

Pepetela and the New Angolan Mythology

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"Pepetela" is the literary pseudonym and former *nom de guerre* of Arthur Maurício Pestana dos Santos, born in Benguela, Angola, in 1941. His political and military involvement with the MPLA during the Colonial Wars and his subsequent role in the government of independent Angola lie outside the purview of this study but form the background for his fictional works. Pepetela is the Angolan novelist most concerned with a broad examination of national culture, past and present, with an eye to the construction of a coherent, multifaceted Angolan self-awareness and mythology. He has been called a "muralist" in the style of Latin American painters Siqueiros (Mexico) and Portinari (Brazil) though his painting is done with words rather than a brush. Students of Brazilian literature have likened him to Erico Veríssimo in the broad scope of his vision, the balance of his perspective, the sincerity and depth of his human commitment, and the accessibility of his prose. It is too early to speak definitively of his literary accomplishments because he appears to be currently at the height of his career as a writer; nevertheless it is not too early to point out an aspect of his vision that may well be the key to the eventual interpretation of his work as a whole. During the ten-year period from 1980 to 1990, Pepetela published the three novels that form the basis of our analysis: *Mayombe* (1980), already in English translation; *Yaka* (1984); and *Lueji* (1990). Though unrelated to each other in terms of immediate thematic content, the three works form a kind of tripartite unfolding of a nascent national mythology; the presentation of such a mythology for a newly independent Angola is an enterprise to which Pepetela has dedicated himself with intentionality and vigor. Both Webster's definition of *myth* as "a story . . . that ostensibly relates historical events, which are usually of such character as to serve to explain some practice, belief, institution, or natural phenomenon" (*New International Dictionary of the English Language*, 2nd ed.) and *The American College Dictionary's* definition of sociological myth as "a collective belief that is built

up in response to the wishes of the group rather than an analysis of the basis of the wishes" are applicable to what Pepetela is about, though he may be seen as *creator* from one perspective and as *collector* from the other.

Mayombe, the first of the three novels under examination, is set in the forests of Cabinda during the early 1960s, near the onset of the Colonial War against Portuguese administration of the "Overseas Provinces." Its cast of characters is a group of guerrilla fighters from various regions of Angola who form a human nucleus working from a small base in the bosom of the rainforest. As their military activity proceeds throughout the novel, so do their attempts at coming to terms with their own ethnic and regional diversity and understanding the overall goals and administration of the independence movement. The group includes Kikongos, Kimbundos, Cabindas, a "detrribalized" urban youth (Muatiãnvua), a mulatto (Teoria), and sundry others caught in traditional intertribal tensions with a need to overcome these for the benefit of the greater cause. The predominantly masculine cast of characters includes European-educated Marxist theorists, pragmatic rural residents, and soldiers of varying degrees of politicization displaying a wide scope of personal and partisan commitment to the campaign for independence.

Mayombe takes on epic proportions, in addition to its immediate socio-political theme, from the initial epigraph preceding the text of the novel: "Aos guerrilheiros do Mayombe, que ousaram desafiar os deuses abrindo um caminho na floresta obscura, vou contar a história de Ogun, o Prometeu africano." The Classical Prometheus, stealer of fire for newly-created humanity, has been displaced by Ogun, the Nagô god of war. The Mayombe forest itself appears throughout the novel as a benevolent, though overpowering, matrix possessing both "masculine" and "feminine" qualities: the forest "gave birth" to the guerrilla base (70), nourishes the fighters by the edible fruits and pods falling from the trees (p. 71), and trembles at the mortar fire accompanying heavy fighting. Reversing the Eurocentric myth of Zeus punishing Prometheus for stealing fire to help humanity, Mayombe seeks to protect Ogun, now identified as the collectivity nestled under its canopy: "Zeus vergado a Prometeu, Zeus preocupado com a salvaguarda de Prometeu" (70). "Tal é o atributo do herói, o de levar os homens a desafiarem os deuses. Assim é Ogun, o Prometeu africano" (71). And as the guerrilla commander lies dying on the forest floor after being hit by enemy fire in a skirmish, he perceives the trunk and foliage of the jungle mulberry tree as symbolic of the hero-collective relationship: "O tronco destaca-se do sincretismo da mata, mas se eu percorrer com os olhos o tronco para cima, a folhagem dele mistura-se à folhagem geral e é de novo o sincretismo. Só o tronco se destaca, se individualiza. Tal é o Mayombe, os gigantes só o são em parte, ao nível do tronco, o resto confunde-se na massa. Tal o homem" (266). The commander's body is respectfully left

to rest by his troops in the bosom of Mayombe, and the narrow human trails cut in the rainforest gradually begin to disappear: "O Mayombe recuperaria o que os homens ousaram tirar-lhe" (268). The apotheosis of Commander Sem-Medo at novel's end signals the multifaceted trajectory of reconciliation which Pepetela considers necessary: the merging of individual with group, of humanity with natural environment, of ethnic and linguistic groups with each other, to create the collective Angolan mythic hero of the future. The Africanized Prometheus is multiple and varied, and no single beaten track which all must tread may be discerned:

"Sem Medo. . . insistia em que era um caminho no deserto. Por isso se ria dos que diziam que era um trilho cortando, nítido, o verde do Mayombe. Hoje sei que não há trilhos amarelos no meio do verde. Tal é o destino de Ogun, o Prometeu africano" (270).

Four years after the publication of *Mayombe*, Pepetela broadened his focus in the field of historical fiction to incorporate the southern region of Benguela over an eighty-five year period crucial to Angola's economic and political evolution; *Yaka* (1984) is the saga of a predominantly white Angolan family from 1890 through 1975 as it develops its generational branches in the context of the indigenous Cuvale and Bailundo cultures and the close proximity of South Africa. The resulting panoramic view of regional and national events, including the birth and activity of the three main Angolan independence movements (MPLA, FNLA, and Unita), makes use of two strands of mythological tradition—the African and the Greek. Almost all the given names of the nuclear Semedo family evoke Classical heroes, heroines, or writers; Alexandre, Aquiles, Aristóteles, Sócrates, Orestes, Eurídice, Helena, Heitor, Ulisses, and Demóstenes carry on the family respect for European antiquity, and patriarch Alexandre "[a]creditava mais em Afrodite e Atena que no Cristo" (113). His latent syncretism extends to other religious practices as well: "No fundo, ainda não tinha descoberto quais os deuses que o protegiam e os que o perseguiam. Pensou mesmo em ir ao grupo espírita" (113). This same man treasures a large wooden statue from the Lunda region of northeastern Angola which has worked its way south to Benguela and come into his family's possession. The tribal interaction of ancient Angola is saluted at the novel's beginning as the *yaka* statue is designated by the author as a symbol of cultural transmission from *within*:

Yaka, Mbayaka, jaga, imbangala?
Foram uma mesma formação social (?), Nação (?) —

aos antropólogos de esclarecer. Certo é que agitaram a já tremeluzente História de Angola, com as suas incursões no Reino do Congo. . . Foi o princípio do que se sabe. Na Matamba, deram força à legendária Rainha Njinga (ou Nzinga), que empurrou o exército português até no mar. Talvez Njinga fosse yaka? A hipótese ainda não morreu. Os ditos guerreiros, que por comodidade chamo de yaka, desceram para o sul. . . Tiveram influência certa no dito Reino de Benguela, formaram chefias nas terras dos Muila, Gambo, já lá bem no Sul, irrequietamente voltaram a subir, formaram chefias no Planalto Central, em Caconda, Huambo, Bailundo, Bié. . .

E o círculo yaka ficou fechado nesses séculos antigos. Criadores de chefias, assimiladores de culturas, formadores de exércitos com jovens de outras populações que iam integrando na sua caminhada, parecem apenas uma idéia errante, cazumbi antecipado da nacionalidad.

Mas não é deles que trata este livro, só duma estátua.
(6)

As to the statue itself, “é pura ficção. . . [e]la poderia ter existido. Mas não. Por acaso. Daf a necessidade de a criar, como mito recriado. Até porque só os mitos têm realidade. E como nos mitos, os mitos criam a si próprios, falando” (Ibid.). Throughout the novel, Alexandre Semedo uses the statue as his “narratee” and sounding-board, but since he dies just when the factionalism of the independence movements begins to assert itself, it is the statue itself which has the “last word” in the novel. Foreseeing the future of a sovereign Angola as the fulfillment of its own cultural “mission,” Yaka ponders the timing of political events and wonders if it is still premature to hope. Will the future bring centripetal or centrifugal socio-cultural development? Will the independent nation scatter or gather? Yaka’s existence has thus far served as a symbol of potential interregional unity and cultural continuity, but the time has come for reality to replace symbol . . . or has it? The novel ends on an uncertain note:

Minha criação está aí em torrentes de esperança, a anunciada chegou.

Posso então me desequilibrar do soco e ficar em cacos pelo chão, a boca para um lado, os olhos pelo mar, o coração embaixo da terra, o sexo para o Norte e as pernas para o Sul? Ou será melhor aguardar ainda?
(302).

Yaka's ambiguous facial features had led family observers to identify her as both a parody of Europeans and a symbol of atavistic forces. The ambivalence as to who are the heroes and who the villains of Angola's past and future remains to the novel's end. The mythic monsters of the South, *oma-kisi*, are evoked as the equivalent of vampires because of the folk belief that they have sharp teeth and eat people every day, yet at the same time these awesome creatures represent in hydra-headed fashion the resurgent will of the people to be free of colonial oppression:

Os colonos diziam tinha muitas revoltas. Não tinha nada, era só uma. Como os oma-kisi, monstros comedores de gente, renasciam de cada vez lhes cortavam uma cabeça. Sempre. Porque a fonte de oma-kisi não secava, estava nos olhos. Os olhos apontavam a lonjura da minha criação (96).

The Semedo family is a microcosm of multiple political factions and value systems emerging on the eve of Angolan independence, and serves to incorporate both southern Angola and an intellectual white/mulatto family into Pepetela's fictional "scheme of things." The third and (to date) definitive step in this broadening of ethnic, regional, and historical scope comes in the author's latest novel, *Lueji* (published late in 1990). This "double novel" simultaneously traces parallel lines of development between the career of Queen Lueji in sixteenth century Lunda and the mulatta ballerina Lu in the Luanda of 1999 as she attempts to create an authentically national ballet; in short, Pepetela intertwines the historical and thematic background and the future artistic realization of the subject of the founding of an Angolan empire. Replete with aesthetic and political artifacts and symbols, this quintessential example of what the novel itself calls "realismo animista" (451) is a *tour de force* of thorough ethno-historical research of northeastern and central Angola and multifaceted awareness of national and international trends and problems at the end of the twentieth century. The novel masterfully intertwines multiple threads into an incipient mythological tapestry of modern Angola, but avoids facile polarization by leaving hard questions for the reader (whether Angolan or foreign) to ponder: Should traditions be *kept* or *created*? If by definition ethnic versions of origins and heroes are ideological, should later versions of the same stories be stripped of their religious-ideological content in order to be contextualized in a wider scale? What constitutes cultural adulteration? What are the parameters of authenticity in the modern world? What is the role of the "cultural elite" (e.g., ballet troupes, artistic workshops, scholars of history) in the formation of a

coherent national cultural awareness among the masses? Are myths “doomed” to continuous evolution without ever achieving a definitive form?

The sixteenth century strand of *Lueji* traces the development of the Lunda-Luba alliance, the breakdown of the traditional Lunda politico-social structures, and the expansion of empire in geographic scope and innovative practice as various factions interpret and develop the same ethnic traditions in diverse and sometimes conflictive ways. Simultaneously (the two novelistic strands intertwine within the same paragraphs and sentences), four hundred years later a Luandan ballet corps struggles to achieve an authentically national art form and preservation of a mythic past by rejecting the Marxist plot and Slavic musical patterns suggested by a visiting European choreographer in favor of the recreation of the story of Lueji and her empire danced to the music of African instruments such as the marimba and the kissanje. The stylization of the traditional and the aesthetic recreation of once-powerful beliefs lead to frequent debates among the dancers involved, who hail from all areas and several ethnic sub-groups of Angola; the result is a microcosm of the intellectual and cultural training experienced by a cross-section of Angolan creative artists, doctors, and business interests during the last quarter of the twentieth century. The invention of electronic kissanjes and the incorporation of lasers into the staging of the ballet are juxtaposed with the wearing of tribal amulets by dancers and the invocation by head ballerina Lu of the spirit of Queen Lueji to neutralize production problems as the ballet progresses. Lu herself synthesizes multi-ethnic differences as she draws inspiration from both the black and white sides of her family and attempts to neutralize value- and ethnic-based frictions among other members of her troupe.

In both the sixteenth century and contemporary strands of *Lueji*, strong female protagonists dominate the scene and face choices that affect not only their own professional careers (the queenship of Lunda and choice of husband-consort in the case of Lueji and the creation of ballet score and selection of head dance partner in the case of Lu) but also the long-term future of their enterprise: empire-building for the former and recuperation of an Angolan cultural patrimony for the latter. Both women stand at crossroads in their careers and know that their decisions will redound to their honor or dishonor in days to come; both are looked to as leaders of others and agonize over the implications of their responsibilities.

Though in this novel the equivalency of European and African mythical entities plays a lesser role than in the two previously mentioned works, the female gender of Tchyanza Ngombe — serpent-progenitor of the Lundas — is fundamental to the text. The *oma-kisi* change their role from symbol of grassroots opposition to colonialism (in *Yaka*) to menacing symbol of aerial military aggression originating in South Africa and interpreted in two parallel

yet divergent ways in competing versions of the national ballet being created in *Lueji*. In the disastrous Marxist version propounded by the imported Czech choreographer, the invaders are repelled by Angolan soldiers determined to save their newly-won turf from further incursions, while in the version commonly understood among the national dancers themselves there is a magical element which the Eurocentric mind is incapable of comprehending:

Ele mudou a estória, não é? A luta principal no "Cahama" é a dos soldados angolanos contra os oma-kisi, os monstros míticos do Sul, os quais se vencem pela coragem e sobretudo pela esperteza. Os oma-kisi vêm vomitando fogo pela boca, arrasam tudo, tentam tudo engolir. Se sentem donos e senhores, na sua superioridade branca de espectros. E pela frente encontram os soldados, quais miúdos espertos e teimosos que se não deixam engolir. Defendendo a sua onganda até ao fim... O espanto faz descomandar as engrenagens dos computadores que estão nas cabeças dos oma-kisi, as respostas ilógicas dos nossos queimam os circuitos lógicos deles, e os oma-kisi ardem em curto-circuitos electrónicos. Esta é a estória verdadeira do que passou na Cahama. Do que passou todos os dias no nosso Sul, mítico-verdadeiro. Vem um gajo, resolve mudar tudo. Claro, aconteceu o que tinha de acontecer. Os espíritos que com os nossos estavam na Cahama se revoltaram, sabotaram tudo e adeus espetáculo. Se ao menos o checo tivesse feito oferendas aos espíritos... (75)

The solution, from Lu's point of view, is the creation of an entirely different ballet which will emphasize not the bellicose images of the recent political past in southern Angola (note similarity with *Yaka*) but rather the broadly sweeping history of cultural diversity and integration incorporating all regions of the nation. It is to be an epic in which the principal culture hero will be a woman — Queen Lueji (Njinga) — and the continuing symbols of identity will be of a more peaceful nature: the sovereign's *lukano* bracelet, the sacred *mulemba* trees, and the *rosas de porcelana* which grow wild on the shore of Lueji's favorite lake.

Diverse opinions reign within the ballet troupe itself as the nature of heroism and mythic qualities is debated by the dancers who perform in the new ballet created by Lu. Cândido, a Cuvale of rural upbringing and Marxist training, maintains that mythic and ancient cultural heroes are somehow remote

from current reality and should be discarded in favor of more relevant subject matter, while Lu seeks the middle ground of integration of the traditional and the innovative:

—Da próxima vez que conceberes um bailado, deixa de lado os Tchinguris, Ilungas e outros e trata os camponeses, os pescadores, os escravos. . .

—Aproveitei o que conta a tradição, Cândido, e a tradição não trata desses, só dos grandes. Os mitos não se interessam por gente comum. E da gente comum os mitos fazem heróis. A culpa não é minha.

—Não podias deformar o mito?

—Até deformei. Mas não a esse ponto. Deixa de ser mito. (478-479)

Three stages of cultural awareness and application emerge in the theoretical discussions among artists that make *Lueji* a work of metafiction. Cândido exemplifies a large rural population, part of which retains in relatively pristine form its belief in traditional gods and supernatural forces who determine the course of human existence while another segment (including the dancer himself) has rejected all such beliefs in favor of the alternative determinism of materialistic Marxism. Lu and others of the company have chosen the third, more reconciliatory position, which seeks out cultural foundations and artifacts with an eye to recreating and staging them in stylized and selective artistic fashion for a modern, largely urban public:

O poder tradicionalista baseia-se nisso. Dos velhos sobre os novos, dos homens sobre as mulheres, das ideias velhas sobre as ideias novas. E a submissão do homem à Natureza. O homem se torna incapaz de iniciativas para mudanças benéficas, pois tudo gira segundo a vontade dos ventos ou do oma-kisi. O homem acaba por não contar, é um brinquedo das forças superiores. . . Devemos aproveitar os cânticos, as danças, as outras artes tradicionais. Mas depurando-as das crendices obscurantistas.

— O que significa adular a cultura, pois esta é um todo.

— Qualquer aperfeiçoamento é uma adulteração. E nenhuma cultura se mantém parada. (456)

Pepetela's latest novel combines theory and practice regarding the creation (or recreation) of a national Angolan mythology for the future. His conclusion that independent Angola must draw inspiration from all sources and achieve its own unique "mix" by consensus is suggested early in the work as he ponders the end of a millenium: "Os velhos mitos renasciam com a aproximação do ano 2000. Medos. Esperanças. Arritmias. Fim do Mundo. Julgamento Final? Bem procurávamos nos afastar desses temores, pensando isso são mitos da Europa, lendas criadas a partir dos semitas e do Novo Testamento, que temos nós, bantos, a ver com isso, os nossos mitos são outros, de nascimento e formação, não de mortes e catástrofes escritas em livros antigos. Mas o Mundo deixara de ser o somatório de mundos fechados, era um só, cada vez mais mestiço" (26-27). The ballet troupe itself becomes a metaphor for the reconciliation of ethnic, regional, and cultural differences as these become factors of enrichment rather than conflict.

From the recent past and far north of Cabinda, represented in *Mayombe*, through the panoramic view of the southern Benguela region and its unique drama, traced in *Yaka*, to the imperial history of the Lunda-Luba dynasty of northeastern Angola and its later proliferation throughout the national territory in both political and cultural terms, as viewed in *Lueji*, Pepetela has gathered the raw material and suggested a creative methodology for the formation of a national mythology for modern Angola, both inclusive and authentic, dynamic and lyric, problematic and promising, and having an increasingly decisive feminine component. At no point does he offer a set scheme or closed symbolic system, preferring rather to follow several alternative routes of investigation and suggest diverse thematic threads. It remains to be seen whether he will develop this focus further in future novels and whether other Angolan writers will also take up the tools of the New Historicism and of traditional African oral literature to pursue a similar epic enterprise.

Works Cited

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