Trapped by the Past: A History and Translation of an Equatoguinean Poet

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TRAPPED BY THE PAST:
A HISTORY AND TRANSLATION OF AN EQUATO GUINEAN POET

by
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Submitted to Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment of graduation requirements for University Honors

English Department
Brigham Young University
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ABSTRACT

TRAPPED BY THE PAST:
A HISTORY AND TRANSLATION OF AN EQUATOGUINEAN POET

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*Atrapado por el pasado* (Trapped by the Past in English) is a collection of Spanish-language poetry and prose by the Equatoguinean poet Zankús Mávé Menemádjimol. Menemádjimol’s work has never received an English translation, and this thesis provides a poetic rendition of three of his poems. It also offers a brief historical introduction, literary overview, and commentary on the poems. While the main goal of this project is artistic and creative, it also aims to introduce readers to an oft-overlooked culture. Equatorial Guinea and the poet’s home island of Annobón are frequently ignored in the fields of both literature and history. This project aims to expand Equatorial Guinean cultural studies and open the door to future work in Equatorial Guinean translation and research.
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I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is twofold: first, to introduce an English-speaking audience to Equatoguinean poetry (which is the cultural and historical aspect of the paper) and second, to provide several translated poems from the Equatoguinean poet Zankús Mázá Menemádjimol (which is the literary and artistic aspect). From a practical standpoint, readers might challenge both purposes. Equatorial Guinea is one of the smallest African countries and skeptics might question why anyone would devote so much time to studying a linguistically and geographically isolated country (Annobón, the island where the poet was born, is smaller than Rhode Island). Furthermore, many people may scoff at the claim that translation is an artistic pursuit, believing that anyone with a good dictionary and a basic understanding of grammar could translate texts (and if that fails, a little help from an AI translator like ChatGPT would surely do the job). This paper challenges both of these assumptions.

Equatorial Guinea and Menemádjimol are worth attention (and research) for multiple reasons. First, Equatorial Guinea is a country that is “on the margins,” which means that its poetry can broaden appreciation of other cultures and expand the field of West Central African studies. Second, unlike other African countries and cultures, Equatorial Guinea is unique because it was the only African country fully colonized by Spain. This means that the project will give readers an entirely new type of African literature and will be of special note to Latin American and Spanish departments. Third, Menemádjimol has never been translated into English which means that readers will discover an entirely new corpus and poet for the first time. Lastly, while the country is small, it has a wealth of history, from indigenous resistance to prolonged dictatorships. This rich and sometimes harrowing past has led to an impressive list of contemporary
Equatoguinean poets who address pressing issues while remaining unknown to the Anglophone world. This paper serves as an introduction and aims to inspire further study and research on this understudied topic.

To accomplish the primary aims of this thesis, I will divide the paper into three main sections. First, I will present the history of Equatorial Guinea and Annobón, which will be crucial background information for readers when they approach the poems. Second, I will present a brief section on Equatorial Guinean literature which will situate the poetry in its literary context and reference Menemádjimol’s contemporaries. Third, I will present the Spanish poems and their English translations with a thorough commentary. The aim of this section will be to inspire translators to provide aesthetic translations of Equatoguinean poetry and not just formal translations which are of little interest to a non-specialist readership.

Ultimately, Menemádjimol has a powerful voice as a prophet-poet for his people. By providing artistic translations, I hope to preserve his message in a way that will reach the widest swath of readers, and not just scholars. Ideally, my commentary will show future translators examples of creative translations so that they will feel comfortable implementing their own styles in their translations. These will go beyond “word-for-word” translations which are all too common in the field right now. Equatorial Guinea has produced amazing literature and I hope this thesis can be the first step in bringing that literature into English without compromising its artistry or the powerful voices that are “trapped” in a different language. As Menemádjimol writes “With this book, I want to return / voices to the voiceless.”

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II. HISTORY OVERVIEW

It is difficult to fully grasp Equatorial Guinea’s literature without first understanding the history of the country, and while it is understudied, Equatorial Guinea happens to be one of the most fascinating African nations. For this paper, it is sufficient to say that modern Equatorial Guinean history began with the European interactions that started at the end of the eighteenth century. Equatorial Guinea was discovered by the Portuguese, traded to the Spanish, missionized by the Italians and Spanish, occupied (for a time) by the Dutch, rented by the British, repopulated with Cubans, almost captured by Germans, surrounded by the French, supported by Americans, and allied with the Chinese.2 Today, it is the only African country with Spanish as its official language, although French is a secondary language, and Fang, Basek Seki, Fa d’Ambo-Portuguese Creole, Bube, Benga, Pichinglis, Kombe, Balengue, Bissio, Yasa, and Bakola-Bagyeli Pygmy, are all indigenous languages that are also spoken in the country.3 Its geography is diverse and includes five inhabited islands (one of which is dubbed “the wettest place in Africa”) plus a mainland and other non-inhabited islands (Elobey Chico, Belobi, and the contested islands of Conga, Cocotiers, and Mbane).4 It is also important to note that even with all of this diversity, Equatorial Guinea became one of the most Catholic African countries (with around 83% of the population identifying themselves with the religion pre-independence).5

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Unfortunately, much of this natural beauty, cultural diversity, and fascinating history has been overlooked. Overwhelmingly, historians of Equatorial Guinea have focused on the two dictatorships that have ruled Equatorial Guinea since 1968. In his work *Equatorial Guinea: an African Tragedy*, Randall Fegley describes Equatorial Guinea before and after Macias’ rise to power in 1968. What once used to be the “African Switzerland” with one of the highest literacy rates in Africa, the largest GDP per capita in Africa, and a successful war against malaria and yellow fever, suddenly became a deathtrap after its first democracy lasted a mere 145 days. After Francisco Macias Nguema came to power, Equatorial Guinea became synonymous with oppressive dictatorships, and the next ten years were some of the bloodiest in Equatorial Guinea’s history and 25 percent of the population was either forcibly exiled or voluntarily fled due to the political tyranny of Macias. Other nationals were not so lucky and an estimated 70,000 deaths occurred in a country with a population of only 380,000.

Macias’ blatant crimes against humanity were leveled against all races and ethnicities (not even his own family was safe). His rule was characterized by torture, murder, destruction of democratic rule, religious persecution, paganism (he believed that he had power over black magic), and a flagrant disregard for the welfare of his people. Perhaps unsurprisingly he listed his heroes as Adolf Hitler and Pol Pot. Inspired by Hitler, Macias “abolished all the old political parties and created the *Juventud en Marcha*

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7 Fegley. *Equatorial Guinea*. 60, 64, 66.
10 Gardner. *The Pariah President*. 
“con Macias” which was based on Hitler’s Youth. The young men were encouraged to report back to the authorities any suspicious activity (this included religious activity, as Christianity was banned by Macias) and physically intimidate any dissidents. For a country that used to be one of the most devoutly Catholic nations in Africa, the religious persecution of Macias was dizzyingly swift. Foreign priests and bishops were deported, native missionaries and priests were incarcerated, all Catholic church activities were banned and even funerals were considered “illegal” activities.

Menemádjimol was born at the beginning of this period in 1964, and because the poet remained in Equatorial Guinea, this means that he has lived under a dictatorship for 54 years; however, unlike some of his contemporaries, Menemádjimol’s poetry remains conspicuously avoidant of political condemnation. This could be seen as a reflection of the diplomacy he would have needed to survive in an authoritarian culture for all those years.

Annobón and the Poet

While the mainland (Rio Muni) and Bioko Island were the two areas most affected by the dictatorship, Annobón escaped much of the violence for the simple reason that it is situated 400 miles south of Bioko and has a total area of only seven square

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11 Fegley. Equatorial Guinea. 67.
12 Fegley. Equatorial Guinea. 67.
miles. Even though the island is frequently overlooked in modern times, for the first few hundred years, Annobón island was the most important area of Equatorial Guinea. After its discovery on January 1, 1473, (hence the name Annobón, which came from the Portuguese phrase for “good year”), the island became a rest stop for European ships during the Age of Sail. Even though Bioko (or Fernando Po as it was named in those days) was much closer to the African coast, the prevailing winds made it was much more difficult to reach Bioko than Annobón. Even though “Annobón ha[d] no good harbors or sheltered beaches,” it was still more accessible than other areas, so the Europeans took control of it long before an establishment was built on the mainland or Bioko. Additionally, 300 years of native resistance and malaria made Bioko an unattractive option for European settlement (Bioko was only settled in the early 1800s). These factors made Annobón a more important island for provisioning Portuguese ships before they headed back out to sea toward the New World or other African destinations.

Although the island was originally uninhabited, the Portuguese brought over slaves from São Tomé and left them on the island in case they needed help and provisions when they returned. Because the Portuguese left them unsupervised, the slaves began to develop their own cultural identity as Annobonese and even created their version of Portuguese Creole. While this relative freedom was surely preferable to working (and dying) on sugar plantations, it was far from an idyllic location. One explorer, José Varela y Ulloa remarked, “Annobón is a small island with acidic, dry soil in many parts. It has

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15 Lingier-Goumaz, Historic Dictionary of Equatorial Guinea.
no cover or any type of natural protection.”19 Eventually, Annobón was large enough to have a sub-government established in 1592.20 As of 2015, the island’s population was 5,232, with many of the inhabitants working in the fishing industry, which has been the island’s main industry for hundreds of years.21

It was on this island and to this culture that Zankús Mázé Menemadijmol was born on January 23, 1964.22 His birth name was Luis María Sabadell Bizantino and his hometown was San Antonio de Palé, the capital of the small island of Annobón. 23 His mother was Antonia Bizantino Benito, and the poet dedicated Atrapado por el pasado (the primary text that this paper analyzes) to his wife, Milagrosa Garriga Ramírez, and his three children: Celestino, Silvia, and Matusalén.24 Menemádjimol (for clarity, we will continue to use his pseudonym) completed his early schooling (estudios primarios) in Annobón, which was much safer than Bioko or the mainland during the Macias dictatorship. In 1979 when Macias was overthrown by his nephew Teodoro, Menemádjimol would have been 15 years old.25 This was fortuitous timing as it allowed Menemádjimol to complete his secondary studies (estudios secundarios) in Malabo, which would have provided many more opportunities than his small community in Annobón.26

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19 Ibrahim Sundiata. Equatorial Guinea. 19.
20 Ibrahim Sundiata. Equatorial Guinea. 18.
23 Menemádjimol. Atrapado Por el Pasado. 16.
24 Menemádjimol. Atrapado Por el Pasado. Dedicatoria.
26 Nânãy-Menemôl Lêdjam, “Atrapado por el pasado.”
The next major recorded event that happened in Menemádjimol’s life was his completion of a degree in Spanish Language and Literature (1994-1998) that he obtained from the Escuela Normal de Magisterio, Martin Luther King de Malabo. He also received his master’s degree from the same school.\textsuperscript{27} In 2003, he began Hispanic Philology studies at the Universidad Nacional de Guinea Equatorial. Menemádjimol has also been active in the Catholic church throughout his life, has entered into the Society of Saint Francis de Sales, and has been involved with the Children of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (both Catholic organizations).\textsuperscript{28} His education also allowed him to teach at multiple schools and be the director of various educational bodies. He was the coordinator for Radio Maria and worked as the vice president of the Consejo de Investigaciones Cientificas y Tecnologica.\textsuperscript{29} The fact that Menemádjimol has worked extensively in the country while his contemporaries fled or were exiled because of their views is an important differentiating factor to consider in his poetry.

III. LITERATURE ANALYSIS

Equatorial Guinean Literature

Despite the geographic and cultural isolation, important literature is still produced in Equatorial Guinea. Marvin A. Lewis is the foremost English-language expert on Equatoguinean literature, and his \textit{An Introduction to the Literature of Equatorial Guinea: Between Colonialism and Dictatorship} is a comprehensive study of the literary works produced in Equatorial Guinea from the colonial period to the present day.\textsuperscript{30} Lewis’s work is the first critical study of the literature of Equatorial Guinea in the English

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{27} Nánāy-Menemól Lédjam, “Atrapado por el pasado.”
\item \textsuperscript{28} Nánāy-Menemól Lédjam, “Atrapado por el pasado.”
\item \textsuperscript{29} Nánāy-Menemól Lédjam, “Atrapado por el pasado.”
\item \textsuperscript{30} Marvin A. Lewis, \textit{An Introduction to the Literature of Equatorial Guinea: Between Colonialism and Dictatorship}, First edition (Columbia: University of Missouri, 2007).
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language. The book covers fifty years of poetry, drama, essays, and fiction, and examines how colonialism and dictatorships have impacted the country’s literature. Lewis brings to light the themes of national identity, Hispanic heritage, Bantu unity, and the African diaspora, and provides an up-to-date bibliography on the subject. It is a groundbreaking work that broadens the field of African literature and Equatoguinean literature, but it is far from comprehensive.

Menemádjimol, who published his work in 2019, is not mentioned in Lewis’s work. Furthermore, Lewis is only able to include a limited number of texts, and while Lewis includes poetry translations in English, they are all literal or “academic” translations that are more concerned with accuracy than artistry. The same concerns exist in his more recent book, *Equatorial Guinean Literature in Its National and Transnational Contexts.* In some ways, the second book can be seen as a second volume to the first and it covers the literature produced in Equatorial Guinea from 2007 to 2013. Overall, Lewis’ second book examines the work of contemporary Equatorial Guinean writers who have expressed their experiences as both citizens and exiles through poetry, drama, fiction, and essays. Some of these writers include Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo, Guillermina Mekuy, and Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel.

Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel is the best writer to compare with Menemádjimol. They are both contemporary Annobonese writers who feature their home island extensively in their work. Both writers also use the island to show the dangerous and whimsical nature of mother earth. But unlike Menemádjimol, Ávila has lived in exile for most of his life and has been translated into English (to some critical acclaim). The best example of this

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would be Ávila’s work of semi-autobiographical fiction, *By Night the Mountain Burns*, which is set in Annobón. Natural disasters take center stage in the book, and because of the role that nature plays on Annobón which is very different from Bioko or even Rio Muni, the Annobonese are portrayed as hardy, and resistant; but also, as superstitious and less Christian than other Equatoguineans.

One of the book’s reviewers—JM Pedrosa—aptly stated that “it has fallen to Ávila Laurel to be the chronicler of Annobón, just as Derek Walcott is for St Lucia, V. S. Naipaul for Trinidad and Edwidge Danticat is for Haiti,” and in this sense, Ávila is responsible for showing the world at large his home country (or island in this case). Ávila is also one of the few Equatoguinean writers who is translated into English, which speaks to his importance in the Equatoguinean canon and the literary world at large. Menemádjimol writes about the ocean, the island, nationalism, family, nature, and religion. In his book *Atrapado Por el Pasado*, Menemádjimol said, “The history of these poems is, at the same time, the history of Annobon; [these poems] are historical products of Annobón.” Ultimately, while Ávila and Menemádjimol share similarities, they also have their unique styles, observations, and purposes, and *Atrapado por el pasado* provides an additional unique perspective into Annobonese literature.

Equatorial Guinean authors have produced notable books that were popular enough to be translated into English. *Equatorial Guinean Literature in its National and Transnational Contexts* by Marvin A. Lewis is a recent exploration of the state of

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33 Laurel Ávila. *By Night the Mountain Burns*. Back Cover.
34 Menemádjimol. *Atrapado Por el Pasado*. 16.
35 *By Night the Mountain Burns*, and *Shadows of Your Black Memory* are examples.
Equatorial Guinea literature, but it only came out in 2017. Justo Bolekia Boleká, perhaps the preeminent Equatorial Guinean poet, has also published a book on the topic, “Who’s Who Among Equatorial Guinean Authors,” but it has yet to be translated into English and only came out in 2019. Essentially, Equatorial Guinean literature is a budding field in the anglophone world, and this project will be an exciting step toward a transnational appreciation of the country’s literature.

One of the reasons why the genre of translations suffers is because good translations require a specific combination of skills. Burton Raffel argues in his *The Art of Translating Poetry* that “translation is by its very nature an interdisciplinary subject, whether one is practicing, theorizing about, or evaluating it.” As academics become more entrenched in a certain niche, it becomes hard for them to justify the skill set that makes a good translation. Dr. Raffel explains the dangers of our modern academic approach to translation: “Compartmentalized approaches lead to minds that are not only deeply habituated to a single perspective, but also to minds that are inherently unaware even of the existence of other perspectives. … Most academics are virtually indifferent to literary quality in the translations they assign. … They seem usually to feel that prose translations of poetry are better (more “faithful”).” This so-called “faithful” translation is also referred to as “formal translation,” and while it has its uses, it is not the best way to enjoy poetry. My project takes a different approach and focuses on an aesthetic rather than a formal translation. This represents a new approach in the field and will make

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40 Child. *Introduction to Spanish Translation*. 111.
Equatorial Guinean poetry more accessible and more enjoyable to a non-specialized readership.

IV. TRANSLATIONS AND ANNOTATIONS

_Atrapado por el pasado_ (or Trapped by the Past in English) is broken into six parts; the first four are poetry and the last two are prose. The first part is a collection of poems under the title “_Fiesta,_” which is recognizable as the Spanish word for “party” or “celebration.” The second part is titled “_Lágrimas_” or “tears.” The third section is titled “_Esperanza_” or “hope,” and the final poetry section is titled “_Alabanzas_” which translates to “praises” and carries strong religious connotations. The second half of the book is a collection of prose divided into two sections. The first is called “_Leyendas_” (which translates to “legends”), although there are only two stories in this section. The last section is called “_Apólogos_” which means “tales” or “fables” and together the two prose parts make up around a third of the book.

I have translated a number of the poems from the book, but for the scope of this project, I have decided to narrow this paper’s selection to just three poems: one from the first section titled “_Fiesta,_” and two from the second section titled “_Lágrimas._” I have chosen the poems carefully, and they reflect my favorites from Menemádjimol’s collection. While I hope further attention will be given to the volume, my translations will highlight important cultural attributes. The first poem addresses the fishing culture of Annobón, the next is a reflection on womanhood and motherhood, and the final poem is a critique of African culture. These poems will be of interest to the broadest audience possible, as I have chosen poems that talk about Annobonese culture instead of elegies to specific individuals from the poet’s life (_Sin tumba: elegía a Anselmo Aguilar Wel_ and _La
voz del viento: Elegía a Nando Sompé are two such examples). Once again, the primary purpose of this thesis is not to give a history of Equatorial Guinea, the poet’s life, a literary analysis of Equatoguinean poetry, or even to talk about Spanish poetry translations, even though all those considerations are valuable. Instead, this project aims to create new poems in English that come from Equatorial Guinea and Zankús Menemádjimol. Hopefully, aspects of the aforementioned considerations will be seen in this work, but ultimately, this paper provides brand-new English literature and explanations that will encourage future translators to work on Equatoguinean poetry that reaches non-academic audiences.

To introduce readers to the poems and my translations, I will provide a close reading and commentary of the first poem “Cayucos en el Mar,” and then provide only the most important details of the next two poems. My aim is that readers will be familiar enough with some of the basic issues introduced in the first poem that further comments in the later poems would be irrelevant. Ultimately, the objective of the commentaries is that readers will learn more about Spanish and English poetry, translation studies, Equatorial Guinean literature, and most importantly accept future artistic renditions of Equatoguinean poetry. Hopefully, my work and explanations will encourage future translators to bring Afro-Latino literature into English without having to rely on formal translations. Additionally, this project leaves the door open to future work on the Menemádjimol collection.

My process for translation always began with reading the poem a few times without trying to translate it into English. I would allow myself time to appreciate the sounds and forms of the Spanish words (reading it aloud helped with this), and then I
would begin to analyze the poem and look for meter, rhyme, and alliteration. During this stage, I would note the counts of syllables in the margins, and, when I felt it was important, I would also note instances of rhyme. It is easier to rhyme in Spanish than in English because nouns fall into “genders,” which means that most Spanish words have similar endings: “a,” “o,” and “e” (the latter to a lesser extent). Menemádjimol does not try to create a standard poetic structure in his poetry or rely on rhyme in general. In specific cases and poems, there were governing principles, but nothing near as formal as an established poetic form like the sonnet, villanelle, or In Memoriam stanza. Each poem was unique and had its own flow and internal structure (or no structure at all in some cases).

While I hope each poem will be able to stand on its own, these commentaries should also provide useful insights into the art of translation and can be used by future translators. Some might use my translations to justify a formal approach, while others might be motivated to attempt artistic translations. Either way, my commentary will explain the issues I experienced and showcase some of my working attitude toward poetry translations. It will also give readers a thorough understanding of both the English and Spanish poems and can be used as an exercise if the reader so chooses. With a basic Spanish-English dictionary and the internet, readers can follow along and try their own variations of the poems.

Ultimately, this is a poetry project and while history, literary theory, and language all play important roles in poetry, this section showcases three brand new poems that have made their way from the Spanish of Equatorial Guinea into the English of the
United States, and I hope readers will enjoy these artifacts first as poems, and second as windows into an important but overlooked culture.
### Figure 1. Poem 1: **Cayucos en el Mar**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Cayucos en el Mar</strong></th>
<th><strong>Canoes at Sea</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cayucos en la mar, tronco flotante, cóncavo y cilíndrico y punzante en los extremos.</td>
<td>Canoes adrift at sea: log-like, concave and cylindrical sharp of stern and pointy at the bow.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Es instrumento conducido, por hombres de pelo en pecho.</td>
<td>An instrument mastered by barrel-chested men.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A la guerra van. Y tu campo de batalla, la mar, tus armas de fuego, remo y achicador son.</td>
<td>To war they go, and your field of battle is the sea; your firearms are oars and bailers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quedarse desarmado por tu enemigo, la brisa, hombre vencido eres.</td>
<td>If your enemy—the deceptive breeze—disarms you, well, you are a dead man.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>En frente está tu enemigo, la brisa, y con monótono pentagrama.</td>
<td>Before you, the wind batters your boat: a foe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allá al fondo se halla el <em>ome saadu</em> impidiéndote hacer el blanco.</td>
<td>Beating deliberately in time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hombres del mar, lobos del mar, nuestras casas son las olas.</td>
<td>Under the waves, the <em>ome saadu</em> diverts your line from its catch.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y el pan tuyo de cada día, es la mar.</td>
<td>Men of the sea, wolves of the sea the ocean is our only home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y esperándote tus niños en la playa están, y en torno a tu cayuco, conocidos, y amigos, la mano tendida aguardan.</td>
<td>And our daily bread is given us by the sea.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conserven esta tradición, hombres sencillos, hijos de la mar y no os dejéis menguar por nada, por la reducida familia occidental, los hijos pobres del mar de ayer y ahora.</td>
<td>Your children watch the horizon, awaiting you on the quiet beach, and around your canoe, acquaintances and friends await with outstretched hands.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La mar nos vio desde la mar, viviendo sobre las olas, ir y volver pobres, ayer y ahora.</td>
<td>Hold to this tradition, my friends, children of the sea and salt, and don’t let yourselves be diminished by the fading of the western family. You poor workers of the sea from time immemorial.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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41 *Una corriente marina que impide que el anzuelo con el cebo alcance el fondo del mar para que pueda picar los peces.* [A marine current that interferes with baited-hooks from going all the way to the bottom of the sea where the fish bite.]
Cayucos en el Mar is many things. It is a religious poem, an ode to home (and Annobón specifically), a respectful representation of the poet’s people, and also painfully distant at times. The poet loves paradoxes and contradictory points of view (meaning that he shifts between the third person and second person, etc.), and many times he plays with convoluted constructions to give an image multiple interpretations. In short, he is deceptively simple. What looks to be a short poem with simple words and almost no poetic structure turns out to be an intricate combination of related scenes that allow readers to feel at once in the canoe with the fishermen he discusses, and on the beach waiting for their return (which is most likely where Zankús himself would be).

To give readers a sense of the complications of translation, before we even get to the first line, we must address an issue of translation in the title itself, “Cayucos en el Mar.” A formal translation would read “canoes in the sea” but Spanish, unlike English, always uses articles. In Spanish, if one were talking about “humility” they would say “la humildad” and not simply “humildad.” A Spanish speaker would understand what “humildad” is, just as an English speaker could understand what “the humility” refers to, but it tortures the syntax. Because of this, I have opted to translate the title into something that sounds more like the title of an English poem: “canoes at sea.”

While the first issue of translation has a straightforward solution, the next major obstacle has no English equivalent. In Spanish, articles like “the” can be masculine or feminine depending on the gender of the word. It is important to note here that in Romance languages, gender is often confused with biological gender, i.e. sex. However,

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42 Jack Child, *Introduction to Spanish Translation*, 70.
this type of usage has its own name: “natural gender.” While natural gender works for people and animals, most words in Spanish have a “grammatical gender,” which has nothing to do with biology or sex. The word “gender” comes from the Latin root for “genre” and “genus” and refers to types of words and not to feminine or masculine ideals. The Latin word for the sea was “mare” which was gender-neutral, and this is why Portuguese and Italian make the word “sea” masculine, while French classifies it as a feminine noun. Interestingly, “mar” in Spanish can take either gender, although it usually takes the masculine “el,” hence the title “Cayucos en el Mar” (emphasis added). Even though the masculine form of “mar” became widely accepted in Spanish, poets sometimes choose the feminine “la” to refer to the sea. Antonio Machado’s Caminante no hay camino is an example of this usage, although there are many others.

In the first line of the poem, Menemádjimol uses the feminine “la” before “mar” even though he just used the masculine “el” in the title. The feminine form of the sea has been used in Spanish poetry to denote an artistic ideal, and this is an example of Menemádjimol’s deceptively simple style. My interpretation is that “el mar” is the place where real people go fishing, but “la mar” is a place where Neptune reigns and pirates sail. There is even a poem that embodies this tension: “El mar. La mar.” by Rafael Alberti. As a translator, I had to ask myself if there was a way to incorporate this nuance into my translation. I had two thoughts, one would be to explain the difference explicitly in a footnote, and the other was to create an artistic representation of the

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44 “Gender, n.”
46 Both “Muy serena está la mar” by Gil Vicente and “Dicen: La mar es triste” by María Manent use the feminine. “El mar triste” by Antonio Machado and “Recuerdo el mar” by Pablo Neruda use the masculine. Finally, “Margarita, está linda la mar” by Rubén Darío uses both the feminine and the masculine.
meaning in the poem itself. I considered a poetic form like the “shining sea” or the “sparkling sea” to alert readers that the poet was not talking about a technical body of water but tapping into artistic distinctions of the ocean. After playing with the line, however, I settled with “Canoes adrift at sea.” This seemed like a compromise. A formal translation “canoes in the sea” sounds puerile in English and does nothing to communicate the nuance of “la mar.” The word “adrift” does more to suggest a specific image and brings back some originality into the line without sounding like it is overextending and trying to be ornate. Variations of “Canoes in the scintillating sea” read like they are amateurish and break the simplicity of the original Spanish. Additionally, “Cayucos en la mar” contains six syllables, “canoes in the shining sea” contains seven, while my final version “canoes adrift at sea” contains six as well.

The end of the first line of the poem contains a single word that also presents new opportunities for a translator. “Tronco” does not have a direct translation in English. Perhaps a closer translation than the one I chose would be “trunk-like” or “trunky,” but the problem with trunk-like is that in English the word carries connotations of luggage (a travel trunk) that does not exist in Spanish. “Tree-trunk-like” is the closest approximation to the Spanish, but it is a horribly obtuse expression, takes an additional syllable, and doubles the number of letters. Instead of focusing on the cognate “trunk” I used the synonym “log,” which is essentially the same thing. Additionally, this expression, “log-like,” has the added benefit of containing the alliteration with the “L” sounds.

While we have only examined the first line and title of the first poem, I hope this exercise demonstrates the complexities of translation. Each word in English and Spanish must be carefully checked, weighed with other synonyms, balanced with the deep
meaning of the entire poem, and then put into place. While there is no room to discuss every word in the three poems I have translated, I hope that this introduction gives readers a glance into the intricacies of poetry translation.

In the last line of the first stanza, we get the line “por hombres de pelo en pecho,” which is wonderfully alliterative (notice the voiceless bilabial stops, or “p’s”). A formal translation would read “by men of hair on their chest.” The image is clear; manly men would have hairy chests and the canoe is a powerful instrument conducted by those types of men. So, why would I translate the line to “by barrel-chested men”? Understanding the purpose of the Spanish expression (which was to emphasize the masculine natures of fishermen) helps me focus on the most important aspects. While English readers would certainly understand the significance of what “harry-chested men” means, there is an expression that is much more natural in English; “barrel-chested.” In translation studies, this is known as “equivalence.” Languages contain idiomatic expressions, and so while English speakers say, “a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush,” in Spanish, you would say “un ave en la mano vale cien en el cielo” (a bird in the hand is worth a hundred in the sky”). Because I am operating under a sense-for-sense translation framework, using equivalents helps the poem more than a word-for-word translation. Additionally, it focuses on the main meaning of the line (which is that fishermen are strong men), and not on the technical considerations that a high level of testosterone might make a man hairier. Finally, there are cultural differences as well. While a hairy chest might be seen as a compliment in some cultures, it could be seen as an unattractive attribute in others. My translation avoids that possibility.
In the second stanza, I have stayed close to the Spanish, with a slight variation in the second sentence. A formal translation of the second sentence would read “To be left disarmed by your enemy, the breeze, you are a defeated man.” Note that in Spanish, the word order is flipped, and it would be “man defeated you are.” To void sounding like a character from science fiction, I have translated the sequence as: “If your enemy—the deceptive breeze—/ disarms you, well, / you are a dead man.” There were several reasons for these changes. The first consideration for a translator is whether or not to retain the word “breeze.” In English, the word is quite pleasant and evokes positive emotions. For example, one might go for a stroll and appreciate a cool breeze, and even on a boat sailors would appreciate a breeze on the way to their destinations. Wind is a more dangerous word. It is still not to the level of gale or gust, but wind can push you around and be an annoyance or a danger, especially when you are at the mercy of the elements. Why then would anyone have a mere “breeze” as an enemy? I read the deep meaning of the text to be about the power of the ocean. The poet has talked about the “weapons” of the fishermen’s craft which are simple oars and bailers. Because of that, I read the second sentence of the stanza to be a stark contrast between the power of fishermen and the power of the sea. In this poem, even strong men—warriors—can be killed by a simple breeze. Considering Annobón’s geography, when you are miles off the coast of a small island in the middle of the Atlantic, I have to agree with Menemádjimol’s caution. I wanted to emphasize that in my translation.

Instead of keeping “breeze” by itself, I added the modifier “deceptive” to comment on the relationship between fishermen and nature and to avoid sounding melodramatic in English. What looks innocent and inviting from the shore, can make the
difference between life and death to fishermen in small canoes. The poet could have written about the dangers of being caught out in a sudden squall or storm, but that is too obvious a problem. Even men in regular boats would fear sailing under such conditions. By emphasizing the breeze, this poem highlights just how brave the Annobonese fishermen are because the stakes are much higher. Every time the men of the village leave, there is a real possibility that they will not return even if something as simple as losing a bailing bucket occurs. Because of this, the word “deceptive” does two things for my translation: it makes this relationship explicit and adds an edge of danger to the image without making the poem sound trite. This change is a clear addition to the original, and it might be challenged by future translators. I welcome other interpretations, but I believe my additions are justified in this version because they emphasize the deep meaning of the poem while giving English speakers a clearer idea of what is going on.

The last comment I will make about the second stanza is on the addition of “well.” While a formal translation might focus strictly on words, a poetic translation should consider other factors in a language like meter, rhyme, and other rhetorical devices. The last two lines of the Spanish are brimming with syllables: thirteen and ten respectively. Even though my translation adds an additional line and four new words, the total of my three lines only adds up to seventeen syllables. This highlights the disparity between English and Spanish word length (when it comes to syllables; not necessarily letter counts). In Spanish, it is easy to have a short word that is packed with syllables while English has lots of phantom letters, diphthongs, and combinations that are more uncommon in Spanish. Because my English translation of this stanza has consistently shortened the length of the original, I felt responsible for filling it out. Ultimately, I
believe that translators who do not risk adding anything to the poem will create a work that is half as long as the original. This too would give the poem an entirely different feel. Finally, I knew that I wanted the emphasis of the stanza to fall on the warning of “you are a dead man,” which meant leaving that phrase on its own line instead of crowding it onto a previous one and muddying the warning’s impact. The Spanish uses “hombre vencido” which looks like “defeated man” in English, but while the verb “vencer” means “to defeat” it can also mean “to vanquish” and in this instance, the emphasis should rest on the second definition.

The next stanza in Spanish was the most difficult to translate and may be the weakest part of this translation. Even still, I believe it is important to see the limits of translation. Occasionally, there are no good options in a second language. The Spanish reads “En frente está tu enemigo, / la brisa, / y con monótono pentagrama.” A formal translation of this would read “In front is your enemy, / the breeze, / and with monotonous stave.” That leaves much to be desired. While the first two lines reference the earlier part of the poem where the breeze is discussed, the last line adds a new image. “Pentagrama” looks like the English cognate “pentagram,” but before investigating demonology, it is important to know that “pentagrama” is the Spanish word for a staff of music (each clef of music consists of five lines, which is where the “pent” comes from). The phrase remains extraordinarily difficult to translate into English. “A monotonous pentagram” borders on the absurd, and “A monotonous stave” is little better. The closest English could get to the Spanish would be “a monotonous beat,” but I believe a translation could do better. In Spanish, “brisa” and “pentagrama” rhyme, and the two parts of the sentence balance each other out. I decided to try to keep the essence of the
statement without keeping any of the actual words. The primary reason for this was to preserve the rhyme from the original in a new way.

By starting with “Before you,” I preserve the meaning “in front of you” (from the Spanish “en frente esta tu”) while introducing the first voiced bilabial stop, or “ b.” I decided to preserve the importance of the rhyme in Spanish with alliteration in English, so that sound is important throughout the stanza. I also took the liberty of shifting the word order so that instead of having the subject “tu enemigo” come first, I instead introduced an entirely new concept of “boat” (another voiced bilabial stop). While the Spanish makes no mention of canoes or boats, as a translator I see that the original two lines “En frente esta tu enemigo / la brisa” have thirteen syllables together. A close translation in English could read “Before you is your enemy / the breeze,” which is only ten syllables. Additionally, the word “foe” is closer to the Spanish use of the word “enemigo.” Friends and foes are perfect opposites in English (hence the saying “friend or foe?”), and “amigo” and “enemigo” are perfect opposites in Spanish. While “friends and enemies” still works in English, it ignores the advantage of the English saying, sounds muffled, is hard to enunciate properly, and takes the easy way out of a thoughtful translation by relying on cognates. Using “foe” lowers the syllable count to eight. The five saved syllables allow a translator to add more words, and I chose this option.

My final version of the first two lines reads, “Before you, the wind batters / your boat: a foe /” which only contains eleven syllables. This means that even with my additions, the poem is still shorter in English. The next line “beating deliberately in time” also comes one syllable shorter than the Spanish. Overall, the purpose of my additions was to add alliteration with the repetition of “b” sounds in “before,” “batters,” “boat,”
“beating,” and “deliberately.” I also separated those “b” sounds to mimic an actual “beat” like the rhythm of ocean waves hitting a canoe. This conveys the meaning of the stanza sonically. While I could have added more alliteration, it risks taking the idea too far and sounding like a tongue twister. Ultimately, I tried to capture what I believe to be the original meaning: a fisherman hearing the ocean waves steadily beating against his canoe. It is not a perfect translation, and the original Spanish was not easy to bring into English, but because I am working on an artistic translation, I felt it was more valuable to work in new elements than to stay faithful but retain something that sounds odd in English.

My favorite line in this poem is also not done justice in my translation. The third stanza contains the beautiful “Nuestras casas son las olas” which means “Our houses are the waves,” but that of course betrays the rich assonance and alliteration of the Spanish. It is one of the most beautiful lines in the entire poem, and I tried to retain some of the assonances even though it is a pale comparison. My version reads “the ocean is our only home,” and the “o” sound carries much of the assonance of the original but lacks alliteration. Additionally, I broke the third stanza into two stanzas in English because there was a clear break in ideas and images.

On that note, the structure of the poem reveals that most of the stanzas remain around five lines long, and so I made the English follow this pattern. I believe that stanza breaks are one of those things that are only important if the poet makes them so. Menemádjimol could have written the entire poem with no stanza breaks and the meaning would be almost identical, but because he introduced the concept, I believe that he uses them as dividers between different poetic images. The first two stanzas in Spanish contain two sentences each. The last three stanzas of the poem contain a single
sentence. Only the middle stanza (the third) breaks the pattern with four sentences. In my opinion, the best option for an English translation is to separate the third stanza and keep the organizational structure throughout. Other translators might dispute that because I have changed something that does not need to be changed, but I argue that an English translation does not need to be needlessly bound by the Spanish original. Breaking a pattern, which might have been an editorial mistake or problem printing in Spanish, serves no purpose in English except to be faithful. By changing the structure in English to follow a pattern that is almost perfect in Spanish, the poem has a stronger internal cohesion. Because there is little to gain except accuracy (which translators always play with), I chose to make the structure of the poem consistent.

The fourth stanza in Spanish is the culmination of Menemádjimol’s nautical story. After the challenges of an ocean voyage, we see the triumphant return of the fishermen to their families and friends. As I read the poem and focus on this stanza, I cannot help but think of Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. From the mythological perspective of the hero’s journey, a victorious homecoming includes characters who have come back changed. Because the heroes completed a cycle that grants them a new perspective, their village or hometown looks a little different. I believe this idea is reflected in the poem. The Spanish reads “*conocidos, / y amigos, la mano tendida / aguardan*” which roughly means “acquaintances, / and friends, keep their hands stretched out.” The fishermen are warmly welcomed home, but what have they learned? Menemádjimol ends this stanza with a volta—a turn that goes from a narrative about fishermen in canoes to a commentary on African culture. While we do not hear from the

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point of view of the fishermen, it is the poet speaker who gives us the lesson in the final
two stanzas, and the reader, who has also gone on the journey with the fishermen through
reading the poem about their adventure also gets the key lesson.

The fifth and second to last stanzas are perfect examples of Menemájjimol’s
deceptively simple writing style. After a relatively straightforward poem about fishermen,
we get the following: “Conserven esta tradición, hombres / sencillos, hijos de la mar.”
Or in English “Conserve this tradition, simple / men, children of the sea.” So far so good,
after the story, we get the lesson, and this is most likely referring to conserving the
fishing tradition and culture of Annobón, which has been stable for hundreds of years. I
translated the Spanish to “Hold to this tradition, my friends, / children of the sea and
salt.” In Spanish, “sencillo” does not carry a negative connotation like it does in English.
It is clear from the text that Menemájjimol has great respect and even admiration for his
countrymen, and I wanted to make sure that this line did not sound patronizing or rude in
English which would completely miss the point of the original. My other additions help
the English more closely match the syllable count of the Spanish and make it slightly
more robust.

While the entire fifth stanza is one long sentence, it follows the pattern of the
poem and is divided into two parts. The second part of the fifth stanza continues: “y no os
dejéis menguar por nada, / por la reducida familia occidental.” Which is literally
translated as “and do not let yourselves fade to nothing / by the reduced western family.”
Relying on cognates, once again, tortures the meaning of the Spanish. Because of this, I
translated “don’t let yourselves be diminished / by the fading of the western family.”
However, even armed with both translations, we must ask what the poet intended with
that statement. It sounds as if the poet speaker has taken on a prophetic mantel and is telling his people that even though the west (or West) is declining, Annobón should remain strong. In this vein, a literal Spanish translation suggests that the Annobonese should not “let themselves come to nothing” as the West shrinks. Given the cultural context, this could be Zankus’ plea for the Annobonese to stay on their island and conserve their traditions even as their numbers dwindle (perhaps losing citizens in the constant migration to bigger cities). In all honesty, I do not know what the poet meant, and it is one of those statements that I puzzle over and appreciate in both the Spanish and the English.

The stanza concludes as it began with a reference to the fishermen or “children of the sea.” “Los hijos pobres del mar / de ayer y ahora,” which means “poor children of the sea / of yesterday and now.” The cyclical nature of the island and the lives of fishermen are reflected in the construction of this stanza. It ends like it began and invokes a sense of timelessness. The tradition of Annobón has been going, and will go on, day in and day out forever unless something changes. This repetition, however, is not depicted as a joyful occasion and there is something nostalgic about the tone of this stanza. Even though the poet started by telling the fishermen to “conserve” the “tradition,” he also acknowledges that it has only kept his people “poor.” The last stanza completes this picture of melancholy. Before we move on to the final part of the poem, I will note that “yesterday” and “now” sound great in Spanish “ayer y ahora” but are poor companions in English. I used “You poor workers of the sea from time / immemorial,” to capture the weight of the stanza. “Immemorial” is the perfect English word to describe the
timelessness of tradition that the poet is reflecting on, and even keeps alliteration to mimic the assonance of the original.

The final stanza of the poem uses the length of each line to convey the meaning of the stanza itself. In Spanish the stanza goes “La mar nos vio desde la mar, / viviendo sobre las olas, / ir y volver pobres, / ayer y ahora.” Or, “The sea watched us from the sea / living above the waves / to go and return poor / yesterday and now.” Once again, the poet references the cyclical nature of time, and the ocean is used to cement this image. In a subtle and clever subversion of cliché, the ocean watches humans coming and going in their canoes and reflects that time is cyclical. This is ironic because humans are the ones who traditionally look at waves and conclude that time is cyclical. As the poem closes, it gets shorter and shorter, which mimics a human looking out at the horizon and seeing distances compress. Similarly, as the poet speaker looks out over time, history and the future are seen going off toward infinity.

My translation also tries to mimic this shrinking effect because it is a powerful conclusion to the poem. “The sea watched us from the depths, / living above the waves / to set out and return poor, / yesterday, today, / forever.” I was tempted to translate the last line to “day after day,” but that does not capture the past like the word “yesterday” and the image of infinite time stretching in both directions (not just forward) is important to this overall effect of the poem. I also changed the first line to read “The sea watched us from its depths” because I believe it makes more sense to English speakers. Additionally, I have mentioned the melancholic turn that this poem takes in the last two stanzas, and the image of an entity looking up at others through water is part of the reason why it feels so “blue.”
Anyone who has been to a pool party or a crowded beach can relate to the sense of isolation and distance that comes from diving underwater and disconnecting from the world. Being unable to see people on the surface or hear them can be disconcerting and uncomfortable, and there is something about the stillness and distortion of being underwater that is unnatural. Staying underwater can be associated with melancholy, sadness, and even drowning. While others might have different experiences, there is an undeniable sense of powerlessness that anyone underwater in the middle of the ocean would feel. By tapping into that image, the poet sets readers’ emotions on edge. There is a certain fatality in the last stanza. The inexorable flow of time does not help the people it pushes (the fishermen are always “poor”), and both humankind and nature are in a recurring cycle of give and take without one gaining the upper hand.

The more I worked with this poem, the more I loved it, and while there were many parts that I was unable to translate satisfactorily into English, I still believe it deserved the effort. Ultimately, the poem is an ode to a people and culture that most of the English-speaking world has never heard of. Cayucos en el Mar does such a good job of introducing an unfamiliar audience to Annobón that readers can understand part of the culture and island just by reading it. The poem also serves as an excellent introduction to Menemádjimol’s poetic style. As demonstrated in the following poems, Menemádjimol begins his poems with a series of images and while they are sometimes paradoxical in nature, they are written in simple Spanish. Then Menemádjimol employs a volta around the last third of the poem and makes a critique of the subject he is writing about.

This is usually the culture of Equatorial Guinea. In this sense, Menemádjimol assumes the mantle of a poet-critic and with his biblical allusions, he can read at times
like a prophet-poet. While Menemádjimol draws on many examples of his own African culture, he also borrows from Christianity and European culture to produce poems that are convoluted and nuanced. Menemádjimol’s poetry is not motivated primarily by activism, unlike some of his contemporaries. In his poetry, there are no “good people” and “bad people” but there are good and bad ideas and Menemádjimol criticizes bad ideas even if they are in his own country or contemporaries. This might be motivated by Menemádjimol’s choice to stay in Equatorial Guinea while his contemporaries fled, but it makes him a powerful voice in the community. His next poem, Sin Respuesta also exhibits many of these qualities.
**Figure 2. Poem 2. Sin Respuesta**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sin Respuesta</th>
<th>Unanswerable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Los hijos, son las riquezas de un africano.</td>
<td>Children are the wealth of an African.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¿Quién podría ser como tú madre de muchos hijos y viviendo orillada?</td>
<td>Who could live like you—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a mother of many children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>constantly living on the edge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¿Quién podría ser como tú, no ser y ser a la vez poseer de todo y sin tener nada?</td>
<td>Who could do what you do, simultaneously having everything while owning nothing?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¿Quién podría ser como tú contada entre otras sin que tú cuentes?</td>
<td>Who could live up to you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tierra nervuda y rugosa plantada sobre la palma de una mano sin dueño,</td>
<td>A woman accounted for by others without them seeing that you count.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y colocada en una hoja seca, y puesta en la mar, y ser conducida a merced del viento y estacionarse en el mismo sitio.</td>
<td>Rough and wiry land, planted in the palm of an ownerless hand, And placed into a dry frond, then cast out to sea, to be driven by the caprice of the wind and come to rest in the selfsame spot.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Sin Respuesta* is a poem primarily written in praise of motherhood. Structurally, the poem is like *Cayucos en el Mar* and can be broken into two parts: the first section is grounded in reality and relatively straightforward, while the second section after the volta is much more abstract. One of the main differences between this poem and the last is that “*Sin Respuesta*” does not begin with a narrative. Instead, the poet asks rhetorical questions for the first three stanzas and then ends with an image, (instead of starting with one like “*Cayucos en el Mar*”). Another difference between this poem and the last is that even though this poem is named “*Sin Respuesta,”* or “without answer,” it begins with a key statement: “Children are the wealth of an African.” Given the title and the body
stanzas, this declaration is likely meant to situate readers before entering the abstract world of Menemádjimol’s poetry. While he entertains multiple questions, the overall subject and argument are presented first as a yardstick with which to measure the poem.

After reading through the poem, I was tempted to translate the title as “paradoxes,” but decided against it after talking with my advisor. In Spanish, the phrase “sin respuesta” is common, but the directly translated English form “no answer” has a different connotation. In English, “no answer” favors an interpretation that means “no one responded,” as in, I knocked on a door and there was “no answer.” Spanish, however, uses the verb “contestar” for this meaning and so there is not the same overlap. The Spanish phrase “sin respuesta” hints that something is “unanswerable,” which is the way I decided to translate the phrase. While this is a fine semantic distinction, it is clear that rhetorical questions are the focus of the poem after reading the first three stanzas. The questions are thus “paradoxical” or “unanswerable” and not just “unanswered.”

While I favored condensing the meaning of the poem by titling it “paradoxes,” my advisor rightfully pointed out that this would rob nuances and other possible interpretations from the original. Additionally, it would be out of line with the final two stanzas of the poem and could sound banal. This example highlights the importance of having other readers examine translations before deciding on a final version, and it was not the only time I changed words in the translations after getting feedback. Because I had spent so long with the poem, I began to have a skewed view of it that a first-time reader would not. Hearing from an outside source helped me be more balanced with my decisions and avoid certain words. Additionally, I found that sharing versions of my translations with friends who were not fluent Spanish speakers was also useful because
they could not rely on the original language to color their understanding of the translation. This gave me a different perspective on how the English version affects readers as they encounter the translation for the first time.

Moving on to the body of the poem, I would say that the central challenge I faced in the first half of the poem was how to translate the repeated question “Quién podría ser como tú.” In the Spanish version, the refrain is repeated three times near the beginning of each stanza (a great example of anaphora). In English, however, “who could be like you” sounds awkward and unpoetic; so, I changed it. This opinion highlights one of my prejudices in translation: I do not like to leave cognates or literal translations behind if possible. I feel that my duty as a translator compels me to put more effort and thought into my translations. Because a twenty-second Google search can reveal “who can be like you” as the English equivalent, I feel that if I can make a better translation than an AI, I am providing additional value. However, if I cannot make my version better than a formal translation, I believe I should keep the most literal form, which is “who could be like you.” While my version might not be any better, it does provide readers with options and allows them to choose their favorite version of the phrase.

Instead of saying the same phrase three times in my translation, I decided to translate it slightly differently each time. While this provides additional options and possible interpretations to readers, it also diminishes the effect of the original’s anaphora. One of the purposes of anaphora is to emphasize a statement and provide momentum. Winston Churchill’s We Shall Fight on The Beaches speech is a good example of this; he repeats the phrase “We shall fight…” many times until the crescendo ends with “we shall
never surrender.” While this poem is the opposite of militaristic, the repetition of “Who could be like you?” forces readers to confront challenging questions and serves as a connector between the images the poet introduces like the string in a necklace. I see these connections as an opportunity to introduce momentum by subtly shifting the point of view of the poet speaker. In the first stanza, I write, “Who could live like to you— / a mother of many children / constantly living on the edge?” The variation “who could live like you” is more confrontational and condescending than the Spanish “who could be like you,” even though I have only changed one word. One can almost imagine an outsider looking at a young mother with multiple children and saying as he shakes his head, “Who could live like you? You are surrounded by too many children and are always stressed to the point of breaking.” Given the structure of the poem, I believe this is the meaning Menemádjimol was trying to convey. He begins the poem not with a riddle, but an affirmation: “Children are the wealth of an African.” After he states that position, he gives readers difficult questions to consider, but his purpose is clear from the first line. Additionally, childbearing has decreased in the West and motherhood has been attacked more than ever. By translating the first stanza in a condescending way, it reflects a certain viewpoint in the English-speaking world that Menemádjimol critiques.

In the second stanza, I have translated “Who could do what you do, / simultaneously having everything / while owning nothing?” At this point in the poem, I imagine the same critical onlooker becomes more familiar with the mother and her family. As is so typical, once we understand something we are slower to judge. Instead of becoming angry at the mother, this unidentified onlooker expresses a grudging

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admiration that the woman is selfless. The sacrifices that the mother has made to both bring children into the world and to care for them are obvious, but so too are the rewards (as they are becoming more apparent to the observer). At this point in the poem, I imagine that one of the children has come up to play with the observer and perhaps smiles at him or tries to get him to laugh even though he is a grumpy pessimist. The observer is forced to remember—even while recognizing the comparative poverty of the mother—the quote by Oscar Wilde “Who being loved is poor?”

In the final question stanza, the observer asks in near awe, “Who could live up to you? / A woman accounted for by others / without them seeing that you count.” The observer has now completed a journey of discovery. He has gone from a critical outsider to a champion of the mother. He recognizes the immense contribution that the woman makes to society while society pays her no attention, or worse still casts judgments upon her like the observer first did upon their meeting. While this is only a single interpretation, and while the Spanish leaves room for multiple, this theme is in line with Menemádjimol’s other poems. In the previous poem, he advocated for tradition and Annobón’s values and in the next poem he will criticize modern trends toward secularization. In this poem, he seems to praise motherhood and chastise those who are apathetic or critical toward mothers. His treatment of the subject is careful and modest. While he advocates his position, he does not know the extent of motherhood himself and so he writes in “paradoxes” or difficult questions to explore the idea. Ultimately, motherhood is a powerful and ineffable part of the human condition that he might never understand, and this is where the volta occurs.

In sharp contrast to the first three stanzas, the last two stanzas ask no questions and instead paint an abstract series of images. While I still believe the final two stanzas are connected to the themes of womanhood and motherhood, I believe the poet purposefully obfuscates the meaning of the images to convey a sense of magic and mystery. I have translated the second to last stanza, “Rough and wiry land, / planted in the palm / of an ownerless hand,” which is incomplete without the last stanza which reads “And placed into a dry frond, / then cast out to sea, / to be driven by the wind / and come to rest in the self-same spot.” Unlike the first half of the poem where I have multiple opinions about what the poet is trying to convey, I believe the last two stanzas are best considered by readers. I do not think the poet is trying to make a specific point here as he was in the first statement of the poem, or even in the questions that he asked in the body of it. I will only say that motherhood requires sacrifices that could feel “rough and wiry,” and that it might feel like an adventure that sends a woman off with nothing but a sinking leaf in a vast ocean (“cast out to sea”). Nature, however looks after her own children, and eventually, life returns to normal, and the women-turned-mothers return to “the self-same spot.” Overall, I tried to preserve the rhyme and words of the original and only added a bit of color to the last stanza (which is why I chose “come to rest in the self-same spot” instead of “to park in the same spot”).

In sum, this poem highlights the importance of women and children in Africa and can be seen as a possible critique of modern social movements. In his typical fashion, Menemádjimol addresses difficult and perhaps controversial topics in a way that is both courageous and measured. He is not a poet of revolution, even though he lived through one, and his social critiques are not written in the style of propaganda or even activism.
Menemádjimol has too much respect for his readers to try to win them over by force. Like the poet-speaker who comes to appreciate motherhood through firsthand experiences, Menemádjimol hopes that his readers will learn through experience as well.
**Poem 3. *Sentencia Firme* Hard Sentence**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><em>Sentencia Firme</em></th>
<th><em>Hard Sentence</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Que marchiten las cosechas, y que bailen los ratones, y que afloren las supersticiones, fruto de un pueblo llamado a desaparecer.</td>
<td>Let the harvests wilt and the mice dance and superstition bloom to become the fruit of a people destined to disappear.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nadie acompañarte quiere, todos, idólatras y supersticiosos vuelven; un pueblo que camina en tiempo de sombra, buscando un libertador que le guíe.</td>
<td>No one wants to walk with you, all have turned idolatrous and superstitious; a people who march in a time of shadow looking for a liberator to guide them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La superstición ha cobrado su víctima, y el primer pájaro caído; cazado por su libertador.</td>
<td>Superstition has taken its victim, the first fallen bird hunted by its liberator.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aunque con el hierro incandescente en la boca no me callaré. Aunque tuviera como compañeros a los muertos, no me vacilaré.</td>
<td>Even with incandescent iron in my mouth I will not be silenced. Even if the dead are my only companions, I will not waver.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Porque desde no ser, a ser tiene como escalera el <em>ora et labora</em> no al espiritismo.</td>
<td>Because the way from not being to being, Comes by climbing the ladder <em>ora et labora</em> And not through new-age spiritualism.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

The final poem that we will examine from Menemádjimol is also the most important of this set. While Menemádjimol’s poetry is not usually an overt form of advocacy, this poem is the closest he comes to challenging an oppressive government and belief system. Even with this angle, the poet is still balanced in his critique and also challenges the beliefs of his contemporaries and countrymen. He assumes an almost prophetic mantle as he warns Equatorial Guineans about the dangers of superstition and lack of vision. He also lays out what he believes is the solution to his society’s problems.
and declares—unabashedly—his stance on the topic. Ultimately, this poem is key in understanding Menemádjimol’s views and the cultural climate of Equatoguinean literature.

The first stanza of this poem conveys exasperated resignation from the poet-speaker. He has observed the state of his society and is tired of being ignored. There is the sense that the poet-speaker has thrown his hands up in the air and said, “fine, do it your way,” as he writes “Let the harvests wilt / and the mice dance.” He knows he has already tried to convince his people against the dangers of “blooming superstition,” but nobody has listened and so he is left to witness their ultimate destruction or “disappearance.” This format and literary tone fit neatly into the Hebraic tradition of Old Testament prophets who lament over the “stiffneckedness” of their people. Ultimately, the speaker recognizes that his people are free to make their own choices even if those choices are the worst. While he accepts that reality, he still fights against apathy.

In terms of poetic imagery, the first stanza is one of the most imaginative and artistic we have read from Menemádjimol. The images of dancing mice and corrupted harvests are juxtaposed with the next images of blooming superstition and evil fruits. The traditional binary of life and death is usually coded as good and bad, but this concept is subverted by Menemádjimol who uses the “fruits” (life) of “growing superstition” to suggest that his people have become corrupted (death). Thus, good has become evil in post-revolutionary Equatorial Guinea. The first stanza uses the phrase, “pueblo llamado a desaparecer” which is roughly translated as “a people called to disappear,” but in my translation, I changed “called” to “destined.” This highlights the inevitability of the path that his people are on and emphasizes that their choices have led them to shadow and not

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50 See, for example, the book of Lamentations in the King James Version of the Old Testament.
some higher good which “called to” could indicate. While the Spanish “pueblo llamado” has the advantage of a direct rhyme, in English I preserve some of the artistry through the alliteration of “destined to disappear.”

Though the first stanza might be seen as a tired prophet’s resignation, the second stanza is a direct criticism of the culture he is in. The poet-speaker warns his people that because of their “idolatry” (once again using Biblical language) they are without allies and are increasingly alone in an ever-growing world. Additionally, the poet recognizes that his people know they are guilty because they feel the weight of “shadows” and search for “a guide to free them.” One of the reasons why I left the Spanish virtually untouched is because the word “Liberator” has connotations in both English and Spanish that reference the “Caudillos” of Latin American revolutions. Simón Bolívar, for example, was a “Liberator,” and because this poem is intentionally religious, this has significance. The main implication of this stanza is that the poet’s people have turned away from the prophets and are “trusting in the arm of flesh” by looking toward human leaders to fix their problems. Given the context of the poem, the poet would prefer that his people look for a messiah, prophet, or even spiritual guide, and because of this, leaving the word “liberator” helps make the poet’s point.

The third stanza is the shortest stanza of all, and the poet reflects on the consequences of what the two first stances have set up. In the first stanza, even though his people are “destined to disappear,” there is no elaboration on what that will mean for them, and it is future oriented. Similarly, the second stanza expresses only a possibility; the poet-speaker observes the isolation and lack of purpose that his people feel without specifically detailing the consequences of that isolation. This third stanza is unequivocal:

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51 See Jeremiah 17:5 in the King James Bible.
superstition has now taken its victim and the consequences of his country’s actions are upon them. The image of this stanza is that his people (and we could add his country) have been in a cage for too long. However, when they are finally freed, his countrymen are ironically killed by the very thing that gave them their independence: a “liberator,” which we have already discussed. Historically, Equatorial Guinea was ruled and colonized by Spain for two centuries. Because of this, they could be seen as the ones who kept Equatorial Guineans caged. But while it might be tempting to assume that the poet speaker is blaming Europe for his country’s failure, what freed Equatorial Guinea in the end was its own people (the revolution that turned into a dictatorship after a hundred days). When Macias rose to power in the 60s, he overthrew both the European and Christian foundations that Spain had imposed upon Equatorial Guinea, and this is where the poet takes a controversial turn. This poem ultimately suggests that freedom or “liberation” became Equatorial Guinea's own undoing, and this will be proved more fully in the last stanza of the poem.

The volta of this poem comes between the third and fourth stanzas. Like the two previous poems we have read, the poet enjoys ending on a complicated and abstract idea, but this is Menemádjimol’s clearest conclusion and the least abstract of the three poems. The final stanzas of this poem read like a declaration. The fourth stanza begins with “Even with incandescent iron in my mouth, / I will not be silenced,” which signifies a lot coming from this poet and cultural context. Considering the history of Equatorial Guinea and the fact that torture, intimidation, and murder were all instruments of the country’s dictatorships, means that this declaration carries weight. The image that the poet could be branded for speaking out is not an exaggeration.
The second half of the fourth stanza is a promise and a commitment. “Even if the dead are my only companions, / I will not waver.” The poet speaker realizes that his opinions might only be permissible of the dead, but even with that knowledge, he decides to speak up for both himself and his country. There is an obvious power and satisfaction that comes from following one’s conscience, but there is another powerful lesson for readers in this line as well. Books are depositories of information for the living, and there is a power that can also be drawn from ancestors and those who have gone before. One thinks of all the martyrs who gave their lives for certain causes and the fact that many left behind books for others to be inspired by. There is also the possibility that Menemádjimol could become one of those examples and then this poem would be a metacommentary on poetry as well.

The final stanza explains the reason for the determination and confidence of the poet-speaker. In the Spanish, the poet leaves the Latin phrase “Ora et labora” untranslated, which leaves readers with a bit of work. Understanding that this phrase was the motto of medieval monasteries and means “pray and work” it’s key to understanding the poet’s message. For Menemádjimol, there is no substitute for a foundational culture of hard work and faith in God. Menemádjimol traces the problems of modern society to the fact that people are “superstitious” and have turned away from God by being “idolatrous.” The poem suggests that Menemádjimol is extremely skeptical of secularization and modern conceptions of spirituality. The Spanish poem ends by saying that “spiritualism” is not the answer to his people’s problems which could refer to both indigenous beliefs of shamanism a possible form of “idolatry” (which his contemporary Donato Ndogo explores in his book Shadows of Your Black Memory) and to modern
conceptions of Christianity that emphasize “spiritual, but not religious.” Given the content of this poem, it seems likely that the latter is more probable. Instead of translating “spiritualism” at the end of the poem which could confuse English readers who recognize that the poet is religious and spiritual, I capture the nuance of the original by adding the phrase “new-age” which qualifies and clarifies the poet’s intent to English readers.

One other factor that deserves consideration in this stanza is the possible allusion to Jacob's Ladder. I have translated the lines, “Because the way from not being to being, / Comes by climbing the ladder *ora et labora*” which is to say that enlightenment or “being” it’s reached only by climbing the ladder of monastic discipline. In the Old Testament, Jacob is blessed with a vision of God’s covenant promise to him after seeing an angel ascending and descending a ladder to heaven.\(^52\) Perhaps the poet sees his own struggles to teach and help his people as the wrestling that leads him to God, and the pathway to God is through “prayer” and “work.” Even if the allusion is coincidental, it is another aspect that strengthens the religious imagery of the poem.

Ultimately, the poet’s deference to hard work and faith is reflected in the title of the poem itself, “Hard Sentence.” Like Adam, we are tasked to go forth and work by the sweat of our brows and so the poem concludes where it began: with the argument that the way to avoid superstition, loneliness, and ultimate destruction is by working to build a strong society. The overtly religious tones of this poem might make some readers uncomfortable, but to understand Zankūs Menemádjimol, I believe this poem does the best job of unapologetically laying out his convictions. Readers are, of course, welcome to disagree with the poet, but the fearless nature with which he challenges the complacency of his fellow citizens and the government is especially impressive when we

\(^{52}\) Genesis 28. KJV.
consider them in context. The poet lives in a dictatorship and grew up during a time when intellectuals were killed for being educated and having their own opinions. This kind of pressure would change the outlook of virtually any poet living today. Thus, I read this poem as an impressive work of independence and courage.

V. CONCLUSION

My primary aim has been to provide background and translations of Zankús Máţé Menemádjimol’s poetry. As readers have seen from these translations, Menemádjimol is a complicated poet who writes about Equatoguinean culture, religion, and his home island. The fact that Menemádjimol was able to come from such an isolated community and achieve an education while his country was falling apart due to the Macias dictatorship is nothing short of remarkable. Additionally, his ability to work in education and write about modern Equatoguinean culture under an oppressive regime is also inspirational. Because of these translations, he will now be able to reach an English-speaking audience. The poems and poet serve as an excellent introduction to the history of Equatorial Guinea and its literature, and I hope they will be the first of many.

Despite the small size of Equatorial Guinea, its unique history and its cultural contributions make it a country worth studying. The blend of Hispanic and African cultures mean that it will be both familiar and foreign to Spanish speakers and there are so many possibilities for expansion in the field of Equatorial Guinean translations. While the translations I provided cover some of Menemádjimol’s favorite topics including Annobón, African culture, and religion, they are just scratching the surface not only of Menemádjimol but also of Equatoguinean poetry in general. From a literary lens, this paper challenges the common misconception that translation is a simple task and
demonstrates that aesthetic translations of poetry can be useful for introducing new readers to foreign literature. This requires, however, an additional artistic focus. From a historic perspective, this paper has introduced readers to a general overview of Equatoguinean history, and has situated the poet’s work in the context of his country. I am excited to see where future scholarship will take Equatoguinean poetry, and hope that this thesis will help it escape from being “trapped in the past.”
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