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The Secret of Yaka: Pepetela and Colonialism

Angolan author Pepetela (Artur Carlos Mauico Pestana Dos Santos) was awarded the Camoes Prize for Literature in Portuguese-speaking countries last year, placing Pepetela within the top rank of Portuguese-language writers. Thanks to the efforts of several translators, Pepetela's works are becoming increasingly available to the English-speaking world as well. Readers and educators interested in adding Angolan literature to their libraries and courses may well consider the recent translation of Pepetela's *Yaka*, translated by Marga Holness.

This translation appears to work quite well as a faithful presentation of both the content and the style for which Pepetela is recognized. This novel will also be of interest to those who wish to understand colonialism in Angola. Published in 1984, *Yaka* presents a fine study of Angolan history from 1890 to 1975, years tracing Angola's movement from Portuguese colony to independent nation.

At the center of *Yaka* is the family of Alexandre Semedo. It is through the microcosm of the lives and the psyches of several generations of this family that Pepetela chronicles and explores the Angolan colonists and colonialism itself. Alexandre's parents view themselves as Portuguese. Alexandre's father was exiled from Portugal and banished to Angola for killing his wife with an axe, though he denies that and claims he was exiled for his republican views. Alexandre's mother "may have ... been the first white woman to be born in Capangombe," a settlement in which there were "about a hundred white families, mostly ex-convicts" (p. 5).[1]

While Alexandre was born in Angola, like most colonists and their Angolan-born descendants, he attempts to build his life on the colonial framework and within that culture. Also like most colonists, Alexandre fears the native Angolans and cowers in fear whenever rumor of an uprising reaches a colonial settlement. However, Alexandre also finds the native Angolans intriguing, especially the women. Alexandre attempts to bridge the gulf between the colonist and the native cultures, something he seems to have been destined to do from birth, when he was accidentally dropped and his "mouth closed when he bit the earth" (p. 3). Through this mouthful of earth, Alexandre appears to become a child of Angola. He inherits from his father a meter high Yaka statue,

described by Alexandre as having "transparent eyes and three parallel stripes, white, black and red" and "the face ... looking sometimes human and sometimes like an animal. The bulbous nose looks like a drunkard's and gives a mocking look to the whole" (p. 16).

Alexandre puzzles upon and talks to the Yaka statue throughout his life because for him it has come to possess the secret to understanding of something, perhaps how the colonist and Angolan people and cultures can become one. But the statue never reveals its secrets to Alexandre, remains silent to his questions, but speaks to us readers.

For the most part, Alexandre and his offspring conform to the expectations of the colonist community. He marries a woman from Portugal (who is selected by his parents), attempts to run a business, acquires a large home and property, and produces a next generation of colonists who still consider themselves Portuguese. His few attempts at bridging the gulf between colonist and Angolan amount to little more than collecting artifacts and attempting to procure an Angolan woman as a mistress. The former brings him little understanding, since the significance of the artifacts escapes him. The latter yields him rejection by one woman whom he seeks as a sexual partner and, from a second woman, a mulatto daughter, whom he never acknowledges, and a grandson, whom he acknowledges only late in life, on the eve of Portuguese power and the morning of the Angolan people's struggle for independence.

Not only Alexandre, but also and even more his sons and daughters and their mates represent the corruption of colonialism at its worst. They exploit the Angolan people as laborers on the lands stolen from the natives. They tremble at every rumor of native uprisings. They rape, maim, and kill in the name of their mother country.

Only with the coming of age of Alexandre's grandchildren and great-grandchildren does the prospect of a new Angola emerge. One of those great-grandchildren is Joel, the only person to whom Alexandre speaks after ten years of silence. Joel, Alexandre senses, seems to understand what his parents, aunts, and uncles know not at all and what Alexandre seeks to know–the secret the Yaka statue knows. The other, a grandson named Chico, is the son of Alexandre's black illegitimate daughter. When Chico, now a young adult, shows up at the Semedo home, Alexandre acknowledges him, thus resulting in Alexandre's first successful attempt to cross the boundary between himself and his grandson, between colonist and Angolan.

It is Joel and Chico who join with the Angolan guerillas to battle the colonial powers, while the rest of the extended family flee, with the exception of Alexandre, who refuses to leave. It is Joel who begins to explain to Alexandre the secret of the Yaka statue: "The statue represents a settler, Grandfather. Look at it. It's what the sculptor thought of the settlers. He ridiculed them. Look at the nose. Stupid and ambitious" (p. 296). But Joel's explanation is that of the new Angolan both he and Chico represent.

Only after Alexandre is alone in the *sapalalo*, his family having fled and Joel and Chico having joined the guerillas, does the Yaka statue speaks to Alexandre. Now Alexandre sees in the Yaka statue the struggle Chico and Joel have joined; he sees in it the end of colonialism and the beginning of the new Angola in which Joel "will be adopted by the Cuvales and they will fight a guerilla war that will be famous .... The invaders will retreat, driven back ....":

Your generation will be the last .... Only now do you understand. And you were a big imposter. You robbed in the shop but criticized the situation to allay the remorse I made you feel.

The earth Alexandre Semedo's mouth bites tastes good to him. It is the smell of soil wet with morning dew ... (p. 302).

So, with the end of Alexandre Semedo, with his second mouthful of earth, Pepetela closes the chapter of colonialism and opens through Joel and Chico the beginning of the struggle for independence.

In addition to being a fine study of the mentality of the colonist and the struggle of the colonist to understand and become a part of a new world, this translation of Yaka also appears to capture Pepetela's ability as stylist and mythmaker, though only the linguistic specialist can speak authoritatively on these matters.

Pepetela's prose takes on lyric qualities in many passages–like those cited above–and in others, such as the novel's opening in which Pepetela announces not only the birth of Alexandre Semedo but also that which his birth signifies–the detrimental impact of colonialism on native Angola:

Alexandre Semedo's first wail sounded in Cuvale territory.

It had the effect of a gunshot. Monkeys leapt from crags and were lost in the branches of swollen baobabs.

Birds of every hue availed themselves of it to vanish beyond the Serra da Chela mountain range. Bush goats, zebras, even leopards, all hid in the folds of the Serra. Lizards and snakes slithered their sinuous bodies into holes and behind rocks.

There remained in the air the echo of the wail and the fearful mantle of silence that followed the violation. Long after Alexandre had spoken his first word, things and beings still looked at one another and looked out, waiting. (p. 3)

This same quality speaks to the reader through the voice of the Yaka statue, commenting to us on the birth of Alexandre, of the coming of the colonists and the portent for Angola of that coming of this new generation of Angolan-born whites:

I heard Alexandre Semedo's cry tear his mother's entrails and come into the light of day. I mingled with the curious and startled glances of the gazelles and the sudden halt of blue lizards nodding their heads.

I waited for the unique shower, perhaps without water, that would join mouth to eyes and legs to genitals, still separate in mistrust. Would this fulfil the augury read in the goat's intestines which combined the sound of rain with music that was strange, new, but so very much ours?

I saw the baby's mouth bite the dry earth. Did it bite or kiss it?

Was that bite-kiss an evening rainbow trailing a shower of music, or merely a tuft of grass in which a knot is made to bind the coming of what has been announced?

I have yet to see. And tell whoever understands. Suffering. (pp. 8-9)

Another powerful element of Pepetela's style is his mythmaking. According to Clive Willis, Pepetela uses elements of Greek myth as symbols of colonial prejudice and the Angolan artifacts (e. g., the Yaka statue and a dagger) as symbols of indigenous culture.[2] Of course, the strongest of these mythical symbols is the Yaka statue itself, embodying perhaps the stupidity and ignorance of colonialism (as Joel sees it), the end of colonialism and the emergence of the new Angola, or, more likely, both of these.

Another example of such symbolism occurs in Pepetela's use of other Angolan artifacts. For example, as the novel progresses, Alexandre collects various artifacts and then spends increasingly large amounts of time in a room filled with these artifacts to indicate that that which is Angolan is overpowering that which is colonial. This transcendence of the Angolan culminates in Alexandre's giving of the dagger to Joel as Joel is about to embark upon his role in the war for independence.

All told, this translation of Pepetela's *Yaka* shows it to be a finely crafted and highly insightful work. It won for Pepetela the National Prize for Literature in 1985. Combined with the Camoes Prize awarded to Pepetela last year, these awards underscore the fact that Pepetela is a major figure among Angolan, African, Portuguese-language writers.

Pepetela himself is Angolan-born to white Portuguese colonist parents. He studied in Lisbon, Paris, and Algiers prior to joining the MPLA as a member of a Marxist guerrilla band. After Angolan independence was achieved in 1975, Pepetela became Minister of Education, a post he held until 1982. After being relieved of that office, Pepetela took a post as a professor of sociology at the University of Angola, joined the board of directors of the Union of Angolan Writers, and began to dedicate more time to writing. His literary output in addition to *Yaka* includes *Muana Pu* (written in 1969; published in 1978), a prose allegory of the Angolan war of independence; *Mayombe* (written in 1971 and published 1980), a novel that is a study of a Marxist guerrilla band operating in the Mayombe forest of Cabinda province; *Ngunga's Adventures: A Story of Angola*, a novella published in mimeograph in 1973; the play *A corda* (*The rope*), 1978; a second play *A revolta da casa dos idolos* (*The revolt of the house of idols*, 1980; *O cno e os Caluandas* (*The dog and the people of Luanda*), an episodic novel written and published in 1985; Lueji, a novel based on oral traditions of the Lunda Empire, published in 1990; *A geran da utopia* (*The utopia generation*), a novel published in 1992; and *O desejo de Kianda* (*The desire of Kianda*), a story published in 1995. In addition to *Yaka*, both *Ngunga's Adventures* and *Mayombe*, along with several other of his works, have been translated into English.

While many resources dealing with Pepetela and his works are available in Portuguese language publications, the number in English is a scant few. A very good introduction to Pepetela and his works for English-speaking individuals is that by Clive Willis. Willis' study also includes a select bibliography containing most of the good resources on Pepetela.

Notes

[1]. Angola became a Portuguese colony in the fif-

teenth century and is the only African country to be used as a penal settlement. In addition to soldiers and officials, the nineteenth century white community included ex-convicts and political exiles. A strict class system placed Portuguese-born colonists as first class whites and then descended to Angolan-born whites, those of mixed blood, and those of purely indigenous Angolan blood.

[2]. "Pepetela." *African Writers*. Ed. Brian Cox. New York: Scribners, 1997: 685-95.

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