The Role of Folklore in Pepetela’s Historiography of Angola

Daniel Colón

A influência da tradição oral africana tem um papel indiscutível nas discussões da literatura luso-africana. Sem dúvida, este é o caso do romance Yaka (1984) do escritor angolano Pepetela. Em particular, o autor utiliza elementos folclóricos para efectuar uma reescrita da história nacional. Na primeira secção deste estudo, analiso o modo como o folclore, em termos gerais, funciona como uma historiografia alternativa e não oficial que existe paralelamente à retórica e aos discursos históricos do governo central. Na segunda secção apresento os argumentos básicos do discurso colonial do Estado Novo sobre as províncias ultramarinas, o qual deriva da escrita do antropólogo e sociólogo brasileiro Gilberto Freyre. Finalmente, na última secção, demonstro como Pepetela utiliza os elementos do folclore descritos na primeira secção para subverter a versão oficial da relação entre Portugal e as colónias descrita na segunda.

One of the most prevalent themes in the discussions of Luso-African literature is the undeniable and ever-present influence of African oral tradition. In their essay “The Use of Oral Traditions in Literature of Portuguese Expression,” the Angolan writers Uanhenga Xitu, Ruy Duarte de Carvalho and Henrique Guerra state that: “[t]he insertion of [orature] into Africa’s modern literature, produced by persons of petty bourgeois origins or background, is generally understood as one of the richest and most valid forms of lending a more meaningful, dynamic, and original character to modern African literature” (45). In the criticism, however, most studies do not go beyond a superficial description or identification of folkloric elements to explain their function in the literature. In this study, I examine Pepetela’s use
of specific folkloric devices in his novel *Yaka* (1984) in constructing an alternative historiography which undermines Portuguese colonial discourse. In *Yaka*, Pepetela recounts a family saga that unfolds over eighty-five years and five generations and, at the same time, highlights the historical development of Angola from the end of the nineteenth century to Independence in 1975. First, I provide a general discussion of folklore in theoretical terms and show how folklore functions as historiography. Then, I briefly outline Portuguese official discourse on its relationship with its African colonies. Finally, I discuss three examples from *Yaka* that demonstrate how the folkloric aspects of the novel re-write the Portuguese official version of history.

**Folklore as Historiography**

I begin with a brief comparison of two definitions of folklore. The first is from Frank de Caro and Rosan Augusta Jordan’s recent publication *Re-Situating Folklore* (2004), in which they formulate different ways that folklore is taken from its popular context and incorporated into literary and other artistic media through a process they term “re-situation.” Their discussion starts by contrasting folklore and literature, stating that “[o]ften folklore is an oral medium involving human speech. It differs [from literature] in that what is transmitted from one person to another (or others) is ‘traditional’ rather than original, preexisting rather than something being made up on the spot” (1). In referring to the simultaneous local and universal nature of folklore, they underscore the fact that “[s]uch factors as creativity, culture change, and memory itself—both memory’s strengths and weaknesses, as well as the different ways in which things are remembered—combine to bring about variations in the ‘same’ folktale” (2). Among other aspects of folklore, de Caro and Jordan add that “folklore communicates particularly fundamental messages—values, perspectives, wisdom—not found in other media,” and that folkloric stories are “a form of news [that express a] hidden truth which comes to us via such sub rosa means as legend and rumor” (17–18). A second definition is that of Jan Harold Brunvand from his seminal study on American folkloric traditions. He states that: “[f]olklore is the traditional, unofficial, non-institutional part of culture. It encompasses all knowledge, understandings, values, attitudes, assumptions, feelings, and beliefs transmitted in traditional forms by word of mouth or by customary examples” (4).

As is evident, these definitions have much in common. First, the aspect that folklore is something that develops over time, from generation to generation, and that what is transmitted is knowledge, wisdom, and news, or (hi)stories of important events. Another important characteristic is that folklore is generally oral, although it could be in the form of music, dance, or
other art forms. Both definitions also emphasize the popular nature of folklore. In this regard, Javier Ocampo López highlights the etymological roots of the term in his book *Las fiestas y el folclor en Colombia* (1985): “El folclor es una disciplina de las ciencias humanas definida concretamente como ‘la ciencia del saber popular’. Etimológicamente se deriva de las expressiones inglesas *Folk*: pueblo y *Lore*: saber” (11). He adds that for those who study folklore “el Folk o Pueblo se encuentra en las masas populares, pues ellas tienen su propia concepción del mundo y de la vida, la cual transmiten de generación en generación y de pueblo a pueblo, en el tiempo y en el espacio” (24). This means that folklore is necessarily divorced from the structures of state power and their related institutions. Lastly, given the popular nature of folklore and the fact that it is transmitted over time, its origins are generally unknown.

Let us focus on two key aspects of these definitions. First, the fact that folklore is passed down from generation to generation means that it relates to the historical traditions of a society. Therefore, it presents a particular worldview of a culture that has been developed over time. This is the main underlying assumption of Barre Toelken’s fundamental study, *The Dynamics of Folklore* (1976). “All folklore participates in a distinctive, dynamic process. Constant change, variation within a tradition, whether intentional or inadvertent, is viewed here simply as a central fact of life for folklore” (10). The second aspect is that much of the knowledge passed down from generation to generation is news of important events. In other words, news of the past is history, and when it belongs to populations marginalized from the centers of power, the result is that folklore presents an alternative interpretation of historical events. Furthermore, the worldview and the generations of knowledge that inform this historical vision imply a cultural narrative that is metaphoric rather than literal, and defies notions of linearity. In sum, folklore implies a specific historical vision and its transmission is the historiography of a culture.

Regarding the idea that folklore is a particular form of historiography, Ocampo López notes that “[Miguel de] Unamuno decía [que el folclor] es la infrahistoria de un pueblo; que responde a ese mundo propio que ciertos estratos inferiores se forman en el interrogante y en el afán de explicar el porqué de su paso por la vida para responder a ese imperativo angustioso de saber de dónde se viene y hacia dónde se va” (12). The prefix *infra* means, in terms of physical location, “below” or “within.” In a more metaphorical sense, it is something intrinsic that resides in the deepest confines of one’s identity. Therefore, by placing folklore together with history, Unamuno emphasizes how historiography and folklore are interdependent and inseparable as long as they are not related to official state institutions. Similarly, de Caro and Jordan observe that “historically, folklore often has been viewed
as limited to contexts removed from those of the intellectual elites who look at folklore from an outsider perspective—limited to distant times or distant places or to such groups as the peasantry, ‘primitives,’ the working class or simply ‘the common people’” (16). Given that folklore is traditionally understood as belonging to the marginalized strata of society, the analysis of its historiographic function is especially appropriate in the context of postcolonial societies searching to reaffirm their cultural autonomy after independence.

In Mythistory (2003) Joseph Mali explores the resurgence in recent years of Herodotean inspired historiography, which places the use of mythology and oral tradition in a privileged position, over the factually-oriented Thucydidean approach to historical inquiry. Mali argues that “Herodotus has become ‘modern’ in his employment of historical myths in his History” (4). It is important to underscore the fact that literature is an appropriate arena for this discussion since, traditionally, it is not restricted to the same constraints as other disciplines and, therefore, more open to the incorporation of folkloric elements as well as tropes such as metaphor and allegory. Furthermore, for the purposes of this study it is also important to point out that, in the case of Pepetela and Salazar, the dichotomy is not factual, reliable sources versus mythology, but rather two competing mythologies. Therefore, we are not faced with the task of juxtaposing a “pure” version of history with a biased and factually inaccurate one; in fact, both Pepetela’s and Salazar’s respective histories could easily fall on either side of this divide. To the contrary, the goal is to examine the alternative interpretation of history presented by Pepetela and understand both the rhetorical strategies he employs in his literary text and to consider what that text tells us about how Angolans perceive their own history, especially vis-à-vis the former colonial power.

To underscore the importance of the role of folklore in historiography within the Angolan context, one can look at Beatrix Heintze’s study: “Written Sources, Oral Traditions and Oral Traditions as Written Sources: The Steep and Thorny Way to Early Angolan History.” She examines how the study of the recorded oral traditions of a particular tribe from Angola helps both to clarify and modify our understanding of written history, as well as to serve as a bridge to modern folkloric traditions. Among her conclusions Heintze finds that “oral tradition is not simply oral tradition (we have already recognized this in theory, but do not pay enough heed to it in practice). It is itself a component of a historical process” (277). Thus, we see that folkloric devices are necessarily linked to the reading, writing and passing along of history by peoples whose access to print culture, which is a necessary component of Benedict Anderson’s concept of imagined communities, is limited if not restricted altogether. The value of Heintze’s study is to high-
light the often overlooked connection between oral tradition as a popular medium and the way official history is recorded and understood.

Gerald Moser, in “Oral Traditions in Angolan Story Writing,” discusses the introduction of folkloric elements such as proverbs, songs and anecdotes into Angolan literature and highlights the special role of folklore to pass culture and history from one generation to the next (43). Likewise, in his brief autobiographical article, “Folk Tales of Angola,” Estevão Kalei Chin-gunji remembers: “during my childhood I attended folkloric festivals, participated in traditional dances and stayed up late to listen to folk tales of our past as told by the elders in the onjango (a meeting place beside a fire where elders and children meet at night to discuss current and past events)” (55). In addition to referring to the historical aspect of folklore, he continues by emphasizing its simultaneous local and universal aspects:

[m]yths and events similar to those which were recorded among my people, were noted throughout Angola. Although my stories are Angolan, I am confident that many other Africans have been exposed to similar experiences; above all, I wish these stories to serve as a touchstone for the African experience, forming a cohesive culture, recognizable to all readers. (55)

The universality of these experiences particular to Chingunji is derived from their popular origin and transmission. This removes folklore from the domain of the state apparatus, thus making it much more enduring than any given regime. For this reason it is especially interesting to contrast folklore with official state discourse.

Portuguese Official Rhetoric Regarding the African Colonies

The official colonial policy of the Portuguese Estado Novo (New State)—the name that Prime Minister António de Oliveira Salazar gave to his regime—sought ideological grounding in the writings of Brazilian sociologist and anthropologist Gilberto Freyre. Early on the Estado Novo rejected Freyre’s theories for espousing a positivist interpretation of the process of miscegenation in its colonies. However, when faced with pressures from the United Nations to decolonize in the aftermath of the Second World War, the Portuguese government openly adopted these principles as a justification for its colonizing enterprise. As explained in the following paragraphs, there are inherent contradictions between the appropriation of Freyrian discourse and the policies implemented by the regime.

The primary arguments of Portuguese colonial policy were that: 1) the African colonies were not in fact colonies, but rather províncias ultramarinas (overseas provinces) since there was no difference between the Portuguese in Portugal and those overseas; 2) this apparent equality was a result of the fact
that there was supposedly no racism in the dealings between the Portuguese and their overseas provinces; and 3) the previous two factors were responsible for the creation of what Freyre called the Luso-Tropical civilization. In other words, this is the notion that all the Lusophone countries of the world share a common culture and a common language that naturally make them seek unity, or what Benedict Anderson terms an “imagined community.” In Freyre’s own words:

A civilização luso-tropical exigiria estudo especial, principalmente pelo facto de se ter formado através de um processo de dominação de terras e de assimilação de valores tropicais de que vem participando, desde o início da mesma comunidade ou civilização, com uma complexidade que faltou aos demais esforços europeus de dominação das diversas áreas tropicais do Oriente, da África e da América, vizinhas das hoje culturalmente e, às vezes, biologicamente lusitanas em suas predominâncias, a mulher, o velho, o menino, o adolescente, o mestiço ou o nativo cristianizado—pois é civilização, como tenho procurado acentuar, do ponto de vista sociológico, antes cristocêntrica que etnocêntrica—, e não apenas o branco adulto do sexo masculino, como tem sido o caso nas demais tentativas de colonização européia de áreas tropicais, com exclusão, é claro, de algumas das espanholas fortemente semelhantes à portuguesa nos seus processos de dominação das mesmas áreas. (23–24)

For the Salazar regime, this Luso-Tropical civilization stands in contrast to the situation of other African nations that sought independence in the mid-twentieth century. Claudia Castelo, in her study of Portuguese colonial history, summarizes the Portuguese response to Article 73 of the United Nations Charter, regarding non-autonomous territories:

A separação geográfica entre as províncias metropolitanas e as províncias ultramarinas é irrelevante [. . .]. Em qualquer parcela do território nacional vigora o princípio da igualdade de direitos e de oportunidades de todos os habitantes, independentemente da sua «raça» [. . .]. As províncias de além-mar não são exploradas econômica e financeiramente em favor das metropolitanas. (96–97)

This argument against the United Nations’ call for decolonization is clearly based on the theories developed by Freyre.

Before examining the speeches by Salazar on Portuguese colonial policy, it is important to mention Russell G. Hamilton’s study “Lusofonia, África, and Matters of Languages and Letters.” Hamilton highlights the differences between Lusophone African countries and their English and French-speaking counterparts. While national liberation movements in Francophone Africa sought to reclaim their pre-colonial cultural identity through the use of indigenous languages, in the PALOP (Países Africanos de Língua
Offcial Portuguesa) the liberation struggle and the accompanying cultural movements were carried out in Portuguese. Hamilton concludes that:

_Lusofonia_, then, whether in terms of economic exploitation or cultural dominance, seems to be a moot point. The more pertinent point, with respect to language and letters, is that at this juncture most Lusophone African writers and intellectuals have gone beyond being resigned to their dependency on Portuguese; they have, in fact, replaced accommodation with an acceptance of the place of the former colonial language in their own political sovereignty and cultural autonomy. (616)

Hamilton clearly differentiates between the effects of Portuguese colonial policy in terms of economic exploitation, on the one hand, and the use of the Portuguese language in postcolonial cultural expression, on the other. Therefore, although we see positive outcomes in the realm of Luso-African literature that are, to some extent, a product of the Luso-Tropical way of colonizing, the policies implemented during the twentieth century by the Estado Novo were anything but favorable.

In two of Salazar’s speeches, “Portugal e a Campanha Anticolonialista” (1960) and “Política Ultramarina” (1963), he offers his own particular reading of the non-Luso-African independence movements vis-à-vis Portugal’s African overseas provinces. In the first speech, the only solution to the turmoil enveloping the African continent as a result of the independence movements is the Portuguese solution. While many countries are regressing into civil strife as a result of the “violentas explosões de racismo contra o homem branco, credor dos progressos realizados” (“Portugal” 87), Salazar claims that the Portuguese overseas provinces live in peace and harmony:

As nossas cidades e vilas, os nossos caminhos de ferro, os portos, os aproveitamentos hidroeléctricos, a preparação e distribuição de terras irrigadas por brancos e pretos, a exploração das riquezas do subsolo, as instalações dos serviços têm seu mérito. Mas o ambiente de segurança, de paz e de fraternal convívio entre os muito diversos elementos da população—caso único na África de hoje—é a maior obra, porque a outra quem quer a podia fazer com dinheiro, e esta não. (“Portugal” 98)

From the perspective of the regime, this was a direct result of what Freyre considered the natural Portuguese proclivity for the colonizing enterprise.

In the second speech, three years later and already well into the wars of independence against Portugal, Salazar continues to argue that the Africans prefer to be a part of Portugal rather than independent nations. Furthermore, in response to the intervention of other recently-independent African nations in aiding the “terrorist” campaigns against the Portuguese, Salazar highlights the confusion inherent in thinking that “autodeterminaço
[é] igual à independência” (“Declaration” 313). He suggests that Portugal’s overseas provinces in Africa are more autonomous than other African nations that, despite their independence, are still economically dependent on their former colonial rulers. As support for this claim, he invokes Gilberto Freyre: “Em Janeiro deste ano, interrogado sobre as características nacionais da sociedade brasileira quando da independência, o sociólogo Gilberto Freyre respondeu que eram insignificantes no aspecto económico, já que o Brasil deixou imediatamente de ser uma colónia de Portugal para ser uma colónia inglesa” (314). The Brazilian example, therefore, foreshadows what was happening in Francophone and Anglophone Africa during the 1960s and serves as a warning to Portugal’s African provinces.

In summary, according to the official rhetoric of the Estado Novo, the history of the Portuguese presence in Africa is characterized by interdependence and racial harmony, which leads to an environment of peace and progress. In the following section I demonstrate how, through diverse folkloric elements, Pepetela contradicts the idea that the Portuguese colonizers and Africans were accepting of one another and that they lived in peace and harmony as Salazar claimed. Pepetela also criticizes the idea that there was no exploitation of the colonies to the benefit of the metropolis, and shows that a marked disparity has always existed between the Portuguese interpretation of its colonial history in Africa and the Africans’ understanding of this relationship.

Three Examples of Folklore as Alternative Historiography in *Yaka*

Much has been written about the role of postcolonial narratives in recuperating a pre-colonial history as a path to forging an independent identity. In one sense, this is a necessary step in the process of national liberation movements, even though the postcolonial subject will inevitably encounter a divided self that is a result of the colonial experience. A more appropriate way of reading many postcolonial narratives is to understand how they engage in an explicit struggle to control discourse and the ability to portray their culture in their own terms. Fanon reminds us that “While the politicians situate their action in the actual present-day events, men of culture take their stand in the field of history” (169). Within this context, we can situate Pepetela’s impetus to assert his voice and vision of Angola’s historical and cultural identity.

As many critics have pointed out, the historiographic function of *Yaka* is, without question, one of the driving forces of the novel. Ana Mafalda Leite, in her overview of contemporary Angolan fiction, highlights the historical narrative as one of the major trends in the second half of the twentieth
century; war narratives, naturally, constitute another. *Yaka* is one of many historical novels of the post-independence period, and Leite compares it to José Eduardo Agualusa’s novel *A Conjura* (1989), which marks “an attempt to re-examine the social order of that period—[the turn of the twentieth century]—and to question the assumptions we hold about history” (114). With respect to *Yaka*, she argues that it “is another work of prose narrative which questions history and attempts to re-examine a given social and cultural reality.” However, Leite suggests that irony is the key to “subverting [. . .] the colonial novel that would typically concern itself with the lives of the Europeans in Africa independently from the realities of the context in which they lived” (115). While Leite keenly observes that there are numerous subversions of traditional European models at work in this narrative, she does not identify African cultural elements as a means to this end, rather that Pepetela “opts in *Yaka* for a fairly conventional novelistic approach” (116).

In contrast to Leite, Luis Kandjimbo argues that *Yaka* is, ultimately, a colonial novel, despite obvious characteristics that would mark it as a historical novel. Kandjimbo’s main concern in his article is the classification of the novel in one of these two categories, which he defines in the following terms:

A classificação deste romance, como é óbvio, depende dos critérios com que se opera. Será histórico se se tiver em atenção o quadro temporal e os factos sociais relevantes aí inseridos. Será colonial devido aos planos narrativos e ao ponto de vista sob os quais se situa o narrador e em que predominem o olhar alienígeno. (72)

With regard to the historical nature of *Yaka*, which is of concern in the current study, Kandjimbo leaves the terrain largely untouched with a merely dismissive comment that: “considero que há bastantes evidências” (72). He also identifies problems of referentiality that are inscribed in the text, which hinder its historical categorization. In terms of *Yaka* being classified as a colonial novel according to the parameters determined above, he argues that the third person narrator as well as Alexandre Semedo, who also narrates large portions of the novel, offer the reader a perspective of Angolan society steeped in racist attitudes towards blacks. Kandjimbo does not, however, mention the Yaka statue as another central narrator, especially considering that its discourse is a function of folkloric elements of African oral tradition. The statue provides a markedly different vision of Angolan society and history from that of Alexandre Semedo, as I elaborate in more detail below in my analysis of one of the chapters narrated by the Yaka statue. This fundamental and distinctive component of the narrative structure of the novel complicates Kandjimbo’s conclusion that: “a predominância de uma visão
que subalterniza a história e seus verdadeiros actores despoja o romance
de certos méritos, para não dizer que inviabiliza a categoria de romance
histórico” (73).

The historical perspective presented by Pepetela in *Yaka* is the focus of
Hanna Betina Götz’s article “Five Generations of Angola’s Colonial Erosion
and National Birth.” She states that Pepetela “is engaged in the re-writing
of the Angolan history through the problematization of the two cultures
that form the very fabric of the new Angolan reality” (67). Specifically, the
structure of the novel as a family saga aptly lends itself to the historiographic
enterprise. In terms of recuperating history as part of the postcolonial pro-
cess, Götz affirms that “even though this narrative can be categorized as
‘colonial’ in its thematic approach, it does bring forth the discussion on
the formation of a national consciousness and identity that characterizes
post-independence forms of literary discourse” (67). In this regard, she ar-
gues that through a better understanding of its past, and by overcoming the
inherent conflicts that naturally arise within a pluralistic society, Pepetela
suggests that Angola will be able to progress as a unified nation; hence, the
motive of rebirth alluded to in the title.

In “Yaka: A Viagem e a Esfinge no Universo do Colono,” Francisco Sali-
nas Portugal calls attention to the deficiencies in the “official history” when
he refers to Pepetela’s attempt to “recuperar uma história que a historiogra-
fia oficial negava” (162). Furthermore, like Götz, he comments on the fact
that “o romance como forma de história forma parte de um longo debate
cultural nomeadamente nos povos que viveram situações coloniais” (162),
without, however, entering into a discussion of postcolonial theory. The pri-
mary focus of his analysis, instead, is the mythical quality of the Yaka statue
that serves a central role in structuring the novel as a symbolic circular jour-
ney. Unfortunately, given the perspective of the current study, he does not
link his initial critique of official versions of history with the role of the Yaka
statue as a central element of African cultural production.

Despite the general consensus on the historiographic underpinnings of
the novel, none of these studies has focused on the particular methodol-
ogy of this “recuperation.” Phyllis Peres argues that what is crucial to un-
derstanding Pepetela’s particular historical vision – and lacking in studies
such as that of Ana Mafalda Leite – is the use of “key critical concepts of
postcolonial criticism” such as those offered by Fanon and others (“Tra-
versing Postcoloniality” 112). Peres is correct in that “[i]f we read several of
Pepetela’s narratives as reclamations of history by new national subjects,
this postcolonial perspective opens those texts to a complex reading of iden-
tity and national formation” (113). While folkloric and postcolonial readings
of Pepetela’s texts are not mutually exclusive, the analysis of textual devices
that are a product of the African oral tradition helps us to understand the
culturally specific rhetorical strategies at play in achieving the subversion of colonial discourse in order to regain control over self-representation. Fanon’s distinction between politicians and men of culture is also particularly relevant to contrasting the historical discourses of Salazar and Pepetela, as they pertain to the Portuguese African colonies. As I argued in the first section, we need to be aware, however, that by counterposing these competing narratives the goal is not to discern between fact and fiction, but rather to understand how folklore is used by a given culture as a medium to transmit conceptions of self and of society that are markedly different from how they are portrayed by others.

In this section I offer a detailed reading of three passages from Yaka, while referencing others, that exemplify how folkloric elements in the novel serve to re-write Angolan history, not regarding any specific historical events, but rather in the overarching aspects mentioned at the end of the previous section. Any discussion of this novel must start with an analysis of the symbolism of the Yaka statue. There follows a short analysis of the final chapter (15) of the first section of the book, “A boca (1890–1904),” in which we find a brief, yet powerful description of the construction of the railroad. The last example of folklore in the novel to be considered is the role of the mujimbos, or rumors, scattered throughout the text, and I explain their general purpose through an analysis of the death of Achilles.

Many critics agree that the Yaka statue—a tribal artifact present at the birth of the white protagonist Alexandre Semedo, and which stayed in his family throughout the novel—is a symbol of national and cultural unity for the post-colonial future of Angola. Hannah Betina Götz interprets the symbolism of the statue as “the ideal of the two cultures merging together, coming to terms with one another to share and fight for their common future” (67–68). According to Ana Mafalda Leite, “[t]he guiding thread of the novel is the search for the ‘story’ of the yaka statue which gives the book its title. [. . .] Yaka symbolises at once the consciousness of traditional values and the ‘anticipated spirit of nationality’ of the new country” (116). Alexandre Pinheiro Torres presents a similar argument; however, he posits it referring to Yaka the novel (in italics) and not Yaka the statue—although Leite also uses italics, it is evident that she is referring to the statue and not the novel. Torres states that “no plano da alegoria, se pode interpretar também como o apelo necessário à união entre a Europa e a África, à irmandade das culturas, à fusão dos imaginários colectivos” (202). Between these two interpretations, the latter seems more plausible, especially taking into account Phyllis Peres’ analysis of utopias in Pepetela’s writings, in which she claims that in Yaka he still has not completely abandoned his utopian vision for Angola as he later does in A Geração da Utopia (“Revolutionary Utopias” 212). Furthermore, the overall structure of the novel, a dual reference system
of dates and body parts, is another piece of textual evidence that supports the argument for the co-existence of distinct cultural frames of reference. The syncretistic titles—“A boca (1890–1904),” “Os olhos (1917),” “O coração (1940–1941),” “O sexo (1961),” and “As pernas (1975)—present competing worldviews and ways of understanding history. A metaphoric interpretation of the construction of self and nation through the various body parts is juxtaposed to a linear mapping of historic events, without either one cancelling out the other.

While the novel Yaka represents this utopian unity of cultures in Angola, I argue that the statue is unequivocally on the side of the Africans repressed by the Portuguese colonizers. Although the Yaka statue is made by one group and depicts the other, as Götz states, the relationship is not equal; it is the resistance of one of the cultures to the other through one of the few means available. From the beginning of the novel Alexandre Semedo, the patriarch and the first in his family to be born in Angola, implores the Yaka statue to talk, yet it is silent. Silence is a common motif as a strategy of resistance to colonial domination, especially among the elderly, who are the most respected and knowledgeable in society. Non-verbal strategies, as we see with the Yaka statue, take precedence because open resistance, unless carried out at the precise moment(s), would only instigate more violence and repression from the colonizer. Here the silence of the Yaka statue throughout the majority of the novel symbolizes this type of resistance in light of Joel’s interpretation upon seeing it for the first time: “A estátua representa um colono, avô. Repare bem. É o que o escultor pensava dos colonos. Ridiculizados. Veja o nariz. Burros e ambiciosos!” (294). The act of making the statue is a form of non-verbal protest or resistance, and the information it reveals regarding the Africans’ perceptions of the colonizers stands in direct opposition to the official history of racial harmony in the Luso-African colonies.

Furthermore, the mystery behind the Yaka statue for Alexandre only underscores its folkloric role in the novel. He tells Joel: “É yaka, dum povo do Norte de Angola, quase na fronteira com o Congo Belga” (291), but knows little more, least of all what it has been telling him his whole life. Therefore, it represents knowledge passed down from an undetermined source. Moreover, the fact that the statue has lasted for five generations in the Semedo family also stresses the truly historical nature of the artifact.

In a metafictional sense, it is only with the publication of the novel after independence that the Yaka statue, as a representative of the African people, weaves its story into the family narrative we know as Yaka. Various textual cues would suggest that what the reader has in hand, the novel Yaka, is a copy of Alexandre Semedo’s memoir. He is the primary narrator and often speaks of his project of leaving his memoirs for future generations
of his family. However, we see that he is not prolific in his endeavor: “Durante quatro anos escreveu regularmente, mas muito lentamente, na média de duas frases por dia. Cada palavra puxava uma recordação, uma idéia, e se perdia nos meandros da memória” (210). Later he does not even write, but instead just reads and re-reads the pages already committed to paper; his memoir, therefore, is an incomplete project. Consequently, Yaka is a community-based, polyphonic narrative whose sole origin in the writings of Alexandre Semedo we must doubt, with the statue and others contributing, as is evident from the changes in narrative voice in different passages. Götz observes: “Yaka will also take part in the narration for it is there ‘para ver. E para contar a quem entende. Sofrendo.’ [. . .] Yaka provides the reader with knowledge and details overlooked or ignored by Alexandre’s personal and biased account” (“Five Generations” 68). This metafictional reading is an example of the complexity of the narrative discourse as it is produced from many different sources. Due to the ambiguity of its origins and the contributions of many characters in the construction of the narration, Yaka exemplifies various trademark qualities of folklore.

One of the chapters in which we can clearly identify the Yaka statue as the narrator is the closing chapter of “A boca” that describes the construction of the railroad in the early twentieth century. There is a marked change in the narrative voice, the general tone of the novel and the subject matter as well. Instead of focusing on the family history of the Semedo clan, this section narrates the minutiae related to one of the significant events of Angolan history. This passage is exemplary of how the historiographic nature of the novel is a function of the folklore devices that Pepetela channels through the Yaka statue as a central narrator. The railroad changed the geographic and economic landscape of Angola, and is referred to by Salazar in his speech “Portugal e a Campanha Anticolonialista” from 1960: “As nossas cidades e vilas, os nossos caminhos de ferro, os portos, os aproveitamentos hidroelétricos, a preparação e distribuição de terras irrigadas por brancos e pretos, a exploração das riquezas do subsolo, as instalações dos serviços têm seu mérito” (98). From the perspective of the Estado Novo, these public works projects are benchmarks of the success of the civilizing mission of the regime in its colonial enterprise.

While official rhetoric focuses on the economic progress as a result of the construction of the railroad, the Yaka statue tells a different story. “Os homens estavam a lutar contra os morros. [. . .] As crianças ficavam sentadas dos lados, a partir as pedras até ficarem brita. As mulheres levavam as pedras nas quindas” (68). Here the focus is on the microhistory, on the individuals whose labor was responsible for the construction of the railroad, on those Africans who are ignored by those who prefer to analyze the broad, overarching themes of history. Let us remember that in Salazar’s
speeches he spoke only of progress for the masses and not the suffering that was responsible for that progress. The Yaka statue’s narrative focuses instead on the people: “Os que morriam eram sepultados ao longo do caminho de ferro. Recrutavam mais para tomar o lugar dos defuntos. [ . . . ] Trabalha, trabalha, cantava o chicote” (69). Here the African workers are cheap, expendable and replaceable from the perspective of the English impresarios. Finally, once the work is done, they are forgotten altogether: “Na subida do Monte Saôa, metro dum lado da linha, metro do outro lado da linha, estava um buraco onde enterraram um morto. Depois o comboio passava ali e nem apitava para os defuntos que o empurraram para o cimo do morro” (69). These workers were forgotten by the colonizers who wrote the history of Africa, but not by Yaka and various generations of Africans.

Regarding the contrast between official history and micro-history, in Yaka the third person narrator explicitly mentions the fact that Alexandre Semedo did not find in the official history books the information he needed to write his memoir:

Leu tudo o que pôde encontrar sobre a história da região e não só. Também livros etnográficos sobre o Leste e o Norte. Era raro o que aparecia no Mercado, havia talvez muita coisa longe, inacessível para ele. Também não era um drama. Interessava-lhe explicar como vivera o pai dele e como ele viveu. Para isso não era precisa muita História. (210)

In keeping with the argument about the polyphonic construction of this novel, we see how the different narrative strands work in harmony toward a common goal: to recount the history of the Semedo family as a means to illustrate the historical trends that shaped Angola in the twentieth century. Specifically, the effects of folkloric devices common in African oral tradition underscores how the historical project of Yaka follows a different set of imperatives and objectives that distance it from “traditional history,” such as the books Alexandre Semedo found useless for his purposes, as well as Portuguese official discourse.

The final example of the influence of folklore on the historiographic function of the novel is the role of the mujimbos, or rumors, in the news of Achilles’ death. The first version of the events is provided by Marques Lopes, one of Achilles’ companions in the ill-fated hunt:


However, there are always, at least, two sides to every story. “Sabiam, amanhã algum do grupo ia contar à namorada ou a um amigo o que real-
mente passara. E o mujimbo ia se espalhar pela cidade. Mas ficavam sempre duas versões e as pessoas acreditam mais no que lhes convém” (174). The way that Pepetela develops this passage highlights the contrast between dominant and popular discourse, especially in terms of the means by which the two are produced and disseminated. The former is pronounced publicly to a large audience and with the authority that accompanies a perceived racial superiority, while the latter travels by word of mouth and with the security afforded by being behind closed doors. This mujimbo is a classic example of the function of folklore in the sense that de Caro and Jordan classified rumors and legend as the media through which news of important events is transmitted. Additionally, the source of these rumors is inevitably anonymous. This is by no means the only instance of the mujimbos assuming this role in the novel. Similar discrepancies emerge between versions of the uprisings in the interior led by Mutu-ya-Kevela, aka, Quebera.

Falavam no chefe, o terrível Quebera e seu amigo Samacaca. Como começara? Ninguém que sabia contar. Só que esse Quebera era um monstro, trazia uma pele de onça nas costas, dentes enormes que lhe saíam da boca a escorrer sangue. [...] Veio o tempo seco e do interior só mujimbos alarmistas chegavam. (35)

Only later, after the uprising was quelled, did small pieces of the truth come out:

Quando voltaram os soldados, soube-se a verdade. Não tinham morrido tantos comerciantes como isso. As lojas foram incendiadas, mas ninguém podia garantir que o Quebera bebesse vinho pelo crânio dos brancos. Todos diziam que ele nem sequer bebia vinho, até destruía os alambiques de aguardente. Eram exageros dos comerciantes do mato para terem mais apoio, dizia o meu pai. (45)

Given that “as pessoas acreditam mais no que lhes convém,” the following pages of the novel are telling. The childhood role-playing games of Alexandre and his friends show how nobody remembers the truth; all they remember is that Quebera—and only their black friend Tuca could play this part in these games—was one of the ruthless, animal-like natives who had to be conquered so that the march of progress could continue. This passage reinforces Phyllis Peres’ postcolonial reading of Angolan literature:

For a certain class of colonized Angolan intellectuals, artists, and writers, Portuguese cultural hegemony, however ambivalent, is at the roots of a divided subject formation. This, of course, is further compounded in colonial representations that are above all stereotypical, but that also tend to primitivize and decivilize the colonized subjects. (113) (“Traversing Post-Coloniality”)
Through the specific folkloric device of rumor, Pepetela not only introduces various versions of a single event, but also undermines the dominant colonial discourse by exposing how it is imbedded in these *brancos da segunda classe* and primitivizes and decivilizes the other within their society.

Here we have seen three examples of how folklore, as defined in the first section of this study, functions as an alternative historiography of the peoples who produce it. Undoubtedly there are more examples in *Yaka*, such as the rumors surrounding the suspicious circumstances of Acácio’s death, just to cite one more possibility. However, the ones provided are sufficient support for my argument that the folklore devices employed by Pepetela provide a window into the unofficial historiography that has been either overlooked or deliberately excluded by those in positions of institutional power.

A later work by Pepetela that engages in a similar historiographic enterprise through the incorporation of elements of the African oral tradition is *Lueji* (1989). In this novel Pepetela narrates the story of Lu, an Angolan dancer who represents the ancient Lunda queen, Lueji, in a performance. Lu’s main problem in personifying the queen is the multiplicity of extant versions of the story of Lueji. Phyllis Peres observes that “Here, however, this does not involve contentious historiographies in the struggle for identity [as in *Yaka*], but rather point-counterpoint dialogue between *estória* and *história*” (“Traversing PostColoniality” 114). This dialogue between oral tradition (the different versions of the story of Lueji) and historical authenticity is explored by Manuela Palmeirim in her study, “Masks, Myths, Novels, and Symbolic Ambiguity” (2008). As an anthropologist Palmeirim focuses on the interconnections between oral lore and visual and literary representations of the story of Lueji. With respect to Pepetela’s use of this tale common throughout the region of Angola, Congo and Zambia she underscores that:

> To write this book, Pepetela conducted extensive research in Belgian and Portuguese sources and, as he himself told me in writing, he heard the story many times around the fire during his days in the guerrilla war for the independence of Angola. In this way he came to collect various versions of the myth told on the Angolan side by neighboring peoples formerly linked to the Ruwund Empire. The fiction he created around them obviously elaborates episodes that are absent in the oral tradition, but he marvelously grasped the overall structure and the “spirit” of this collective memory and, in doing so, he can in a way be said to have created a new version of the myth in Lévi-Straussian terms. (76)

Palmeirim’s explanation of the convergence of oral tradition and literary prose is exemplary of an ongoing process throughout Angola, as well as other parts of the world where orality plays a fundamental role in the cultural fabric of society.
Keeping in mind that folklore is both a universal and local phenomenon, in addition to looking at manifestations of folkloric elements in other works by Pepetela, we can also apply this analytic framework in a freyrian sense to other Luso-Tropical or even Hispano-Tropical cultures. The Iberian colonizations and the mestizo cultures they produced have many similar, overlapping characteristics that make possible this type of analysis. In her dissertation, “Luso-African Real Maravilloso?: A Study on the Convergence of Latin American and Luso-African Literatures,” Hanna Betina Götz examines the similarities between Angolan fiction and Latin American “magical realism” as a product of “the native [American] indigenous and the African communities which are essentially oral in their traditions” (3). This type of comparison reinforces the assertion that literary production in societies where orality is the bedrock of cultural tradition utilizes an amalgam of folkloric elements and “traditional” prose narrative.

While Götz’s study focuses on points of contact between Angolan authors Pepetela and José Eduardo Agualusa and the Peruvian novelist and poet Manuel Scorza, important similarities between Pepetela’s Yaka and Gabriel García Márquez’s Cien años de soledad (1967) are worth highlighting. Both are family narratives of relocation and assimilation that span numerous generations, and whose metafictional aspects suggest that the novels may be, in part, based on narratives developed within the stories themselves. Mody C. Boatright identifies the family saga as a type of story particularly appropriate for the study of folkloric elements as they relate to history, as does Götz. He asserts: “I use the term [family saga] mainly to denote a lore that tends to cluster around families, or often the patriarchs or matriarchs of families, which is believed to be true” (1). After surveying the various motifs—family relocation is the one most relevant to the current study—Boatright acknowledges that “Since most of these stories exist in multiple versions and are attached to more than one person, they cannot all be true” (18). In this regard, we see similar motifs appear and reappear in the works of Pepetela and García Márquez. Their novels have a rich folkloric underpinning, and García Márquez himself has given testimony to this fact in interviews as well as in his memoir, Vivir para contarla (2002).

In Cien años de soledad, folklore serves as the basis for an alternative historiography of foundational myths, the role of the Catholic Church in Latin America and the repression of labor movements throughout the continent. To elaborate on just one of these examples, as with Achille’s death in Yaka, rumor plays an important role in disseminating numerous versions of the massacre of the striking banana workers. Official accounts report that not a single drop of blood was shed in dispersing the crowd of protesters, while José Arcadio Segundo, one of the lone survivors, reports at least three thousand deaths (424). This version of events resurfaces in later generations
thanks to the insistence of José Arcadio Segundo and the young boy he rescued in telling their story of what happened on that fateful day. In conclusion, Pepetela, García Márquez and numerous other authors—such as the Chilean novelist Isabel Allende with her family saga La casa de los espíritus (1982)—help bring to the foreground the stories that have always paralleled official discourses in an attempt to question their authority and force us all to rethink our understanding of the histories of our societies.¹

Notes

1. I would like to acknowledge Professor Isabel Ferreira Gould for her meticulous corrections and thoughtful insights as I developed the framework for my analysis. A special thanks as well to my anonymous readers for their help in shaping the final product.

Works cited


