You Can’t Kill a Kianda: A Reading of Pepetela’s “Magias do Mar”

ANITA DE MELO
University of Cape Town

Abstract: In the present essay, I analyze “Magias do Mar,” a short story published in 2017 by Angolan writer Pepetela. Drawing from the Angolan myth of Kianda, a mythological creature believed to be the goddess of the ocean, Pepetela’s narrative evokes animism in a manner that parallels Harry Garuba’s observations on contemporary African thought. I reflect on Garuba’s work and examine how animism in “Magias do Mar” works to challenge colonial and modern Western epistemologies and practices. Of particular interest is the narrative’s reflection on the extermination of African wildlife through hunting. I conclude by arguing that Pepetela’s use of animism in “Magias do Mar” has significant implications for postcolonial ecocritical analysis.

Keywords: Angola, animism, ecocriticism, postcolonialism, mythology

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Drawing from the precolonial Angolan myth of Kianda, a creature believed to be the goddess of the ocean, Pepetela’s “Magias do Mar” engages with animism in a manner that parallels Harry Garuba’s own observations on contemporary African thought. For Garuba, manifestations of the animist unconscious in contemporary African social and literary contexts work to subvert colonial epistemologies and constitute a “continual reenchantment of the world” (“Explorations” 265).

In the present essay, I first reflect on Garuba’s account of contemporary African thought and examine how animism in “Magias do Mar” challenges

colonial and modern Western epistemologies and practices. Of particular concern is the extermination of African wildlife through hunting. I conclude by arguing that Pepetela's use of animism in "Magias do Mar" has significant implications for postcolonial ecocritical analysis, insofar as it works to "reenchant the world."

On Animism

The earliest known ethnographic theorization of animism is that of Edward Burnett Tylor. Writing in 1871, Tylor argued against the then commonly held notion that indigenous peoples lacked religious systems. According to Tylor, indigenous people do not necessarily have organized forms of religion; rather, they believe in spiritual beings, and they believe that natural phenomena—such as plants, animals, rocks, and thunder—have spirits that influence human events (284). Tylor argues that indigenous people's animism is a consistent, real, and meaningful philosophy of nature that predates organized religion (285). More recently, Wole Soyinka has argued that the human condition belongs to a cosmic context that is anterior to the separation into categories advocated by the modern European imagination. Soyinka explains that Greek paganism, prior to Platonic and Christian traditions, probably contained in its metaphysics of Earth this same cosmic dimension: "In Asian and European antiquity, therefore, man did, like the African, exist within a cosmic totality, did possess a consciousness in which his own earth being, his gravity-bound apprehension of self, was inseparable from the entire cosmic phenomenon" (3).

Soyinka argues that the African and European thought are fundamentally different. Given this, it is necessary to understand Western ideas about animism and somehow separate these from autochthonous accounts of the "cosmic totality" Soyinks describes. Soyinka himself underscores the need for African peoples to develop a "self-apprehension" of their world that is not conditioned by the views of others (viii-ix). Caroline Rooney similarly criticizes the Western account of animism as an ethnocentric distinction that ultimately serves to separate "modern" from "primitive" thought. According to Rooney, the term "animism" belongs to a group of "stigmatized words" marked by an asymmetrical relation that can be altered and even reversed. If "primitive" connotes inferiority for the West, it can also (and more justifiably) point to that which is "original" (Rooney 9-10). Opting to work with the term "primitive" and

its unmistakably link to notions of *trajectory*, Rooney explains that Western thinkers have since the nineteenth century considered that the minds of primitive people functioned differently from those of Europeans. Rooney argues that some canonical modernist literature is intrinsically animist, and she provides as examples James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and even William Shakespeare's plays. African animism, Rooney argues, tends to be approached as spiritism, characterized by an exaggerated mystical alterity (10-11).

Current discussions on African animism revolve predominantly around the theories proposed by Nigerian Professor Harry Garuba. He points out, for example, that animism must not be linked to any organized or systematic form of religion:

> Rather it is the umbrella designation for a mode of religions consciousness that is often as elastic as the user is willing to stretch it. Perhaps the single, most important characteristic of animist thought – in contrast to the major monotheistic religions – is its almost total refusal of countenance unlocalized, unembodied, unphysicalized gods and spirits. Animism is often seen as belief in objects such as stones or trees or rivers for the simple reason that animist gods and spirits are located and embodied in objects… Within the phenomenal world, nature and its objects are endowed with a spiritual life both simultaneous and coterminous with their natural properties. Rivers, for example, not only become natural sources of water but are prized for various other reasons. The animist urge to reification may have been religious in origin, but the social and cultural meanings that become attached to the objects often break off from the purely religious and acquire an existence of their own as part of the general process of signification in society. ("Explorations" 267)

Garuba explains that "the physical world of phenomena is spiritualized," and that currently in Africa there are practices, influenced by animist thought, that become an act of "re-traditionalization of Africa" (264-65). This happens, according to Garuba, because of "a manifestation of an animist unconscious,"

which operates through a process that involves what he describes as a "continual re-enchantment of the world" (265). By "re-enchantment of the world," Garuba means a process through which "magical elements of thought" constantly assimilate "new developments in science, technology, and the organization of the world within a basically 'magical' worldview" (267). It is a continual re-enchantment through which "the rational and scientific are appropriated and transformed into the mystical and magical" (267).

With regard to African literature, Garuba argues that African writers have frequently recontextualized animist thought. He maintains that animism in "literary practice devolves into a representational strategy that involves giving the abstract or metaphorical a material realization" (285). Animism enables new meanings, which have been utilized in literary practices, and in studies about African culture and society. These possibilities of creating new meanings become, in literature, strategies of representation and narrative techniques that allow 'transpositions' and 'transgressions' of borders and identities, having as its foundation (or superstructure) an animist conception of reality. Therefore, the technique or strategy consists of "giving a concrete dimension to abstract ideas" (273). Such use, argues Garuba, no longer reflects the modernist understanding that animism was somehow a cognitive problem, inferior to Western thought and views ("On Animism" 42). He goes on to point out that animism has largely absorbed present-day intellectual inquiry and become a "platform for political action, particularly in relation to issues of ecology and environment" ("On Animism" 42). As he puts it:

> Recognizing this is important, and what has led to this recognition is the work of environmental/ecological movements which have increasingly invoked animistic understanding of the world that are derived from indigenous communities, postmodernism's relativist epistemologies, New Age spiritualism, and contemporary anthropologists speaking of relational epistemologies and different conceptions of personhood across cultures. A result of this work has been the suggestion that the boundary between Nature and Society, between the world of objects and that of subjects, between the material world and that of agency and symbolic meanings, is

> less certain than the modernist project had decreed it to be. (Garuba, "On Animism" 43)

Put another way, the old Cartesian division between object and subject likewise no longer seems as convincing as it once did.

It was Pepetela who introduced the term "Animist Realism" to describe contemporary African literature. Referring to African art, Pepetela speaks of Animist Realism to define his own narrative aesthetic. Through character dialogue in *Lueji* (1989), Pepetela stresses the importance of the term and encourages literary critics to adopt it:

> - Aqui não estamos a fazer país nenhum - disse Lu. - A arte não tem que o fazer, apenas reflecti-lo.
> [...] Eu queria é fustigar os dogmas...
> - Eu sei, Jaime. Por isso te inscreves na corrente do realismo animista...
> - É. O azar é que não crio nada para exemplificar. E ainda não apareceu nenhum cérebro para teorizar a corrente. Só existe o nome e a realidade da coisa. Mas este bailado todo é realismo animista, duma ponta à outra. Esperemos que os críticos o reconheçam.
> […] O Jaime diz a única estética que nos serve é a do realismo animista, explicou Lu. Como houve o realismo e o neo, o realismo socialista e o fantástico, e outros realismos por aí.
> […] isto que andamos a fazer é sem dúvida alguma. se triunfamos é graças ao amuleto que a Lu tem no pescoço. (451-59)

Through his characters, Pepetela shows what Garuba would later theorize; that is, literature in Africa as part of a distinct socio-historic process.

Animism in Pepetela's "Magias do Mar" involves reclaiming a traditional Angolan myth with the goal of using it to disrupt colonial and modern Western thinking that promotes the destruction of colonized environments. In "Magias do Mar," Pepetela specifically denounces European hunters who kill African animals. The narrative is divided into two parts. The first part presents the narrative conflict. It reads as an allegory of the colonial process that worked, *inter*

alia, to all but exterminate African animals. The second part of "Magias do Mar," involves a turning point in the narrative; it evokes the presence of Kianda, whose metaphysical force rids Angola (and by extension, the African continent) of a merciless European hunter.

Pepetela had previously explored the myth of Kianda in *O desejo de Kianda* (1995). This novel begins with an almost simultaneous celebration and disaster. The day of the protagonist's wedding is followed by the unexpected slow-motion collapse of a building in the new Largo do Kinaxixi, in central Luanda. Maria Theresa Abelha Alves has argued that *O desejo de Kianda* can be read through two principal metaphors: conjunction and disjunction. Kianda, she argues, has a fundamental role in the chaos: "[…] libera o seu canto que fora soterrado pelo colonialismo, com o intuito de restaurar a antiga geografia do Kinaxixi. Kianda redesenha o mapa que o império Português alterou, devolvendo à Praça seu antigo estatuto de lagoa, devolvendo à ilha de Luanda, que em peninsula fora transformada, sua insular configuração" (238).

Zuleide Duarte and Izabel Cristina Oliveira Martins offer an explicitly postcolonial reading of *O desejo de Kianda*. They argue that the novel can be read as an account of "Luanda Syndrome," a term that refers to the kleptocratic tendencies of political actors in Angola's capital (39). To counter these tendencies, Pepetela introduces the figure of Kianda, a "mythical being from Luanda's popular imaginary, inserted into the narrative to call attention to the loss of ethical values and the struggles for democracy as well as to disclose and preserve Angolan identitarian roots, which had been threatened by extinction as a result of the colonization process" (Duarte and Martins 37).

It is noteworthy that while Pepetela has invoked Kianda more than once in his writing, two other Angolan writers, Luandino Vieira and Arnaldo Santos, have made even more frequent use of the mythical figure (Duarte and Martins 46). In addition, *O desejo de Kianda* is, as the author admits, the most violent of his novels. In an interview with Maura Eustáquia de Oliveira, Pepetela said that he wrote *O desejo de Kianda* in a moment of profound rage because of Angola's non-democratic elections (Duarte and Martins 47). This suggests that Pepetela's working with the myth of Kianda serves also to challenge counter-hegemonic and colonialist powers. Pepetela is also the Angolan writer who has perhaps most consistently sought to revise the history of Angola while denouncing the signs of the nation's political-ideological collapse. As Duarte and Martins propose, *O*

desejo de Kianda communicates the importance of honoring Angola's Kianda (48).

The Plot of "Magias do Mar"

The protagonist of "Magias do Mar" is a Dutch man named Ruud de Boer. He is an aficionado of big-game hunting, and the story starts when he is only five years old. As a child, De Boer lives with his mother and grandfather in the Netherlands. His father is never mentioned. At this tender age, De Boer already enjoys killing animals, and he spends his time smashing flies with a dictionary of Afrikaans. This early indication in the story of the protagonist's obsession with hunting is symbolic of colonial violence, and the dictionary of Afrikaans works as a thinly veiled synecdoche of the Dutch colonization of Southern Africa. An Angolan named Rodrigo assumes the role of De Boer's antagonist, and the latter is ultimately defeated. Reading allegorically, this may well be a historical reference to the MPLA's efforts to help end the South African annexation of Namibia and provide military aid to the People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN) in the 1980s.

When De Boer turns six, his grandfather gives him a pistol, despite the mother's strong protests and opposition. Soon afterward, De Boer shoots and kills a cat. The mother threatens to take away the weapon, but the grandfather intervenes. As it turns out, the old man had once hunted lions in Tanganyika, and he explains to the mother that one cannot kill a Bengal tiger without persistence. De Boer gets his pistol back, though he is made to promise never to shoot cats again. But he is not finished killing animals. He begins to visit public parks with his pistol tucked into a green shirt. He shoots at birds, and while his aim is poor at first, he finally manages to hit one. Giddy with success, the young boy dances around as the dying bird agonizes on the ground. There is nothing suspicious about about a little boy jumping around euphorically in a park, but De Boer is nonetheless careful not to be seen. The omniscient narrator comments that little Ruud is already aware of those cults and leagues that defend animals, and he considers them to be more fanatical than those that defend humans. It is when De Boer goes to college that he buys his first rifle. During school breaks, he sets off to hunt ducks in the swamps of France and rabbits in Spain and Portugal. To gain access to public lands, De Boer bribes poorly paid officials to look the other way.

He eventually sets his sights on hunting reindeer in Sweden, but he is not granted a permit. Elsewhere in Europe, De Boer starts encountering difficulties with permits. When De Boer graduates from college, he marries and goes into the insurance business. It is at this time that he decides to venture outside of Europe. He goes to Tanzania, where he spends a fascinating and unforgettable month hunting antelope and even his first lion in Tanzania. He later travels to Asia to hunt saber-toothed cats. De Boer eventually feels the need to return to Africa, and he opens a branch of his insurance company in Kenya with a plan to decimate the regional fauna under the pretext of helping stimulate tourism. At this point, De Boer is hunting African animals and acquiring land, both of which he is unable to do in his country, or even on his home continent. By expanding the scope of his dominion, De Boer uses his status as a white, European man to justify his desire to hunt. He eventually ventures into legally protected areas in Southern Africa. He secretly liquidates meerkats in Namibia before moving on to protected and endangered species. This description of destruction constitutes the first part of the story. The second part presents a conflict that ultimately progresses to an (anti)climax, introducing different likelihoods. And it is in the second part of the story that animism plays a decisive role.

De Boer meets an Angolan by the name of Rodrigo in a Namibian bar, and the two of them share a few too many drinks. De Boer mentions to Rodrigo that he has heard of a rare mammal, a manatee, that lives in the Kwanza River, though no one has actually seen it. De Boer begs Rodrigo to find him a good excuse to go to Angola, which involves telling him of some previously unknown animal he might hunt. Rodrigo replies that in Angola they have *kiandas*, but nobody has so far ever been able to kill one. With this, hunting and killing a *kianda* becomes De Boer's new obsession. He eventually plans an expedition to Angola. Rodrigo meets him in Luanda and agrees to accompany him as his interpreter. The two then set off to the island near waters where several *kiandas* are thought to live. Once there, they ask locals where *kiandas* have been seen, but they receive disjointed answers. Next, they meet an old Muxiluanda man who flatly denies the existence of *kiandas*. The suspicious old man says that a *kianda* is a mermaid, half woman and half fish, and such creatures do not exist. Rodrigo explains to the man De Boer's obsession with hunting a *kianda*, and the old man then claims that it was the Portuguese who decided that *kiandas* were mermaids. But *kiandas*, he explains, are not mermaids at all but rather goddesses of the sea. The old man

adds that young Angolans no longer believe in *kiandas*, and De Boer is similarly unconvinced. Distrusting the old Muxiluanda man, De Boer decides to get a second opinion. He meets an anthropologist who confirms that the identification of *kiandas* with mermaids is a Portuguese fabrication. The anthropologist explains that according to the Axiluanda people, when the ocean acts in mysterious manners, and nature appears to be subverted, it is Kianda manifesting herself. Most importantly, Kianda will provoke catastrophes in the ocean if she is not worshiped, and if she is threatened. De Boer does not believe any of these explanations. He is committed to hunting a *kianda*, regardless of what it might be. Rodrigo realizes he must come up with a plan to discourage De Boer. He visits a Kimbanda man who is known to practice unusual magic and asks him to help. The man replies that ocean creatures are not his specialization, and that he prefers to work with disincarnated spirits. Despite his hesitation, the man acquiesces and creates an elaborate ritual with stones, smoke, and feathers. He then paints De Boer's hand with a special liquid and explains that Kianda will be attracted by the perfume of that liquid, and when Kianda comes near, he can shoot her as many times as he wants. The man also warns that De Boer must go alone and armed. Indeed, and finally feeling ready to hunt a *kianda*, De Boer departs carrying with him a gun, a harpoon, full dive gear, and a large plastic bag to transport the body. De Boer boards a boat and sails towards the high-sea. Rodrigo stays on the beach, observing as the Dutch man's boat disappears over the horizon. Suddenly, high waves transform the ocean as if nature has been subverted. Later Rodrigo would swear that he saw beyond the horizon, and next to the moon, the Dutch man's boat on top of a huge wave that seemed like the back of a giant whale. De Boer never returned.

By invoking the myth of Kianda, Pepetela brings to his narrative a major divinity of many West African nations and of the African diaspora: the orisha Yemonja in Yoruba tradition; Yemanjá in Brazil, and Yemayá in Cuba. In West Africa, Yemoja is worshipped as a river deity; in Brazil and Cuba she is worshipped as a sea goddess. The Kimbunda man uses material elements to attract Kianda, and this is in accordance with what Garuba proposes, namely that African animism is the manifestation of an animist unconscious shared by the peoples of Africa, whose practical life is permeated by magical elements that coexist naturally with business, public life, and daily tasks. Garuba also argues that many postcolonial African writers assume the role of new historians,

anthropologists, and ethnologists giving voice to their people, nations or to the African continent through literature. Indeed, Pepetela in “Magias do Mar” fictionalizes part of the history of the African continent’s colonization through the perspective of a hunter. In this sense, Pepetela assumes the role of the new historian or anthropologist. De Boer’s obsession with hunting animals around the globe, but specifically in Africa, is highly indicative and representative of the colonial process. Benefiting from his status as a white man, De Boer hunts, acquires lands, expands his business, defies indigenous beliefs and knowledge in order to try to satisfy his never-ending desire to have what he wants. Moreover, when De Boer’s obsessions progress to the point that he decides to hunt a *kianda*, a creature that may or may not exist, the allure of the exotic becomes toxic. European colonizers have historically sought the “exotic” and “authentic” in Africa, and this search has proven inexhaustible. The first Portuguese colonizers went off in search of Indian Ocean spices but ended up establishing enormous sugar plantations in the Americas and not only damaging local environments but also forcibly displacing and enslaving people. Furthermore, the hunting conflict, as presented in the first part of “Magias do Mar,” denotes a neocolonial enterprise. That is, wealthy white Europeans and North Americans currently pay exhorbitant fees to hunt African animals without any official hindrance. Often enough, these hunters receive misplaced praise for their supposedly “conservationist” donations. “Magias do Mar” dives into the myth of Kianda to retell the history of African colonization by conjuring up elements of Angola’s precolonial identity. Animism in “Magias do Mar” revives the Angolan myth of Kianda, the goddess of the ocean, as a symbol of African traditional beliefs, and a counter-hegemonic discourse. The character of Kianda in “Magias do Mar” challenges anticipated and close ends for the plot. Rather, it provides a different possibility. The omniscient narrator of “Magias do Mar” blends mythology with other traditional beliefs and practices, creating hybrid spaces of representation *in lieu* of colonized histories, pointing out that Angolans must also look to local, precolonial epistèmes.

Pepetela’s use of animism in “Magias do mar” also has significant implications for postcolonial ecocritical analysis. Pepetela simultaneously denounces the colonial process, the exploitation of native people and their lands, and the obliteration of traditional beliefs along with an explicit concern for environmental matters (i.e., game-hunting in Africa). Environmentalists have

long argued that game hunting contributes to environmental imbalance, even if its proponents link it to responsible conservation efforts. Pepetela links these environmental concerns to a post-colonial concern with European exploitation of African resources. In this way, he brings together in "Magias do mar" modes of thought—ecocriticism and post-colonial critique—that have largely remained on parallel but separate tracks (Afzal).

Pepetela works jointly with ecocriticism and post-colonial thought by evoking African animism. "Magias do mar" works through the destructive colonial legacy through the literary imagination, itself a manifestation of an animist unconscious (Garuba, "Explorations"). It functions as a counter-discourse to Western notions of modernity, although it is not necessarily suggestive of a revival of traditionalism. These acts of animism, Garuba explains, present an alternative mode of being in the world, which subverts Western notions of modernity ("Explorations"). Pepetela's "Magias do mar" is thus not a nostalgic and romanticized appeal to Angolan original traditions; rather, Pepetela's use of animism suggests an alternative modernity. In "Magias do mar," traditional practices, beliefs, and myths co-exist in present-day Angola in the collective imaginary of its people. The Kimbanda shaman reminds the reader that young Angolans no longer believe in Kianda; nonetheless, her existence is confirmed by the beliefs of the old man, Rodrigo, the shaman himself, and by the anthropologist who provides a rather scientific explanation for the manifestation of *kiandas*.

In "Magias do Mar", the accentuated presence of the ancestral imaginary and the myth of Kianda direct the narrative to the disappearance of De Boer, although it is unclear what happens to him. It provides alternative paths for engaging animism as an epistemological possibility to think through the status of previously colonized people who have lost their lands and whose environment is continually under attack. Pepetela acknowledges the persistent destruction of African wildlife that began during the colonial period and persists to the present day. De Boer is the quintessential neo-colonizer whose activities are regulated by law in many countries, although he uses his (foreign) wealth to get around these and even hunt endangered species. Beyond this, De Boer represents the marginalization of indigenous knowledge. "Magias do Mar" thus invokes an animistic understanding of the world, which strongly suggests that "the boundary between Nature and Society [...] is less certain than the modernist project had

decreed it to be" (Garuba, "Explorations" 43)." Pepetela demonstrates through his story that European colonization has oppressed not only humans but also animals and whole eco-systems. Even today, certain Western mentalities and activities continue to be destructive, and they constitute a *de facto* continuation of the colonial order. As a response to this, the animist elements in "Magias do mar" reclaim indigenous knowledge in order to provide a local, autochtonous response to a series of modern crises.

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