

## Embodying the colonial memory. White colonists and “implicated subjects” in photographs from Equatorial Guinea

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**ABSTRACT:** Except for explicitly colonial approaches, academic research on the visual culture of former colonies tends to adopt an allegedly critical perspective towards colonial history, as a way to participate in the construction of a conscious memory that helps to transform contemporary relationships. However, for a while, the hypervisibility of colonised peoples has been compared to the lack of visibility of white colonisers in academic studies. In line with theories of cultural memory, this study examines images as critical cultural artefacts to argue that racial deidentification in images of colonial Equatorial Guinea takes the focus away from the current society of the former metropolis, and thus from its memory and its colonial responsibility. I present a theoretical approach to photographs of white people ranging from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to family images during the final years of colonial domination (1959-1968). These chiefly depict everyday scenes whose protagonists are apparently oblivious to the colonial context, and in which nothing seems to happen, in the same way, that their descendants, understood collectively, are enabled to ignore the colonial past and its continuities.

**KEYWORDS:** Photography; Equatorial Guinea; Colonial memory; Whiteness; Implicated subjects; Reparation.

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**RESUMEN:** *Encarnando la memoria colonial. Colonos blancos y “sujetos implicados” en la fotografía de Guinea Ecuatorial.*— Salvo la explícitamente colonialista, la investigación académica sobre la cultura visual de las excolonias tiende a sostener que su intención es revisar críticamente la historia colonial para participar de la construcción de una memoria consciente que ayude a transformar las relaciones en el presente. Sin embargo, sobrevuela desde hace un tiempo la crítica por la hipervisibilidad de las poblaciones colonizadas en relación con la escasa visibilidad de la población blanca en los estudios académicos y las exposiciones sobre el tema. Considerando fundamentales, en la línea de las teorías sobre memoria cultural, artefactos como la imagen, este ensayo propone que la desidentificación racial en lo relativo a la difusión de imágenes de Guinea Ecuatorial durante la colonia aleja el foco de la sociedad actual de la exmetrópoli, y por tanto su memoria, de la responsabilidad colectiva por el colonialismo. Así, esboza una propuesta teórica en torno a la fotografía de personas blancas desde principios del siglo XX hasta las imágenes familiares durante los últimos años de la colonia (1959-1968). Son en su mayoría escenas de vida cotidiana en las que sus protagonistas parecen vivir de espaldas al contexto colonial y en las que apenas sucede nada, estableciendo una analogía con la posibilidad en el presente de sus descendientes, entendidos en un sentido colectivo, de ignorar el pasado colonial y sus continuidades.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Fotografía; Guinea Ecuatorial; Memoria colonial; Blanquitud; Sujetos implicados; Reparación.

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## THE ANTICIPATION OF COLONIAL MEMORY



FIGURE 1. Ramón Albanell, D. Gabriel Rius and a group of workers in his estate, ca. 1915. Real Biblioteca de Palacio, Madrid. FOT/390. Número de inventario: 10183857. © Patrimonio Nacional.

The man in the centre of the image (Fig. 1) is Gabriel Rius, who, along with his brother Salvador, took the firm Rius i Torres to Fernando Poo in 1894, where they created La Barcelonesa, one of the island's most important and well-known cacao plantations (Sant, 2018, p. 147). Rius's portrait was taken by missionary and photographer Ramón Albanell and was included in an album presented to King Alphonse XIII in 1915 (currently in the Real Biblioteca, Palacio Real de Madrid). In terms of subject, the photograph is not particularly original (white colonist with his workers), but the composition is certainly eccentric, probably the idea of the always 'original' Albanell. The Africans are seated, holding their machetes in front of them and looking forward, while Rius is to their left with his eyes on the horizon, as though observing something that's happening out of the image or, perhaps, lost in thoughts of 'great entrepreneur'. This may be one of the images that presents the alleged heroism and epic that the graphic and written records associated with Spanish colonists and missionaries to the Territories in the Gulf of Guinea most blatantly. Visually, the two types of portrait, presented in a single frame, stand in sharp contrast, with Rius standing out from the rest in an eye-catching attitude and performative superiority.

According to Nicholas Mirzoeff's "The Right to Look: a Counterhistory of Visuality", Rius's portrait illustrates the 'heroic subject' to whom Thomas Carlyle, back in 1840, granted the power of 'visuality', understood as the "the making of the processes of history perceptible of authority" (Mirzoeff, 2011, 475). That subject holds a power materialised in its ability to collect the necessary information to 'visualize' the battlefield, so he monopolises the "right to look," which also comprises the right to reconstruct History with this privileged information. Rius's gaze, fixed on an imaginary horizon, symbolises an attempt to produce and look at history according to a

power narrative, as well as the construction of a cultural memory of the colony for the future through photography. This gaze reaffirms a series of hierarchical and property relations; his body is the place on which racial inequality rests. Mirzoeff situates the first spaces of visibility in the plantations worked by slaves "monitored by the surveillance of the overseer, the surrogate of the sovereign" (Mirzoeff, 2011, 475). Rius is a plantation foreman in the context of a labour regime that, according to Ibrahim Sundiata, amounted to "neo-slavery" (Sundiata, 1996), so it can be included in the list of spaces in which vision was regulated and controlled by those who not only had the power to look, but, I add, to use photography to perpetuate their power and their discourse. Power to look is also control over representation. But not necessarily over interpretation.

Gabriel Rius's portrait belongs to a category of images in which whites pose alongside blacks to emphasise hierarchies and conceal abuse behind a deliberately triumphal composition. Photography in colonial Guinea must be understood, however, as a complex mesh of relations and agencies that is not always presented directly, but that can be updated with each research programme or exhibit. From the earliest known photographs from the colonies, dated to 1862, white colonists are hegemonic, but not monopolistic. In addition to the photographs commissioned by colonial administrators, there is the enormous corpus accrued by the Claretian missions from 1883 onwards, as well as the private photographs of white colonists and the black colonial elite; these include a few photographs of temporary workers from Ghana and Nigeria in Fernando Poo, but these are rare and difficult to locate. Although the Claretian order and colonial administrators were active photographers, most professional photographers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were Africans who set up shop in Fernando Poo for long seasons. This, along with the presence of amateur photographers, such as the local Walterio Dougan, turned the colony into an active photographic hub, despite its small size and the irregular interest that Spain took in it.<sup>1</sup> After the 1940s, under Francoism, amateur and family photography became much more common, while the number of colonists increased (although they were never particularly numerous). The most outstanding professional project during this period is Miguel Hernández Sanjuan's many photographs and documentaries for the Dirección General de Marruecos y Colonias and the production company Hermic Films between 1944 and 1946. This project has been studied by Francesca Bayre and Alba Valenciano, whose articles seek the relations that images created in the past and continue creating in the present (Bayre and Valenciano, 2009, 2011, 2014).

As noted, Rius's photograph was included in an album presented to the king on the initiative of the Claretian order, which was established in modern Equatorial Guinea in 1883, counted Albanell among its members, and produced a large number of photographs during the colonial period. The present was not anecdotal but aimed to disseminate 'progress' in the Claretian's missional duties, which reached virtually all spheres of the private and

public life of the colonised. This caused constant friction between the order and the governor general of the colony, Ángel Barrera. Colonists, however, were a minor subject in the missionaries’ photographs, because these images aimed to disseminate the order’s work and because the colonists generally resorted to professionals or more or less skilled secular amateurs for their photographs. With Albanell’s photograph, however, Rius’s image moved, probably to his delight, from the private to the public sphere. This, however, was a constant for Africans during the colonial period.

These sorts of colonial image are violent in the extreme, and their reproduction and study present us with some fundamental dilemmas. In my latest work, I rarely use them, but in this instance they allow me to introduce some basic notions and the questions that I wish to address in this study: if most research and exhibits in Europe, including Spain, have focused on black bodies, how can this activate memory in Spanish white society? How can it affect the ideas about responsibility and reparations? Why are white bodies seen from the perspective of normalisation, if not of nostalgia? This enquiry rests on the idea that memory happens in the body, or perhaps through it (if not despite it). I wish to examine the importance of the visibility of the white body when we write, think, feel, and work from whiteness, within so-called white academia, when the idea is to place the memory of the majority in colonial history and its legacy, but also to ask questions about the difficulties involved and why it needs doing at all. I shall begin by describing how this body has been addressed and self-defined in some late-19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century images and in recent exhibits about colonialism in the former colonies of Spanish Guinea (called Equatorial Guinea since independence). The following questions are related: where do we put colonial memory; how can different bodies that coexist in the same images result in a clash of irreconcilable memories in the present? Who are we addressing with these images?

I shall present two preliminary ideas. First, exhibits and research tend not to address the existence of colonists critically, ‘shielding’, to an extent, the memory of what we may call ‘colonial nostalgia’. Second, attempts to make the colony visible have largely tried to bring it closer to Spain, rather than display the colony that inhabits the old metropolis and its graphic legacy. In my understanding, as a political and legal reality randomly formed as a result of colonial processes, ‘colonial territories’ are not the whole of the colony, even if they have been ‘visualised’ as distant and geographically distinct. The colony begins, in fact, in the metropolis and its crisscrossing relations and in the oceanic currents that bring subjects and objects (like photographic cameras) along a two-way road that leaves one another’s mark on both ends. Neither can ever be without the other again. In this way, a body in a photograph is a body whose experiences resonate *now*: they are irremediably in the present even if the images are loaded with the past.

In the opening image, Gabriel Rius is portrayed among the ‘workers’ of his cacao plantation (one of Guin-

ea’s most lucrative products). At the same time, the photograph is a statement about the white colonial subject: he is the one that does not work but owns; the one with a distinct pose among a collective that is not being portrayed but which lends support to his identity. As Georges Didi-Huberman’s *Pueblos expuestos, pueblos figurantes* points out in relation to the workers coming out of the famous factory filmed by the Lumière brothers: “the extras are, foremost, an accessory of humanity that frames the central action of the heroes, the true actors of the narrative” (Didi-Huberman, 2014, p. 154). Similarly, the black people in the photograph are not *portrayed*, but are merely a complement to reinforce Rius’ (obviously, male) authority. Along with the fact that men outnumbered women in the colony, the male subject is the one that best exemplifies the visual representation of colonial power and is represented the most often. It holds, among all groups, the most ‘right to look’.



FIGURE 2. Ramón Albanell, Catalan colonial estate managers, ca. 1915. Real Biblioteca de Palacio, Madrid. FOT/390. Número de inventario: 10183866. © Patrimonio Nacional.

In my view, we can apply Didi-Huberman’s arguments about Parisian workers to Guinea and sustain that the subjects being portrayed, even when surrounded by Africans (or even when they are not in the photograph at all), were the Spaniards: as foremen; as landowners; as administrators. These are images of people who own and whose only job is to give orders, as illustrated by Gabriel Rius’s photograph, among many others. Interestingly, but perhaps not coincidentally, there are few photographs of *Fernandino* landowners,<sup>2</sup> who were not free from accusations of brutality to their workers, posing with their men or even in their plantations. This could have to do with the racial issue and discourses about racial differences, which increasingly marked colonial relations and laws.<sup>3</sup> In Guinea, a radical form of segregation was practiced throughout the colonial period (Nerín, 2017, p. 245). Laws were applied differently to colonists and colonised, although this regime became (theoretically, not so much in practice) softer in the years of provincial and autonomous government (1958-1968); this is clearly reflected by the images,



in which the two realities are separated deliberately in the same visual field.

On the other hand, photography, as a social agent, played a crucial role in both the construction of identities and in the creation of collectives and communities (whether their members joined voluntarily or otherwise). The colonists of Guinea were linked in the colonial context as part of a political identity, that of colonists, which was articulated by living conditions and expectations in the colony, the racial dimension of which was gradually enabled by formal norms.<sup>4</sup> These limitations and possibilities affected from the most intimate aspects of life to social spaces and the acquisition of goods, the final straws in the consummation of racial segregation.

In this photograph from the same album (Fig. 2) we can see a group of landowners building their community: a European, specifically Spanish, paradise, inaccessible to Africans but for a few exceptions, such as *Fernandinos*. In the other image (Fig. 3), the local Maximiliano Jones, identified on the reverse as “the only black landowner,” is portrayed surrounded by his European ‘peers’. I am not sure that it is true that all the other blacks in the photograph are domestic servants, but the truth is that there were more “black landowners” in the colony, although Jones was especially well-off. In any case, the photograph again reveals the radical visual separation that prevailed in Guinea until the country gained its independence in 1968. It is clear that the photographic visual culture of colonisation in Guinea reflects what Gustau Nerín has referred to as *apartheid*: “the segregation of whites and blacks in Guinea was absolute, belying the idea, disseminated in Spain, especially during Francoism, that Spaniards were not racist” (Nerín, 1997, p. 12).



FIGURE 3. Group of landowners, ca. 1915. ©Trinidad Morgades/Laida Memba.

Photographs of Equatorial Guinea have mainly been presented in two ways: through exhibits and, in recent years, through several online fora. Both exhibits and websites are spaces suitable for debate and public discussion; in order to understand the true scope and aims of accounts and discourses, however, each institution and organisation

needs to be correctly situated. By now, the list of exhibits about Guinea, of which the relationship between the Spanish state and Guinea has played a significant role, is fairly long (Plasencia, 2022).

Perhaps the most famous colonial exhibit was the Philippine Exhibit in El Retiro in 1887, and the most paradigmatic was the Ibero-American Exposition of Seville in 1929. The latter included pavilions for the former Spanish American colonies, the colonies in Equatorial Guinea, and the Protectorate of Morocco. Although the project had been kickstarted almost twenty years earlier, the Exposition was held during the dictatorship of Miguel Primo de Rivera and aimed to send a message of ‘brotherhood’ between Spain and America, and also to display that the country’s colonising prowess was still active in Africa. This exposition model aimed, more physically than symbolically, to bring the colony closer to metropolitan soil. Naturally, what was brought was ‘the African’ itself, the curio, the foreign, and the exotic. The exposition also aimed to display the colony’s economic potential: art, resources, and, most importantly, labour.

Some of the best-known photographs of the Exposition portray a group of people from different Guinean ethnic groups dancing in front of a crowd of white Spaniards, with King Alphonse XIII in the front row, along with the images of the king’s visit to the Guinean pavilion. Significantly, these images are more eloquent about European culture than about the population of the colony, whose various nations had different cultural and artistic expressions. In other words, prior to colonisation there was no such thing as Equatorial Guinea. The brutality of the scene rests not so much in either group but in the distance between them. The distance is not cultural, but a present emotional chasm that pitches two memories against one another, like the two narratives in Gabriel Rius’s portrait. This distance can be used as a metaphor (even if it is not) and a *dispositif* to understand why so many modern whites do not feel colonialism in Spain has anything to do with them.



FIGURE 4. The Spanish Monarchs visit the Guinean Pavilion in the Ibero-American Exposition of Seville, 1929. Archivo ABC.

This distance is a construction begun during colonialism, and is, in fact, one of the pillars that supported the discourses that legitimated colonial violence, still visible in ongoing abuses. In fact, most cultural products and documents in the archives aimed to create and widen this distance. According to Arjun Appadurai’s “Archive and Aspiration,” archives are an “aspiration”: “we should begin to see all the documents as intervention and all archives as part of some sort of collective project. Rather than being the tomb of the trace, the archive is more frequently the product of the anticipation of collective memory” (Appadurai, 2003, p. 16). Guinea and its archive anticipated an official memory managed and disseminated by white colonial powers and their societies, a memory that was not unique, but which has been perpetuated and dominates European exhibits and research about the former Spanish colony. It is worth recalling that the memory in Guinea, marked by postcolonial individual and collective conditions, is very different, like all colonial memories in which north and south (and also the north of the south and the south of the north) clash.

Photographs are a key artefact in what we refer to as the memory of and about Spanish Guinea: “the very concept of *cultural* memory is itself premised on the idea that memory can only become collective as part of a continuous process whereby memories are shared with the help of symbolic artefacts that mediate between individuals and, in the process, create communality across both space and time” (Erll and Rigley, 2009, p. 1). Photographs mediate between individuals and the world: they vehiculate collective memories, making them possible or impossible. They are used to fight for marginalised or forgotten narratives. In this way, we need to return to photographs for a historical account of Equatorial Guinea and Spanish colonialism that integrates its multiple agencies and resistances: to understand that memory only becomes collective if these artefacts are made public, and also how the different groups involved clash endlessly. ‘Media’ that vehiculate memory “play an active role in shaping our understanding of the past, in “mediating” between us (as readers, viewers, listeners) and past experiences, and hence in setting the agenda for future acts of remembrance within society” (Erll and Rigley, 2009, p. 3). Everything we receive, what we are capable of doing, is a reinterpretation of the past but, first and foremost, an act of mediation between the past and us.

For all of these, it is necessary to ask, at least, about the visual hegemony of the Spanish administration as the main, but not only, the narrator of the colonial process and social relations in Guinea. We also need to ask about the characteristics of the photographs and the use that has been made of them by exhibits, texts, and research, forming the memories of the different communities alluded to by the colonial history of Guinea.

## COLONISTS IN PHOTOGRAPHS: A GENERAL VIEW

Although the western African colonies only played a marginal role in the construction of what we could call

the ‘Spanish identity’ and the collective memory(ies) of the white and racialised Spanish population, some things must not be forgotten. First, the radical separation of blacks and whites, with the creation of the figure of the ‘freedman’ (“emancipado”), suggests that colonial relations were articulated by race. Second, the importance of Guinea for modern Spaniards of African descent, a significant group in numeric terms, children and grandchildren of original Guineans; many of these were left stranded without nationality in the immediate aftermath of the country’s independence, when they entered Spain without valid documents. And, finally, the despicable legacy of Spain in Guinea, which includes Francoist laws and educational systems, is alive today in the colonial memory of the fractured postcolonial Guinean society.

However, visual and cultural studies about Equatorial Guinea have paid little attention to race, and least of all to the ‘white race’. In this context, Mayca de Castro has opened a dialogue between decolonial studies, memory studies, cultural studies, and whiteness studies, to analyse literature, among other cultural expressions, in search of the relevance of race in the construction of the Spanish identity in Equatorial Guinea, as well as possible ways to explore racial constructions:

...although we sustain that ‘race’ is a historical construction or a fiction, its historical outcome, racism and racist practices, are real. Similarly, even if Spanish whiteness is a historical-discursive fiction, the racism that it triggers is real. For this reason, in order to address its identification processes, we need to trace the historical constructions and discourses that it has generated. Modern socio-racial relations are the result of their historical configuration and vice versa. the socio-political present conditions the memory of the past that narrates collectives (De Castro, 2020, p. 71).

At this point, I want to make it clear, especially in a ‘work in progress’ such as this, that my aim is not to adopt studies on whiteness as a solution to my own contradictions, because, as De Castro points out in her doctoral dissertation, white academics putting white subjects back in the centre of racial studies is also problematic (De Castro, 2020, p. 68). However, in the fields of ‘colonial photography’ and curatorship, I think we need to overcome the hypervisibility of the black body, especially if we are not going to acknowledge its role and agency in colonial history and the history of photography or think ways to problematise the presence of colonists beyond nostalgic accounts. As a lever to address this issue, I also intend to apply one of the maxims of visual culture: that the ‘spectator’, and not only a representation, holds a central position in the study of images.

Western aesthetic experience is marked by the centrality of vision and the eye. This has highlighted the importance of the body in western thought, and especially of the way to interpret it. Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí argues that:

The reason that the body has so much presence in the West is that the world is primarily perceived by sight. The dif-

ferentiation of human bodies in terms of sex, skin color, and cranium size is a testament of the powers attributed to “seeing.” The gaze is an invitation to differentiate. [...] the body has an exaggerated presence in the Western conceptualization of society (Oyéwùmi, 1997, pp. 2-3).

Looking is an invitation to find differences. Therefore, it seems reasonable to argue that the overexposure of black bodies in a mostly-white (socially and politically, anyway) context, like Spain, has had an impact on the construction of meanings and interpretations of the colonial ‘past’ and its legacy. For visual culture theorist Irit Rogoff, meanings are truly crafted in the field of vision; visual studies consider the centrality of vision and visibility in the construction of meaning, as well as in the generation and maintenance of gender stereotypes, power relations, etc. According to this, photographs would be part of this system of relations:

First, there are the images that come into being and are claimed by various, and often contested histories. Second, there are the viewing apparatuses that we have at our disposal that are guided by cultural models such as narrative or technology. Third, there are the subjectivities of identification or desire or abjection from which we view and by which we inform what we view (Rogoff, 1998, p. 28).

A relevant and practical issue that partially explains this invisibility fits the above-noted idea of the archive as an aspiration. A general feature of images of white people in the initial decades of the colonial history of Equatorial Guinea, which distinguishes them from the more widely known photographs of black people, is the ‘private’ nature of many of them. That is, a gap that separates ‘anonymous’ people – the photographs of the whites mostly remained in private collections – from the black subjects that circulated through books, albums, and, especially, state archives, even if the photographs were originally taken for private purposes. Precisely because of this, images of whites stand out from the ‘official’ photographs of missionaries and governors. With some exceptions, private photographs of white people have fared badly, and most have stayed in private collections, although some have entered institutional archives, like John Holt’s collection, now in Liverpool’s Public Library. This unbalance is due, first and foremost, to the loss of many photographs during Macías’s dictatorship (1968-1979) and, second, to climate-related conservation issues. For this reason, we have many photographs of Catholic weddings between Africans, taken by missionaries even if these were private events, or postcards which, although originally commissioned for private use, entered the catalogues of editors. In this regard, we cannot but say that the property of these photographs also has an origin and a meaning, but the way they reach us and, therefore, in which we experience them, is not necessarily the same.

Despite this, the number of images about the everyday life of whites does not increase until the 1940s. Many are held in institutional archives but many more in personal archives, as well as the virtual collection *Crónicas de*

*Guinea Ecuatorial*, which more later. This is anything but anecdotal, because the possession of images of African’s private lives is, in fact, a reflection of the control exercised over their lives. When amateur photography became widespread, however, photographic production ceased to depend on professional photographers, administrators, and missions.

## IMAGES AND ARCHIVES AS SPACES OF HISTORICAL STRUGGLE

Anthony W. Lee’s *A shoemaker’s story* demonstrated that images can tell different angles of the same story (Lee, 2008). Furthermore, this is the case even if we do not have those images, or not many of them, that told stories *other* than the stories that are better represented. Images are also “sites (...) of historical struggle” (Lee, 2008, p. 9) and can be useful to explain the relationship between different agents in both the past and the present. This expression, “sites of historical struggle,” presents images, photographs in particular, which as material objects travel, appear, disappear, are preserved, and are destroyed, as a field in which often antagonistic historical processes and their possible future narratives converge. This methodology is a valuable way to think of images that represent distant subjectivities. Lee argues that “the photograph’s uncertain way with them was that it did not resolve their relationship in a compelling or even recognizable manner, simply letting them clash in a field of vision” (Lee, 2008, p. 127). Therefore, even when the sources are scarce, both images and archives can yield alternative histories and interpretative proposals that go beyond the illustration of colonial history.

As well as family collections, which can be difficult to find, the main way to access these images is in forums of former colonists – e.g. *Crónicas de Guinea Ecuatorial*, a rich source for researchers interested in Equatorial Guinea of which I have written often – and some exhibits that included photographs and which involved updates or “remediations” (Erl and Rigley, quoting Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, 2009, p. 4). Exhibits give access to corpora that are as a rule difficult to compile and, importantly, present them within a discourse, which can reveal important information about the narrative of colonialism (again from the point of view that this is shaped by photographs and other cultural artefacts). In *Crónicas de Guinea Ecuatorial*, we find, unsurprisingly, considering the origin of this website as a forum for people who lived in Guinea during the colonial period, a deliberate ‘colonial nostalgia’. With this I do not mean that participants wish for the return of the colony, but that this period has been situated in their personal memories in ways that entirely ignore the social and political reality of the colony; this is reflected in both the images selected and the comments that accompany them. It is through images that individual memory turns into a collective memory and the latter is elevated to a privileged position vis-à-vis others.

Something similar happens with film archives, which are even harder to find and disseminate, because

it was a less widespread technology and the conservation challenges are greater. Several attempts are being made in Spain to fill the gaps and integrate these narratives into the wider stream of visual culture. Although Equatorial Guinea plays a smaller role in these projects than other territories, especially Morocco, some projects on Spanish African colonialism include it. Recently, Alberto Berzosa and Carmen Bellas, working for Filmoteca Española, have carried out *Memorias de ultramar*, an attempt to recover amateur films. In addition to the material/conservation side, the project’s interest lies in the histories that these films tell, what is behind the amateur expressions of colonists and the discourses that are built around them today. Alberto Berzosa and Josetxo Cerdán argue that

One of the greatest recent challenges of film repositories is the curation of family collections, of sub-format movies made from an amateur perspective. Often these depict private life, celebrations, and domestic dynamics, projecting an idealised image of the family institution. But they can also capture painful and historically controversial moments, such as exile or the colonial past during the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Berzosa and Cerdán, 2022, p. 21).

On the other hand, the issue is not only to find images that can illustrate our knowledge of colonial history, but also our thoughts about how, and with whom, these images connect today. This means assuming that taking sides is nothing but a new mediation and, in my opinion, one that is no more interventionist than any previous form of mediation.

The domestic films recovered are interesting because they show a gaze from below, from the eye of the storm of history, while having no historical pretensions beyond the recording of events that are important for the person filming and their close circle, which are, ultimately, the potential audience for which the films are being made (Berzosa and Cerdán, 2022, p. 24).

The recovery of these images is positive “in itself,” but this clashes with the dearth of critical analytical tools and bibliography with which to neutralise the “necessarily” positive connotations. In *Crónicas de Guinea Ecuatorial*, individual memories wipe out context or self-criticism, but this is unsurprising, not only because these are not the aims of the forum, but also because these memories, and not coincidentally, often represent the best time in life of former colonists. Dealing with the memory of colonists is very tricky, because trying to find a collective memory beyond those that personally lived in the colony, formed through narratives of exceptional individual and family memories, is a nigh impossible task. Structurally, however, it is hard not to see this memory as a sheltered space, protected by the reticence (beginning with public institutions) to incorporate the memories of the groups that suffered colonialism and still suffer its legacy and the consequences of the avoided (self)criticism of white society.

A project that illustrates these issues is *Guinea en patués* (2008), which comprised a documentary film, by

Manuel Brunet, José Luis Cosculella, and José María Mur, an exhibit, and a book. The project, based on the memory of colonists, addressed emigration from Valle de Benasque, Huesca, to Equatorial Guinea in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>5</sup> The book, a paradigm of colonial nostalgia, completely glosses over the violence that comes with all colonisation processes, in particular in Guinea (Plasencia, 2017, p. 31). It also illustrates how difficult it is to speak about social class not as a revolutionary vector but as a reactionary position before colonialism. Obviously, not all colonists were equally powerful or wealthy. Many went to Guinea pushed by poverty and by the harsh political conditions imposed by the dictatorship, but the fact is that they aligned themselves with colonial society. This was largely because, unlike in Spain, race endowed them with privileges and rights, ranging from the most intimate aspects of private life to the public sphere, that put them above the locals. For instance, the strike of black workers during the autonomous government period found no sympathy among white colonists (Nerín, 2017, p. 243), in a display of class estrangement between black and white workers. The epic image, the continuation of the missionary narratives of the past, which portrayed them, in writing and images, as a heroic species on which the state could rely to consummate the occupation of Guinea, runs through projects such as *Guinea en patués*.

In relation to the visual archive of Guinea, in particular about *Guinea en patués*, Sara Santamaría argues that:

In this way, the postcolonial archive presents the Spanish colony in Equatorial Guinea as a lost Arcadia from which Spaniards were expelled unjustly, shamelessly, and without compensation from the Spanish state. Guinea as the colonial dream, or a surface upon which to project the nostalgia of lost youth, almost invariably embodied by a heterosexual, brave, hardworking, adventurous white male, like in *Guinea en patués*. This discourse produces a male, white, heterosexual subject that identifies 20<sup>th</sup>-century colonists with 19<sup>th</sup>-century explorers (Santamaría, 2022, p. 323).

The discourse of colonial nostalgia dominates the documentaries collected by Santamaría. In general, the community of ex-colonists rely on the narrative of the forced exile after independence, triggered by the anti-Spanish environment and the violent policies implemented by the first president of independent Equatorial Guinea. This violence, in fact, hit Guineans much harder than it did Spaniards, but it has nevertheless supported many “coming of age” and, more often, “paradise lost” narratives. This is compounded by the “neglect” that, in their view, they suffered from the Spanish state, and the lack of compensation for the loss of their land and other forms of property.<sup>6</sup> Colonists enter the ground of exiles, their memories fragmented as a consequence of political violence. These are, however, peculiar exiles, the instruments of colonial violence that appropriate the land of others and end up exiled in “their own” country.



The exhibit *Ikunde. Barcelona, metròpoli colonial*, presented in Museu de les Cultures del Món, Barcelona, in 2017, projected photographs in different formats and from multiple origins, like the Claretian Fund and the albums of the governor of Guinea, Miguel Núñez de Prado, onto a screen.<sup>7</sup> The exhibit attracted criticism for offering the possibility of consulting the website *Crónicas de Guinea Ecuatorial*, and thus putting the focus, albeit unwittingly, on the memory of colonists. In this way, although exhibits finally make the body of white colonists visible, they display them in a violence-free space, while black bodies are presented within two main frames: working (i.e. being exploited), and as subjects of observation (their cultural features and their social and religious events). *Ikunde. Barcelona, metròpoli colonial*, in fact, displayed numerous photographs of Guinean subjects taken by the primatologist Jordi Sabater i Pi, which stood in sharp contrast with those that depicted the ‘everyday life’ of colonists.

### PERPETRATORS AND IMPLICATED SUBJECTS

So-called perpetrator studies analyse accounts from and images of people directly responsible for acts of violence in genocidal and dictatorial settings. This perspective is, obviously, applicable to colonial violence, especially considering that for western countries the colonies were a field of experimentation for violent practices.<sup>8</sup>

Crucially, collective responsibility and reparations for the colonial past must respond to the same criteria that we demand acts of violence perpetrated in Europe. The everyday life of colonists and its amateur graphic representation is an analytical tool and at the same time a vehicle for memory, which, based on the theory of empathy by identification, situates us in a politically “innocent” field; it is nonetheless very eloquent. It is difficult to empathise with colonial abuse because this is never reflected on the white body that exercises it, but on the black body that suffers it while being deprived of all agency and power over its own representation. But it is also true that the definition of ‘perpetrator’ does not entirely fit most of the colonists in Guinea. Everyday actions, leisure moments, family photographs, portraits and moments in which ‘nothing happens’ can be read from a perspective bordering estrangement, but they also resemble our current everyday lives: lives that happen outside the fields marked by colonial legacies.

Very occasionally, cultural products and testimonies are able to erode colonial nostalgia; to appeal to a fragmented memory barely able to digest the possibility that the background of idyllic childhood reminiscences could be horrific abuse. *Ikunde. Barcelona, metròpoli colonial* also displayed family photographs belonging to the writer Carles Decors, author of a trilogy about Equatorial Guinea.<sup>9</sup> This trilogy, as well as challenging the idealised narrative of life in the colonies, dwells in the stunted memories and identities caused by absence and disaster. This and other critical approaches help us to look at the images and find the collecting vacuum of so-called ‘colonial amnesia’.



FIGURE 5. Photographs from Carles Decors’s family albums, displayed in exhibit *Ikunde. Barcelona, metròpoli colonial*, 2017.

As briefly noted above, it is hard to think of this space that does not fit in all instances the notion of ‘perpetrator’ as an active executor of colonialist or genocidal plans. This could deactivate the assumption of responsibilities, because it was not ‘them’, those that feature in the photographs, who directly or actively indulged in violent actions. However, this “it wasn’t us” has also been a useful alibi to feign current ignorance, even when no aim exists to build (another) binary narrative. Instead, rethinking the colonial ‘past’ should intend to contribute to the reparations demanded, especially, by non-white academia and activism. Thinking about complex settings that transcend the victim-perpetrator narrative, Michael Rothberg coins the notion of “implicated subject”:

Implicated subjects occupy positions aligned with power and privilege without being themselves direct agents of harm; they contribute to, inhabit, inherit, or benefit from regimes of domination but do not originate or control such regimes. An implicated subject is neither a victim nor a perpetrator, but rather a participant in histories and social formations that generate the positions of victim and perpetrator, and yet in which most people do not occupy such clear-cut roles (Rothberg, 2019, p. 1).

Rothberg points out that the figure of “implicated subject” does not form an identity nor does it create a solution, but a new problem: implicated subjects do not dismantle hierarchies or deny that their implication comes in degrees, that some people and groups were more directly and consciously involved in violence than others. But as Rothberg also notes, although nobody alive suffered or imposed slavery directly (I am referring to European slavery over Africans), states cannot offhandedly reject the reparations that are being demanded from different sectors. The notion of implicated subjects, Rothberg argues, allows us to move from guilt (a deeply Catholic concept) to responsibility, which is a useful position against injustice.





FIGURE 6. Photograph from *Crónicas de Guinea Ecuatorial*.

As I have pointed out elsewhere, “not knowing, not doing, ignoring, is the index of these photographs; it is, in fact, what is happening, which goes beyond colonialism in itself, because this ‘not knowing’ is the cornerstone of the continuity of power and inequality regimes built on a collective memory in which ‘nothing happens’, in Equatorial Guinea or any other colonial process” (Plasencia, 2023, in press).

Implicated subjects may of course experience degrees of coercion, but the realm of implication is above all a realm of conscious and unconscious consent, a place where privileges are enjoyed and historical legacies shunted aside, whether through deliberate denial or through what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls “the privilege of unknowing.” The realm of implication is also a site from which to launch a new consideration of collective responsibility (Rothberg, 2019, p. 42).

These images not only explain the reality of the colony in experiential terms, what we go through and what we live. They also explain that not knowing, not happening, ignoring, is an actively violent practice, capable of drawing crystal-clear connections with the present. These photographs in which ‘nothing happens’ are too similar to modern photographs in which nothing happens either, but which portray themselves while being, in themselves, what is happening.

## CONCLUSION

“What is the value of revising the visual archive of colonialism?” This question hovers over the most critical research approaches to photography in the colonies. Academics and activists have criticised the use of these images, insofar as they can reproduce colonial violence by emphasising racialised subjects and, in consequence, barring reflection about perpetrators. Here, I have tried to develop the idea that, in order to address this question, we must also critically select the material we use, without fear of assuming racial segregation in the visual field

as a reflection of the narrative bias, at least concerning ‘public’ images, which make hyper-visible black bodies. I suggest that this instrumentalization is rooted in the construction of Spain’s colonial memory; that the everyday life of white colonists speaks more about our collective memory than visual studies have assumed to date. Even if, apparently, *nothing is happening*.

In relation to Equatorial Guinea, despite the paucity of studies on colonial photography (although I am aware that this is relative), an increasing number of projects are looking for tools to examine colonial memory and its value for reparations. In this text, I tentatively present a genealogy of the conditions of visibility of white bodies; how these have generally been used to reinforce so-called colonial nostalgia, behind which to hide a collective responsibility that, away from the empty notion of guilt, can help to challenge modern violence. The difficult task of situating this body critically as a vehicle of collective memory, which still relates to colonial logics today, is rooted in deidentification from past images and violent actions. By integrating Rothberg’s notion of implicated subjects, which links white colonists in Equatorial Guinea and modern subjects who do not feel alluded to by colonial violence and the inequality that perpetuates it, amateur family photographs can be used as an analytical tool to guide collective social memory (mostly white). Not to make white bodies the centre of the narrative, but *part of it*.

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## NOTES

- 1 For a broader perspective on the photographic market in Guinea see Plasencia Camps 2017.
- 2 *Fernandinos* were the descendants of slaves from various regions in west Africa brought to Fernando Poo when the island was mostly inhabited by British colonists, which founded the city of Clarence, renamed Santa Isabel when the Spaniards took over the administration of the colony. The British influence was strong in the cultural and linguistic features of *Fernandinos*, who were fairly respected by the white population and also became wealthy with plantations.
- 3 For more analysis of *Fernandina* photography see Plasencia Camps, 2017, pp. 268-294; and 2021.
- 4 The royal decree of 17 July 1928 coined the idea of “freed indigenous subject” to distinguish *Fernandinos* from other Africans, although, although this distinction was racially based, it was not until 1938 that “indigenous subjects” were defined as

- “all coloured races” (Decree of 29 September 1938, Título I, Cap. III, art. 5°).
- 5 Benasque is also behind Luz Gabás’s novel *Palmeras en la nieve*, which inspired a homonymous movie in 2015. These are, without a doubt, the furthest-reaching cultural products about Equatorial Guinea in the post-colonial period.
  - 6 See Aixelà 2022.
  - 7 <http://bioko.net/claret/>
  - 8 This was pointed out in Aimé Césaire’s famous *Discourse on colonialism*, in which colonial history was compared, with stunning clarity, with Nazism: “What am I driving at? At this idea: that no one colonizes innocently, that no one colonizes with impunity either; that a nation which colonizes, that a civilization which justifies colonization—and therefore force—is already a sick civilization, a civilization which is morally diseased, which irresistibly, progressing from one consequence to another, one denial to another, calls for its Hitler, I mean its punishment” (Césaire, 2000, p. 39).
  - 9 *Al sud de Santa Isabel; Aquell món idil·lic*; and *El malson de Guinea*.

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