

Baptism of Clay or Yaka, a Polyphonic Novel / *O batismo de terra, ou Yaka, um romance polifônico*

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ABSTRACT:

The present study aims at investigating the polyphonic discourse played out in the novel *Yaka* by the Angolan writer, Pepetela, through the observation of the way which the narrators' discourses are constructed. Our objective is not only try to understand how the different voices dialogically composed contribute to make the content and/or meanings of the work apprehended, but also the way such content is shown and signifies to the reader. Thus, the narrators' voices and the discourse of the character Yaka (a statue that besides being an African work of art is also the magic object that provides the title of the novel) will be analyzed. Seeking to "unveil" the tangled discourses woven by the author, we will try, based on Bakhtin's concepts of polyphony and dialogism (1973, 1981, 1997), to support the reading of the novel, set in Angola for four generations of a Portuguese colonial family. Such critical approach, nevertheless, does not exclude either the analysis of the novel's historical-fictional network or its political-ideological content.

KEYWORDS: Polyphony, Dialogism, Discourse, Novel, Pepetela

RESUMO

Pretende-se com este estudo verificar o "jogo" discursivo polifônico presente no romance Yaka, do escritor angolano, Pepetela, a partir da observação do modo pelo qual os discursos dos narradores são elaborados, formando o todo romanesco. O objetivo não é apenas tentar compreender como as diferentes vozes dialogicamente constituídas colaboram para o acesso ao conteúdo e/ou significados da obra, mas como esse conteúdo é apresentado e significa para o leitor. Para tanto, serão analisados as vozes dos narradores e o discurso da personagem "Yaka" (estátua que, além de obra de arte africana, se apresenta como objeto mágico e dá título ao romance). Na tentativa de "desvendar" o emaranhado de discursos tecidos pelo autor, buscar-se-á, a partir dos conceitos de polifonia e dialogismo empreendidos por Bakhtin e o Círculo, embasar a leitura da obra, ambientada em Angola, durante quatro gerações de uma família de colonos portugueses. Tal abordagem crítica não exclui obviamente a análise da rede histórico-ficcional do romance, nem a análise de seu conteúdo político-ideológico.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Polifonia; Dialogia; Discurso; Romance; Pepetela

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The polyphonic novel is dialogic through and through.
Mikhail Bakhtin

I saw the boy's mouth biting the dry land. Did he bite or kiss?
Pepetela, *Yaka*

Introduction

The term polyphony, before being used by Bakhtin (1981) in his studies concerning the compositional structure of Dostoevsky's works, used to be restricted to music theory. As the scholar himself points out, polyphony in the novel creates a figurative analogy between the structure of the literary prose and the principles of lyrical song. "The image of polyphony and counterpoint only points out those new problems which arise when a novel is constructed beyond the boundaries of ordinary monologic unit". (BAKHTIN, 1984, p.22).

The scholar ensures that, as well as it has happened to music, the new problems related to the novel appeared when the limits of only one voice were surpassed. He warns, however, that the issues concerning music and novel are too diverse so that one can talk about something which can be superior to a figurative analogy, to a metaphor. "We are transforming this metaphor into the term 'polyphonic novel', since we have not found a more appropriate label. It should not be forgotten, however, that the term has its origin in metaphor. (BAKHTIN, 1984, p.22).

Bearing in mind these statements and also the way Bakhtin builds up the concept of polyphony (having as a starting point the reading of Dostoevsky), we can say that polyphony in the novel *Yaka*, by the Angolan Pepetela, starts in the thematic field since the whole narrative is constructed around the dialogic pair colonized and colonizer. Thus, all the other elements which either oppose or dialogue in its narration come from this initial play. The novel, as Tania Franco Carvalhal says, "listens to the voices of history but no longer re-present them as a unit but as a play of confrontations." (CARVALHAL, 1986, p.48).

So, this amount of voices and the "different consciousnesses" identified in the novel *Yaka* make the reader realize the fundamental contradiction in the Angolan society of the colonial period, in which contradictory and colliding worlds lived together. However, polyphony in this novel is not restricted solely to the interventions

of the narrators or the external dialogues expressed by the characters. On the contrary, it is present in all levels and pervades the whole internal structure of the referred text.

In this aspect, Bakhtin (1984, p.40) states that “the polyphonic novel is dialogic through and through”. Dialogic relationships exist among all elements of novelistic structure; that is, they are juxtaposed counterpointually. The scholar also observes that the dialogic relationships – a broader phenomenon than the relationships between the answers in a dialogue compositionally expressed -- “are an almost universal phenomenon, permeating all human speech and all relationships and manifestations of human life – in general, everything that has meaning and significance.” (BAKHTIN, 1984, p.40).

1 Dialogic relationships in *Yaka*

It is in the internal structure of the novel, more precisely, in the threads woven by the narrators’ discourses that Pepetela, little by little, inserts the voices of “historical” characters silenced up to this moment and that are not found in the official history of colonialism. These same voices are the ones which give double meaning to the elements of the novel, thus producing a “veiled dialogism” whose manifestation in the literary prose happens in the following way according to Bakhtin:

Imagine a dialogue of two persons in which the statements of the second speaker are omitted, but in such a way that the general sense is not at all violated. The second speaker is present invisibly, his words are not there, but deep traces left by these words have a determining influence on all the present and visible words of the first speaker. We sense that this is a conversation, although only one person is speaking, and it is a conversation of the most intense kind, for each present uttered word responds and reacts with its very fiber to the invisible speaker, points to something outside itself, beyond its limits, to the unspoken words of another person (BAKHTIN, 1984, p.197).

Bakhtin’s words strengthen the concept of an “invisible speaker” in the novel *Yaka*, which is, in fact, the colonial historiography which has always tried to hide the real interests of the conquest through imperialist mystification. Due to this fact, the referred text displays a tense relation in so far as it gives more emphasis to events which were silenced by such historiography as, for instance, the Angolans’ continuous

resistance by means of bloody wars throughout the whole colonial period (BENDER, 1980). In the following passage from the novel, the narrator-character Alexandre Semedo, making use of irony, destroys the importance of a historical fact, which had been registered in the colonial historiography with heroic praise. It is the death of a prominent colonialist, narrated as follow:

They were going to meet in Caconda, with the Boeres from Huila, so that together they could revenge the death of the colonialist Silva Porto in Bié. The later perched himself upon a gunpowder barrel, wrapped in the Portuguese flag and lit the wick. It might have been a real big explosion, Silva Porto was the representative of the King of Portugal in Bié, besides being a tradesman. He committed suicide, people said, because he had been offended by Ndunduma, king of Bié. So now the governor was going to take revenge and destroy Ekovongo, king Ndunduma's capital. (PEPETELA, 1985, p.12).

In the passage above, not only is the colonialist's death totally ridiculed, but also the highest Portuguese authority, the king, as well as the most important symbol of the Portuguese nation: its flag. However, it is not written or said that such death is ridiculous; this is known through the "invisible voices" or the "words not pronounced" which can be perceived in the narrator's discourse. Through the silence, they are saying that the colonialist was "stupid" since an affront was never considered a sufficient reason for someone to kill himself; it is also said that a suicide could not have led the governor of the city of Benguela to invade the region of Bié. Therefore, the referred invasion was not because of the suicide, but because of the land of the Bienes. They may also be saying that in the same way the representative of the king of Portugal blew up into the air with the flag and everything else in an explosion, the colonial regime together with its "stupid representatives" would also get to an end (in fact it did as the novel was written after the end of the colonial period) setting not only Bié but the whole Angola free.

The excerpt above also leads us to realize the transformations which can appear in a discourse when it is changed from an enunciatory context to another, that is, when a historical fact is reconstructed through a fictional discourse. The death of the colonialist Silva Porto, told by the narrator Alexandre Semedo, ended up acquiring new overtones, new meanings. This happens not only because of the fact that the narrator is an anti-colonialist, but also because of the fact of its being told in another context, in a different

time, as Jorge Luis Borges (2006) teaches us through the “creation-writing” of his “Pierre Menard, the author of Quixote.”

Bakhtin (1984, p.200/201) argues that the internal dialogic relationship can exist “between one word and the same word in someone else’s context, on someone else’s lips.” The historical fact of “the colonialist Silva Porto’s death” reconstructed in *Yaka*, as if it were, “the same utterance in the context of another speech”. This other speech, in this case, is Pepetela’s fictional discourse told at a different time and in a different way.

Once more, in the first part of the novel, the narrator-protagonist, mentioning an event which refers to the foundation of Benguela, shows his distrust in relation to the Angolan colonial historiography, but this is done in a veiled way through a dialogic play between the words “legend” and history. In the narrator’s words:

I have never met a Benguela’s governor who was worth for something. It seems the evil had started a long time ago. In such a way that the founder of Benguela and his first governor, Cerveira Pereira, were killed, put in a barrel with salt and thrown into the sea. The legend says it floated up to Luanda, so, this way, in the capital they knew about the revolt. Although there was a historian who states that this is just a legend, I prefer to believe in it. (PEPETELA, 1985, p.20).

Before verifying in which way the narrator Alexandre Semedo’s discourse deals with governor Cerveira Pereira’s death (a real fact registered by the Portuguese historiography) according to René Pélissier (1986), it is necessary to explain the word “legend”. In a recent edition of the *Aurelio Dictionary*, among other definitions, the term is defined as a written or oral narrative, of a wonderful tone, in which the historical facts are distorted either by popular imagination or by poetic imagination” (FERREIRA, p.829). Such definition brings to our mind Aristotle’s concept (undated) which defends that literature is centered on fictitious events and not on real ones, as it happens in History. So, if we agree with Aristotle, a “legend” would not be worth of being believed as it is fiction and not reality. In the passage above, when “a historian” states that what is said about Cerveira Pereira’s death is just a legend, he, in a veiled way, is saying that the facts related to the referred death did not happen “really”, they were just part of popular invention a “legend”, then.

But the narrator says that, “although there is a historian who states this is just a legend”, he prefers to believe in it based on the fact that he has never met “a Benguela’s

governor who was worth anything” (the utterance is explicit in the passage). The narrator’s belief in legends, that is, oral narratives which cannot be proved by means of documents, leads to other readings, since the novel *Yaka*, as a whole, establishes a tense relationship with the colonial historiography. This way, this event shows the narrator’s “debate” with the main “invisible interlocutor” of the novel in question, the colonial historiography.

Being the colonial history an extension of the history of the domineering nation, obviously, it was not part of the colonialist historian’s interest to register facts that, by chance, could bring any doubt in relation to either the competence and/or power of the Portuguese authorities in Angolan land. Perhaps, this is the reason why such facts are not part of the sources and, because of this fact they are not taken as real by the historian. The narrator of the novel, knowing well this kind of gap so frequent in the colonization history, chooses to believe in the oral narrative (African culture has an oral basis) of the event so that, in a first instance, he could establish a counterpoint with the official history and say that, due to the gaps which are present in the Angolan colonization history, it turns out to be very difficult to specify the limits between fiction and history. In this way, it is reinforced that fiction can also be worth believing and the word, in this new context, shows itself in its fully dialogic strength which tries to cross the dominator’s official word out.

2 Several voices

Among the narrative voices which are interwoven in the process of internal composition of the novel, two of them deserve special attention. According to the terminology proposed by Reis & Lopes (1988, p.118), it is about an omniscient and omnipresent narrator, heterodiegetic, who will be referred to as main narrator; and a narrator-character, homodiegetic, whose name is Alexandre Semedo, patriarch of the family whose saga is told in this novel.

In Reis & Lopes’ words (1988, p.124), heterodiegetic is every narrator “that tells a story to which he is unfamiliar, as he is not and never was a character part of that universe”. Homodiegetic, on the other hand, is the narrator who gives out information based on his own diegetic experience; this means that, having lived the story as a

character, “the narrator has taken from it the information needed to give an account of the events, thus, distinguishing from the heterodiegetic narrator, since the latter does not have complete knowledge”, (REIS & LOPES, 1988, p.124).

Besides both narrators’ discourses, we will try, in part 4, to analyze the statue Yaka’s discourse, not only as a magical character (a kind of Alexandre Semedo’s alter ego) but a work of African art as well. It is a very important discursive representation to the meanings read in the novel, as well as the silencing of the narrator-character, Alexandre Semedo, discussed in part 3.

The importance of the heterodiegetic narrator in the novel *Yaka* is in the fact that he sees and knows everything, so, obviously, due to this fact, he is the one who has the control of the utterances in the play built up by the enunciation and the utterance. He is the one who establishes the connection among all discourses, thus, becoming a kind of coordinator responsible for the usage of words in the discursive universe of the text. His role, opposing the other narrator’s performance (the narrator-character) is one of a demiurgical being, insofar as, despite not having lived the narrated events, he is able to “control” the diegetic universe completely. The narrator-character, Alexandre Semedo, on the other hand, begins telling his story (and the one of the Semedos) from a certain moment of his life in which he was already mature and critically distant from his participation as a colonial character.

In *Yaka*, the varied narrators’ discourses are not explicitly bordered as in another Pepetela’s novel, *Mayombe* (1984) in which they are directly presented to the readers, saying: “I, the narrator, am Theory”; “I, the narrator, am the Chief of Operations”, etc. In *Mayombe*, each narrator says that it is his turn to go on with the narration, while in *Yaka*, the reader, uninformed, not always realizes that the narrative discourse has changed to another narrator.

On the whole, what distinguishes a discourse from the other and, in a particular way, what differentiates the main narrator’s discourse from the one (in the third person) of Alexandre Semedo and even the discourse of the statue-character Yaka is the particular “speech” uttered by each one of them, that is, the peculiar aspect each speech has in the novel (of course, besides the subject of discourse), which is shown in the following passage: “Alexandre Semedo’s first groan cracked in cuvale land. It was like

a shot. The monkeys jumped from the cliffs, muddling themselves up with the swollen branches of the imbondeiro trees” (PEPETELA, 1985, p.8).

This passage is the opening of the novel and, as we can see, it is narrated in the third person (in external focalization by the main narrator) and occupies just a page, as in the following one, who holds the utterance is the protagonist-narrator, Alexandre Semedo, who starts telling (using the first person) about his birth and continues narrating the history of his family.

I was born in 1890, under a tree. (...) My father, Oscar Semedo, disembarked in Moçâmedes ten years earlier. expatriated, accused of having killed his wife with an axe. He always said it was not true, but this was his conviction. Expatriated because he was a republican, although he belonged to an aristocratic family (PEPETELA, 1985, p.9).

The segments of the novel have an internal numbered order, a subdivision. The first segment is narrated by Alexandre Semedo who, however, is not able to keep his speech for a long time as, all the time, it is interrupted by the interventions coming from the principal narrator. This one, who is favoured by his omniscience, tries to give information needed to the development of the story, although unknown to Alexandre, who is a narrator with an internal focus, resulting in the restriction of informative elements due to lack of knowledge. The excerpts below contribute to this view:

In 1890 the town was probably a group of farms between the sea and the beginning of the district of Peça, there still were large empty areas in the middle. We went to live in Peça. Father rented a room in the house of a former expatriated, his acquaintance from Moçâmedes. Even now, I still remember the roaring of the lions going for water in the original bed of Corinje river that, later on, was diverted so that the new city center could be created (PEPETELA, 1985, p.15).

When they arrived, Alexandre’s father (...) was not interested in agriculture. Oscar Semedo was able to find the only job which fitted him: assistant in a shop. The boss, Sô Queirós, was Alexandre’s godfather. He had a store in Peça, a low house of sun-dried brick, painted in yellow. Oscar Semedo was let to look after that store and he decided to open a new one closer to Corinje and the sea (PEPETELA, 1985, p.15).

The passages mentioned were taken from the same page and the same speech sequence. So, as we can observe, in the first, Alexandre is still telling the story of the way his parents settled in Benguela; suddenly, as it can be observed in the second passage, the main narrator's voice (as he is omniscient) interferes to give necessary information to the reader, which Alexandre, as a character-narrator does not remember or does not know. We can realize, in the taking turns of such a novelistic play, the simulacrum strategy, in which the novel's discourses are made up as counterpoints or retorts to suppressed and/or silenced discourses, such as the fact that the character-narrator's family had been pioneering and/or invader of that African geographic area which, in earlier time, belonged to races of Bantu origin.

Vološinov (1973)¹, researching on the processes involving “verbal creation”, refers to the concept of infinite chain of utterances in which the speaking persons can “look” back into two possible ways: the first, by going back to the previous *status quo*, with a view to the past and not to the future, forgetting the fact that the present time and space are not the same anymore. The second, by bringing ideas from the past to the present, changing the “ruins” into a fundamental place to the historical continuing of time as, for instance, before the ruins of a church, one cannot imagine an atheistic world. The author mentions the ability one should have to find meaning in everything – in nature but also in man's customs, his ideas, his abstract concepts – the prints of the passing time.

Agreeing with Vološinov, one can realize that places are not impartial in relation to the events, that is to say, the events take place at a fixed time and leave marks in the space. The notion of event, situated in time and geographically marked, moves the idea of immutability away and/or of pre-established data, as the event is part of mankind and interferes in the human and in nature (BAKHTIN, 1997). Besides this, as art imitates life, one can say that a unique point of view about the past or an object from the past is not capable of perceiving it in its completeness. Bakhtin says that it is precisely in polyphony

¹ The questions of authorship of the Bakhtin Circle's works are well known. Differently from what occurs in the English translation of *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, in the Portuguese translation, Bakhtin and Vološinov are listed as the authors.

that a combination of several individuals wills takes place, that the boundaries of the individual will can be in principle exceeded. One could put it this way: the artistic will of polyphony is a will to combine many wills, a will to the event (BAKHTIN, 1984, p.21).

The novel *Yaka* is written in a time of colonial “ruins”, that is, after 1975, the year which marked Angola’s independence and also the end of Portuguese colonialism in Africa. Its narrators choose to deal with the colonial “ruins” such as “plundering”, slavery and forced labour, trying to “re-write” the history of the nation which is being created in the moment of its utterance. The “re-creation” of the Semedos’ history is used as a starting point, metaphorical, to talk about the perspectives and “wills” of the present. Bakhtin (1984) mentions the “combination of several individual wills” that is “a will to the event”.

Pepetela’s “artistic will”, matching or questioning the past (into present), succeeds in making the combination of several discourses produce fiction in its wholeness; a work of art unique and completed, but not closed, in Umberto Eco’s (1990) view. In the novel, there are also the characters’ and heroes’ “willingnesses”, which, in the plot, search for their emancipating objectives, as a lot of these characters and heroes are treated, by the colonial history, as if they were enemies of the empire. Even with regard to the characters and heroes’ wishes, if we analyze them, we will get to the conclusion that the “event” of the independent Angolan nation is, at the same time, the representation of a superior and collective “will”, a kind of synthesis of all individual will to be free from the colonial domination.

In fact, freedom or independence is the “event” that authorizes thinking about the organization of the nation and it is this same event that, dialogically, interpellates the past from the beginning to the end of the novel. Thus, the visitation to the colonial “ruins” is not meant to admire or deny them, but rather a continuation of the historical time.

3 The character-narrator’s silence

Pepetela’s narrative is divided into five segments, “The mouth – 1890/1904”, “The eyes – 1917”, “The heart – 1940/1941”, “The sex – 1961”, and “The legs – 1975”. Alexandre Semedo’s role as narrator, if compared to the main narrator’s, is very short; it

does not go beyond the second segment whose narrative action happens during the year of 1917. This fact means that he, as narrator, told the story of his life only up to the moment he was 27 years old, leaving almost all the rest of the story (he dies in 1975 when he was 85) to be told by the principal narrator.

It happens that, little by little, Alexandre starts becoming silent, giving permission to the role of character to be more important than that of narrator, whereas the main narrator begins to occupy more and more the narration. In the second segment, “The eyes – 1917”, his interference in the discourse becomes less and less, although his discourse can still be perceived, in short passages, on pages 87, 91, 107 of the 1985 edition. From the third segment onward his speech, when it appears, is marked by a dash which, in literary writing, indicates a character’s direct speech. This silencing is registered, at least, in two passages in the novel. The first appears by the end of the third segment and the second is at the beginning of the fifth one:

And the captain handed out a dagger, in its leather sheath.
- I’m going to give it to my father-in-law, he enjoys collecting these things. Bartolomeu went to the sapalalo. Alexandre Semedo was in the big chair in the living room, as usual, without speaking.

Things had changed a lot in sapalalo, and Alexandre Semedo noticed but did not interfere. He talked less and less and only with the statue... (PEPETELA, 1985, p.249).

To understand Alexandre-narrator’s process of silencing, it is necessary, at first, to understand the contradictions of Alexandre-character, and, to make this possible, it is essential to refer to his birth. Just like all the Portuguese children born in the colony, he was doomed to be a colonialist, as Albert Memmi (1979, p.59) says, “the mechanism is almost fatal: the colonial machine builds up the colonialist the same way it constructs the colonized”. Alexandre’s fate, on the other hand, due to the conditions of his birth, was completely changed.

I was born in 1880, under a tree. The mother was attended by the old Ntumba, a Ganguela slave. The slave, perhaps due to her age, dropped me in the dust. Only for a few seconds, but enough to make my body get mixed with the dust of the land and the liquids I brought with me when I came out of my mother (PEPETELA, 1985, p.9).

Thus, Alexandre's birth is emblematic to the understanding of the whole symbolism present in the novel, as the character brings in his body, besides the liquids which came out of his mother, the dust of the Angolan land. This means that not only the Portuguese blood is part of his body but also the baptismal clay of Cuvale land (people who resisted bravely to the colonial domination). His falling on the ground and consequently his mixture in the dust, here understood as the baptism of clay, establish a deep relationship of the character with the Angolan land, the same way a Christian baptism ceremony seals a commitment between the baptized and the church.

The territory and the tree also help to create a mythical atmosphere for his birth. The tree is the mulemba, which is considered sacred by the Cuvale people because it is branchy and rare in the semidesertic region of the Angolan southwest, area where Alexandre was born (MIRANDA, 2010). The Cuvale people lived basically on breeding cattle; they were warrior people and, because of this, the colonizer feared them (BENDER, 1980). So, not only the tree but also the region and the people are symbolic references which will mark Alexandre's life forever. And, as well as the baptism of clay, such references also contribute to establishing the connection between the protagonist-narrator and the Angolan land.

This connection will become stronger by the end of his life, before that, while he was younger, it was not permitted because of the colonial pressures. To be involved with the Angolan land during the colonial period was a synonym of being against the colonizers; against his parents and, to some extent, against himself. But this dramatic evidence, which takes him some time to understand, is what changes him into an ambiguous being: neither Portuguese nor Angolan neither colonizer nor colonized. The maximum he could do was to be a "colonizer full of goodwill", as defined by Albert Memmi.

Refusing the evil, the colonizer full of goodwill was never able to reach the good, as the only choice he was permitted is not between good and evil, but between evil and uneasiness. (...) The colonizer who refuses the colonial fact does not find in his revolt an end for his uneasiness. If he doesn't suppress himself as a colonizer, ambiguity is installed (MEMMI, 1979, p.50-1).

Alexandre's uneasiness was getting deeper as far as the contradictions in the colony between the Portuguese and the ethnic groups geographically settled in Angolan

territory became deeper. During the wars against the Bailundo and the Cuamato (ethnic groups that also resisted Portuguese domination), he was still an adolescent; therefore, there was no need to assume a position, but in the war against the Seles (ethnic group which fought against the domination in 1917), he was obliged to declare on which side he was, as when “the news began to be spread more insistently, the white city was at once frightened” (PEPETELA, 1985, p.96) and all white Benguelense were terrified, as they felt the obligation to defend the Portuguese possessions and their colonialist interests. His decision to take part in the repression against the Seles, according to himself, was due to fear and lack of security:

it was in that night of July 14, 1917 that Alexandre Semedo besieged at home by fear, escorted by pregnant Donana, thumped the table, and like many others, shouted into posterity:

-Shit! One cannot live in fear forever. We must finish with them (...)

I don't give a shit if they are revolted against the taxes to have a hut or against the birth taxes. I don't give a shit if the land was theirs before (PEPETELA, 1985, p.101).

From 1917 onward, his contradictions started becoming bigger and bigger. A deep gap between his way of thinking and behaving was visible. At this moment, it can be stated that Alexandre-narrator's silence is intrinsically connected to the uneasiness of Alexandre-character. Such uneasiness is caused by his interiorization of the social contradictions whose historical circumstances did not allow the existence of ambiguous people. His silence was a mirror of his inner drama, which was the mirror of the colonial drama. The passage below offers some more elements for discussion concerning the narrator's silence:

He started writing his memoirs, as if they were a conversation with Yaka, the statue. (...) What had been started as a modest biography just to entertain the family, began to gain a more general context, which surpassed him. Besides that, he couldn't write there everything he had gone through or felt. It was to be read by his grandchildren, after his death. (...) He didn't recognize himself in the pages read and re-read. It was just a part of himself. The one that could be seen, the one that he wanted to show. (...) The memoirs stopped at the Seles rebellion. (...) How could he have such ideas? It was through writing that he divorced from them and nowadays he feels them as if they were stabbing from the past. (PEPETELA, 1985, p.210-211).

Before making any comment about the fragment above, it should be informed that it was taken from subdivision 5 in the fourth segment, “The sex – 1961”, in which all the narrative takes place during the year of 1961, the beginning of the armed struggle in Angola and Alexandre Semedo’s 71st birthday. It is in this passage that, for the first time, the reader is informed that Alexandre was writing his memoirs as if they were a conversation with the statue Yaka. Well, as it was mentioned before, Alexandre’s role as narrator finishes exactly by the end of the second segment, “The eyes – 1917”, in which the revolt of the Seles is narrated. Taking this fact into account, some questions may be asked: Is there any connection between Alexandre-narrator’s silence and the interruption of the writing of his memoirs? Or rather, are the incomplete memoirs written by Alexandre truly narrated by him in the novel?

Certainly the answer is affirmative, as it does not seem a mere coincidence that Alexandre’s silencing as narrator and the end of his memoirs are connected to the same event: the revolt of Seles, fact that aroused his inner drama and/or his ambiguity. In this case, there is a perfect simulacrum on the part of the author, Pepetela, when he creates a coincidence between the end of the narrator’s memoirs and his silencing. He, dialogically, continues his speech as an ambiguous character, through the voice of the principal narrator. In this sense, there are in its discursive composition dialogues, replies and rejoinders which cause the simmering tensions, as marks of the colonial event, inscribed not only in the “language body”, but also in his physical body, if we take into account his emblematic birth.

4 Yaka statue as discourse

According to Bakhtin (1997), in the utterance chain there is a possibility of a rupture, a change in direction. This is what happens in Pepetela’s novel. In this novel, the colonialist “ruin” is recovered, but as a space of “questioning”. So, it is not by chance that Yaka, the name of the statue and also of a warrior race, is the title given by Pepetela to his work. The presence of the statue is felt throughout the whole narrative, even if it is not playing the part of a character. Besides being an African work of art, it is put in the novel as a type of Alexandre Semedo’s “alter ego”, who believes that the statue is there to censure him. Even so, he is not able to get away from it as it is the only

one he is able to talk to about his dilemmas and contradictions. He himself says that he has written his memoirs as conversations with the statue.

Yaka's discourse as a magical character (it is not going to be discussed here whether it is a fantastical, wonderful character, etc.), always points to the overcoming of colonialism, poverty and oppression. Due to its magical powers (it sees everything and knows everything), it ends up anticipating the events' outcome. The "statue's discourse" is not dated as the narrators' one; it is constructed in an allegorical way, that is, it speaks through images. Whereas the narrators, following history chronological order step by step, tell about the war conflicts between colonizers and the Angolan people – the former achieving victory and the latter, massacred and impoverished – the statue's discourse foretells, at the very beginning of the novel, that all the violence and oppression exerted by the colonizers would come to an end. Alexandre Semedo's birth is an omen for the future freedom. The protagonist-character's "kiss-bite" in the Angolan dry land predicts the inevitability of independence:

The rains have come, the same which have started in the Bailundos' eyes and Sumbes', and Seles', and Cuvaes' and other eyes from the North and the East, and in the dances and drumming of endless nights. (...) First came the dews and the drizzles, then scattered showers in Cabinda and in the immense East, and suddenly, when everything was quiet in the sun (..) a terrible thunder burst waking up men and cattle (...) and the weapons, over there, in the jungle fired volleys into the air celebrating the collective victory and nobody would hold the process any more, as there was no one who wanted to fight to block the impetuous coming of the clouds (PEPETELA, 1985, p.244).

In this passage, taken from the last segment of the book, "The legs – 1975", the statue narrates the allegory of "rain of music" in which a great number of images related to the semantic field of the word rain is noticeable. The several rains are the several battles fought by the people from the Angolan countryside (Bailundos, Sumbes, Seles, Cuvaes) against the colonizer. They have formed the endless flows which have aroused in men the desire for independence, carried out in the war.

The meaning of the statue as a work of art and its relationship with Alexandre Semedo deserve some considerations as well. According to Ola Balogun (1977, p.63), "if one wishes to understand the stylistic characteristics of the African sculpture, one has to begin by discovering the usage people from Africa attribute to it". He adds that

“the majority of the African sculptures are magical objects or symbolic representations of ancestors or gods, having, this way, as an ultimate aim to play the part which was assigned to them” (BALOGUN, 1977, p.63). For this reason, the statue of Yaka, as well as every African work of art, is not merely a sculpture which Alexandre Semedo inherited from his father. It goes beyond the merely aesthetic aims. The statue, Pepetela’s creation, plays several parts in the novel, but it can be assured that it is a magical object that goes back to tradition, according to the report of the main narrator.

It is almost a meter high and has the body shaped like a man, though the face is weird, sometimes showing human features, sometimes animal’s. The big nose looks like the one of a drunk man, but it creates a funny appearance. (...) It seemed the statue was able to see everything. (...) It always stayed in the livingroom, in an unstable balance, as the wooden pedestal was not very smooth underneath. I have just known it is Yaka, from a race that lived near the northern border (PEPETELA, 1985, p.22).

The author/sculptor Pepetela, in the process of creation of his “statue/fiction”, in reality, acted as if he were an African artist who tries to conform to the artistic traditions of which he is the heir. Pepetela searched in the North Angolan people, the yakas or jagas, the style which is characteristic and peculiar to that people’s statuary tradition to create his “statue/fiction”. It’s because of this that he reproduced natural features or created a “realist-fiction-sculpture”. It was the weird appearance of the statue that made Alexandre Semedo more and more obsessed to understand its significance. It was such a strong effect that by the end of the novel he addresses the statue in the following way:

Yaka, you have been talking to me for eighty years, but I’m not able to understand you. It’s not a matter of language, there is something else that obstructs the understanding. And I have to solve this before I die. What sense would this eighty years dialogue have if I die before understanding you? You must have been a God in the act of your own creation, turn yourself, then, into God and keep me alive until I can hear you (PEPETELA, 1985, p.282).

At this point, Alexandre seems to have understood that the problem concerning himself and the sculpture is not simply some misunderstanding because of the language, but that there was something else which hindered the establishment of a dialogue between them. Who reveals to the protagonist-narrator all the symbolism that comes

from the statue and that, obviously, makes him understand the reason for his lack of understanding, is his great-grandson Joel: “- The statue represents a colonialist, grandpa. Look at it. It’s what the sculptor thought about the settlers. Ridiculed. Look at the nose. Stupid and ambitious! (PEPETELA, 1985, p.249).

So Alexandre tells Joel that he is the chosen one because he knows how to interpret the statue: “- It’s still needed to surpass many things, the weight of History. This statue does not talk to everyone, but only to the rare chosen ones like you. Do not fool yourself... (PEPETELA, 1985, p.295). Among all of Alexandre’s descendants, only Joel takes part in the war to free Angola.

If Yaka, the statue, as defended by Joel, is a work of art whose objective is to satirize colonialism, Alexandre Semedo, in fact, couldn’t be able to understand it. Firstly, because he lived together with it, as it is literally said by the end of the novel in a conversation with Joel: “- So, do you think it is an image of the settler? I do not see it this way, but, in fact, I cannot see it. – You have always seen it, you were born with her, how can’t you interpret? – It’s a satire to the colonialism, grandpa” (PEPETELA, 1985, p.295). Secondly, even criticizing the Portuguese colonialism, Alexandre brought with him the ambiguity of his birth: on the one hand, the mark of the *cuvale* land dust, on the other, his Portuguese blood. In other words, he still kept with him the remains of colonialism that he fought against, being, in short, also a colonizer, hence satirized by Yaka. That’s the reason why sometimes the statue annoyed him so much with its ironic appearance, “- Do you like, grandpa? – Yes. But it bothered me. After a while, it didn’t bother me anymore. There was a part in it that attracted me and other that irritated me. The ironic look” (PEPETELA, 1985, p.295).

In fact, Alexandre in trying to understand the meaning of the statue, searched for the meaning of his own colonialist existence which had come to an end. He chooses to stay in Angola when all his relatives, except Joel, who had joined the ranks of the movement for the liberation of Angola, MFLA, flee afraid of the war. Alexandre stays to die in Angola, the land which baptized him.

Like every African sculpture, the statue of Yaka, even without a narrative function, can also be read as a “carved discourse” which questions colonialism, insistently, throughout the enunciation. In the words of Manuel Rui (1985), also an Angolan writer, Yaka is an “already seen discourse” since it shows, through its features,

a collective message of repulse in relation to the domination. A text that mocks the colonizer, showing his arrogance and ambition. This way, the “discourse” carried out by the statue Yaka questions the colonial discourse through satire and laughter. According to Bakhtin (1984), laughter degrades power, so it is a resource of ambivalent and libertarian nature. The truth of the statue was the certainty that the colonial oppression would reach an end.

Conclusion

The polyphonic narration of this text clearly does not intend to mean the various possible focalizations of the same story, but to show the collective value, the solidarity of constructing something together, not only from the standpoint of enunciation – to set the dominated free is only possible thanks to collective struggle – but also in the participatory utterance of the past in order to construct the present. VOLOŠINOV (1973) says that the subject is a participant in his own questioning as, if he denied the existence of a previous structure, one could not “come across the world”. In this way, the words belonging to others can be changed into our own, due to the “oblivion of their source”. So, the relay of voices in the development of the novel, as well as the varied possibilities of focalization, reflect the polyphonic basis on which the novel is structured. The merging of voices and viewpoints, colonial and anticolonial, in a dialogic process construct the postcolonial discourse.

The polyphonic way of narrating also presupposes the exercise of creative freedom. It seems as if Pepetela were saying that the monovocal discourse was not capable of representing the multifarious history of the Angolan colonization, let alone the present making of the postcolonial nation.

The subjects polyphonically constituted in the figures of the narrators of the novel (they tell the story at a time subsequent to its happening) give an enriched meaning to the story (diegesis), as the voices which constitute them in the present of the narrative do not permit them to read the Angolan history, or the private history of a colonizer’s family, being narrators dated from the end of the 18th century (period in which the Semedo’s family saga begins).

The place of polyphony which constitutes them, and in which they were constituted (culture), as defended by Bakhtin (1997), denotes responsibility in relation to the future. The questioning of the colonial past, in the enunciatory present reinforces the narrators' longing for the consolidation of an independent Angolan nation, since the moment of production of the novel is subsequent to the independence from the colonial oppression.

Alexandre Semedo, due to his baptism of clay (and his consequent ambiguity), and Yaka, the statue, with its artistic and magical characteristics (to African people these objects are sacred), synthesize the colonial event well and are the bridge to the construction of the postcolonial nation discourse, assuring, in this way, the dialogical historicity of the events and discourses.

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Received February 24, 2013

Accepted June 04, 2013