorable reviews from the human-rights set. A member of Obiang’s delegation even insisted on taking a copy back to Malabo, though he couldn’t read English.

Hard work remains ahead: Tutu Alicante hopes to delay the formal release of the Spanish version until there are 3,000 copies in circulation inside Equatorial Guinea. He is working with activists who’ve smuggled political pamphlets into North Korea and flown encrypted thumb drives to Cuba, but he’s not sure how much of that experience will apply to Equatorial Guinea, where computers are still a rarity outside the capital. Instead, the high-tech flank

of the release strategy is a video game that can be transmitted via Whatsapp and played on smartphones as well as one-page excerpts of the book that could be distributed via text.

For the paper copies, the cheapest solution is to get the books on a flight from Madrid to Malabo. “It will not be easy,” Alicante says, because bags are routinely searched at customs. So he is gradually coming around to the idea that the trek through Cameroon may be the best option. In this, he’ll be reviving a time-honored tradition of resistance: In the 1970s, Alicante recalled, Obiang’s uncle Macías Nguema took his fervor for Africanization to the extreme of declaring Western groceries “creations of the devil,” and people routinely smuggled olive oil, wine, and wheat flour through the neighboring jungle. Nowadays, he said, a bribe will do for most things, but not for a 122-page skewering of the president.

Obi’s Nightmare unites the Obiang-centric focus of LocosTV with the artistry of Esono’s captionless work. In Esono’s view, it will at last give him enough credibility to call himself a professional “*BDiste*”—French shorthand for an illustrator of *bandes dessinées*, or “illustrated strips.” “Up until now,” he told me recently, “I can’t really call myself a professional; I’ve never done a graphic novel.”

In all of this, partly funded by a Kickstarter campaign with the tagline “Comics vs. Dictatorship in Equatorial Guinea,” Esono hopes to capitalize on what many in Malabo perceive as a gradual easing of Obiang’s decades-long stranglehold on the forces of soft power. Hannah Appel, an anthropologist who studies Equatorial Guinea’s relationship with multinational oil companies, sees this evolution as the inevitable byproduct of the age of oil. “Equatorial Guinea is a much more bustling place today than it was as a pariah state,” she told me. Esono grew up during the claustrophobic years when roadblocks were seemingly everywhere and passes were required to move through the country. “Most people had never left their home cities and towns,” Appel said. “Today, there are thousands of people flying in and out all the time—Americans, Western

Europeans, Filipinos, people from all over the world who are part of the oil-working diaspora. That claustrophobia has had to change, a little bit.” In spite of the efforts made by the regime and oil companies to keep the offshore industry cordoned off from the local population—those efforts are the focus of Appel’s research—some degree of mixing has been inevitable.

Appel relayed a joke that’s become popular of late in Malabo: “We used to have a *dictadura*,” people say—a hard dictatorship. “Now we have a *dicta-blanda*”—a soft one. A smattering of exiles have returned to start shops and businesses, and in 2012 the country got its first bona fide bookstore.

In Esono’s words, “the old man can no longer control the mentality of the country: He controls what you eat, whether you’re able to eat or not, but he can’t control what you think.” With *La Pesadilla de Obi*, Esono is hoping to generate more than the cowed reaction he saw to Ávila Laurel’s hunger strike in 2011. By spirit-ing several thousand copies of the book into the country clandestinely, he wants to give average citizens the opportunity to engage with ideas that have long been banished from the country.

Appel maintains that “the vast majority of [Equatoguineans] would consider themselves dissidents, but they are terrified.” They are dissidents who have hitherto been too hobbled by repression and reliance on the regime’s patronage to speak out. “People have no idea if they’ll be met with quick and direct violence,” she says. Thus, according to Appel, they cannot trust one another enough to plan the kind of mass protests that might exert meaningful pressure on Obiang’s regime.

Could a comic book change that? In the concluding pages of *Pesadilla*, the exhausted autocrat leaves jail and seeks refuge in the back of a Catholic church, where he nods off to the sounds of the parishioners taking confession. So begins the “nightmare within the nightmare,” in which the devil himself offers to lead Obi on a tour of hell. Here, too, we encounter a problem of trust—“Calm down, calm down, papa,” the devil cautions Obi. “You don’t trust me? We’re soulmates.” ■