

## WHO IS AT THE CENTRE? GIKUYU OGRES, ORAL NARRATIVE AND POSTHUMAN THINKING

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### **Abstract**

*In this contribution I would like to offer an interpretation on ogres and humans in Gikuyu oral narratives, focusing on the earliest records of such stories in the colonial era. Gikuyu oral narratives have been recorded since the early twentieth century, albeit often rendered only in summarised form, in English translation, and evaluated from a racist and paternalistic stance. Despite these serious drawbacks, the collections can serve to reconstruct a preliminary Gikuyu ogre history of the early colonial period, thereby contributing to the sociocultural history of the imaginary in a more general sense. The focus here will be on the social relations between monsters and humans, in connection to ecological concerns in the narratives, based on textual analysis.*

*In my view a historical perspective on oral literature can offer theoretical insights into the recent debates on (East) African popular culture and the post-human turn in literary studies. Many studies in popular culture are strongly connected to urbanity and new ICT, and the posthuman, ecocritical turn is a relatively new approach in academia and gaining momentum only recently in (East-)African literary studies.*

*This ‘newness’ should not stand in the way of appreciating older philosophical traditions: Gikuyu people have, through their oral narratives, long reflected on the relations between humans and other creatures, between culture, nature and preternature. Studying such historical reflections may indeed help to qualify our concepts in literary criticism.*

**Keywords:** *Monster Studies; Gikuyu oral narrative; Ecocriticism*

### **Introduction: ‘Newness’ in Academia**

Viewing literature and popular culture from a historical perspective is not *à la mode*: the emphasis is nearly invariably on ‘the new’. Studies in popular culture, an established field in African studies at least since the 1990s (cf Barber 1997), often revolve around recent urban developments, ‘modernity’ as a concept, and new ICT. Also the latest frameworks in literary criticism stress ‘newness’: the nonhuman turn and posthumanism, including queer studies,

animal studies, new materialism, new media theory, ecocriticism, etc. (Grusin 2015; Braidotti 2013) emphasise newness, up to the point of leading to a ‘turn-fatigue’ (Grusin 2015: ix). While initially, some of these approaches were criticised by African scholars (Slaymaker 2007: 683-685), as of the turn of the century we also see an increased scholarship in posthuman, ecocritical and queer approaches in (East-)African literary criticism (Quayson & Olaniyan 2007: 681-764).

Also in the humanities, there is an emphasis on such new approaches, on citing the latest publications and a constant invention of new vocabulary; leading to – as Grace Musila (2019) points out – a homogenisation in a mono-epistemic, largely Northern-directed academic space. ‘The fetish of the new’ (Musila 2019: 289) is standing in the way of studying older debates and philosophical traditions that may not merely be ‘helpful’ to our current understandings, but can also potentially lead to qualifying our concepts in literary criticism and a broadening of our academic epistemic range. This is not to say that we should discard innovation and new approaches nor to imply that we should refrain from studying recent developments; my aim with this historical approach is to try and open up the space for conceptualisation, while at the same time pointing to possible trajectories for studying the history of imagination.

As a case-study for this paper, I would like to make a preliminary attempt to reason from Gikuyu oral narratives from the beginning of the twentieth century, as they reflect on the relations between humans and other creatures, and on culture, nature and preternature. My focus will be on ecology and the social relations between ogres (*irimũ*, pl. *marimũ*) and humans in ogre narratives. While my argument may be useful for other types of monsters, the case study deals with ogres that feature in Gikuyu fictional oral storytelling.

### **The Anthropocene and Ecocritical Traditions**

Climate change, environmental degradation, and ecological disaster form an enormous global problem. It may seem silly, perverse even, to focus on ogres while the world is facing such tremendous problems. Yet it is my firm belief that ogres, and monsters more broadly speaking, can help us in our reflections on ecology. Often the ecological crisis is related to the Anthropocene. We may view the Anthropocene – a term that became popular in academia since about 2000 – as ‘the era that began when humans developed capabilities to alter geologically significant conditions and processes’ (Mwangi 2019: 19). While humans have always changed their environment, through practice and discourse, now (when precisely is a matter of debate)

humanity can potentially alter geological conditions and this is precisely what is happening. The Anthropocene may be regarded as a consequence of extreme anthropocentrism, whereby human interests have been consistently viewed as more important than and superior to everything else, and whereby 'nature' is viewed in opposition to 'culture' and utilised as a mere resource.

At the same time, anthropocentrism has a second range of implications. It may also mean that humans are viewed as a unique species and the sole producers of morality, thus opening up a more positive space for anthropocentrism. While taking human interests as the standard has indeed led to destruction of the planet earth and beyond, this second hallmark of anthropocentrism can also lead to a focus on humanity's moral duties towards 'nature'. In order to survive, humans must protect nature and ensure the care of animals and natural resources. This realisation has led to Environmentalism, indeed advocating the preservation, restoration and improvement of the natural environment.

Concurrent with the developments during the Anthropocene, with its detrimental consequences for biodiversity, climate, geomorphology, etc., there is a growing concern for ecology in academia. In literary studies, ecocriticism has been developed as a tool for analysing literary and cultural forms in their relation to the environment. This approach addresses the current ecological crisis, and establishes how literature imagines environmental problems, as it discusses the relations between humans, animals and plants from a holistic perspective. For example, ecocriticism proposes to 'speak with' instead of 'speak about', in an attempt to do away with hierarchical procedures of categorisation.

Usually ecocriticism is regarded as a new approach. Only few studies exist that focus on philosophical traditions in which storytelling or other literary practices are historically used to reflect on ecological issues. It is problematic, however, to view the current attempts in literary studies to overcome anthropocentrism as 'new': as we will see, also in this case, these literary reflections have remained outside academia, but that does not mean they did not exist.

## **Sources**

*Ng'ano cia marimũ* (ogre narratives) form a widespread fictional genre in Gikuyu oral literature, and have been recorded since the early twentieth century. Often the narratives were rendered

only in summarised form, or just an English translation was offered, and/or they were evaluated from a racist and paternalistic stance. To underscore my point it suffices to refer to the title of the first published ethnographic study of the Gikuyu by W.S. and K. Routledge of 1910, entitled: *With a Prehistoric People*. Such labels were used to dismiss the relevance of the philosophical and ethical concerns that speak from the gathered materials, and justified an exoticising approach. Despite these serious drawbacks, these early collections can serve to reconstruct a preliminary Gikuyu monster history of the early colonial period, thereby contributing to the sociocultural history of the imaginary in a more general sense.

The sources consist of small reports made by the British military, such as captain Barrett, colonial administrators like C.W. Hopley, early missionaries like Church Missionary Society Reverend Leonard J. Beecher and Consolata father Cagnolo and the book by anthropologist couple Routledge, who set up a camp near Fort Hall (Murang'a). Later sources, such as Kenyatta's *Facing Mount Kenya*, Mũriũki's historical study, and various publications on Gikuyu oral narratives of later date were also consulted. Fieldwork carried out in the early 1990s provided additional insights.

### **Monsters' Cultural Work**

Firstly, we will explore the 'cultural work' (Mittman 2013: 1) that monsters do. Precisely because monsters belong to the imaginative sphere, they matter. Monsters embody the opposite of human culture in their uncanniness: they are 'difference made flesh' (Cohen 2020: 41). In this, they form a warning against 'abnormal' behaviour. Leisure activities, such as oral storytelling are not 'innocent': they are meant to be educational and productive of social norms. Thus it is no coincidence that Antonio Gramsci explicitly mentioned folktales in his theorizing on hegemonic models (Gencerella 2010), and Pierre Bourdieu (1977) frequently takes oral narratives as examples to drive home his points about habitus and generative schemes: both relate these examples to societal hierarchies. Oral narratives are all about normativity and processes of socializing, rendering horror stories more than fun: they are formative at the same time.

The interesting thing is, however, that ogre narratives may also provide a way out of and a means to resist existing hierarchical patterns. Ogres, like all monsters in oral storytelling are ambivalent, and therefore attractive. They constantly escape our modes of categorisation, they never fit and as soon as we start defining or describing them, their hybridity thwarts our

attempts. Their point is precisely to not fit: ‘monsters are the harbingers of category crisis’ (Cohen 2020, 40). In this manner, narratives with monsters may also formulate alternatives to societal inequalities and undo rigid classifications. It has been pointed out that in stories, the small animal may win, the poor can marry the rich, the less powerful can become king, etc. This ‘liberating potential of the fantastic’ (Zipes 2006) has so far not been brought into connection with the ‘promise of monsters’ (Cohen 2013). Yet, the point of monsters is also to question categorisation, to consider alternative discourses and behaviour through fiction.

In their ambivalence ogres are profoundly posthuman. On the one hand, they reinforce the boundaries of humanity by pointing to ‘difference’, but at the same time they straddle these boundaries, rendering the categories of humans, monsters, animals questionable. In her article ‘Posthuman teratology’, Patricia MacCornack’s explains that posthumanism interrogates the category ‘human’. So it follows, as she (2013: 294) explains, that: ‘we are all, and *must* be, monsters because none are template humans.’ The category ‘human’ is an ideal that is established ‘through what deviates from it.’ Asa Mittman (2013: 8) points out that ‘the monstrous is that which creates this sense of vertigo, that which calls into question our (theirs, anyone’s) epistemological worldview, highlights its fragmentary and inadequate nature, and thereby asks us [...] to acknowledge the failure of our systems of categorization.’

### **Ogres Versus Humans**

Gikuyu ogres cannot be reduced to one single dimension or assessment as they point into various directions. In a way, they indeed form the Gikuyu Other. They are indeed the opposite of what humankind ought to be, and in terms of abode, food, body and sexuality they entirely contravene the normative order. Thus while to make a home it is essential to clear the forest, and to live where other people live, ogres – and anti-social human beings such as sorcerers and thieves – transgress these rules and live in the wild, in the forest, mostly on their own. In this, the opposition is not made between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’: it is rather between ‘spaces inhabited by humans’ and ‘uninhabited spaces’. The latter – ‘wilderness’ if you like – is denoted with the word *werũ*. *Werũ* could bring people good things (for example through hunting), but ogre narratives form a caution that such places are to be treated with respect and awe: humans have to be careful there.

Not only do ogres choose abnormal dwelling places, they also eat the ‘wrong’ food as they eat human flesh. Ogres are greedy creatures; many of them possess two mouths: one in the front and one in the nape with which they catch flies. Again, such anti-social and greedy behaviour coupled with cannibalistic tendencies may be related to witchcraft, transgressing the normative order. Furthermore, all ogres have deformed bodies: apart from having two mouths, ogres may have only one leg, others miss half of their body. There are hardly any ogres without eye problems: they are wall-eyed, cross-eyed, one-eyed, or they have a third eye in the middle of their forehead, etc. These deformities again reinforce their abnormal nature.

So we can think of ogres being in opposition to humans: with their abnormal characteristics, ogres can be described as the ultimate Gikuyu Other. They must be distinguished from Gikuyu human beings: in the words of one storyteller: ‘And that woman lived just like a Gikuyu person, she did not become an ogre’ (Kabĩra and Mũtahi 1988: 90).

### **Ogres and Ambivalence**

Apart from this ‘difference made flesh’, *marimũ* are also ambivalent, as they do not fit any mode of categorisation. They escape us as soon as we start describing them. This liminality of *marimũ* is established in various ways.

As we saw, ogres live in the wilderness, but they construct homesteads, and even an entire village life in the bush. In this, they create parallel dwelling-places in the bush, and with that destabilise the categories of uninhabited and habited spaces. Furthermore from their dwelling places in the wilderness, they may come to visit human dwelling places.

I indicated the deformed bodies of ogres as a sign of their Otherness, but it is important to keep in mind that through shape-shifting ogres can appear as seemingly friendly old ladies or as handsome young men, thus questioning the boundary between ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’. We established ogres as anthropophagic, and they also eat flies (with their second mouth), but *marimũ* also have a ‘normal’ mouth, they can speak like humans and often they can cook, thereby questioning the boundaries between ‘humans’, ‘animals’ and ‘monsters’. The gender of ogres is often not stated, and it remains unclear whether they are male or female. Yet we do find examples of ogres married to Gikuyu women, while they may be found pounding grain, a typically female task, thereby questioning the boundary between ‘man’ and ‘woman’.

Ogres form a link between the underworld and this world, they may be seen as *ando ago* (people with knowledge that is accessible only if you can cross the boundaries between this world and other worlds), and even the word *marimũ* is etymologically related to spirits and ancestors (Bastin e.a. 2002), thus questioning the boundary between 'life' and 'death'.

With this liminality ogres pose a threat to society's order. The shape-shifting of ogres renders them extra-difficult to assess, as they may easily escape human's capabilities of evaluation. This deceives humankind and is potentially destructive and potentially powerful at the same time. In other words, *marimũ* at once establish and problematize the category of 'humanity'.

### **Ogres' Perspectives**

Reasoning from the perspective of monsters may help to further nuance our view of liminal creatures. Literary analysis generally follows the views, focalisation and actions of the human protagonists in monster literature and film, but it is worthwhile to trace the monster's experience in narratives. How are events viewed from the ogres' eyes (however many they may be)? Let us look into matters with monster eyes and reason from the stance of Gikuyu ogres in the narratives.

As indicated, ogres may deceive people through shape shifting. Yet far more often in the narratives, it is humans who deceive monsters. Thus in one narrative, a group of *marimũ* is tricked by a man who promises to teach them a dance (Barrett 1913: 74), and in another a captured girl removes her ornaments and puts on a smelling substance so that the ogres could no longer recognise her as a human being (Routledge 1910: 321-324). Because ogres are so easily deceived, they are often evaluated as 'stupid'. Yet humans may also be deceived by ogres, hence acting in similarly 'stupid' ways. Thus a girl consents to marry an ogre and only finds out about his true nature after he eats their child (Routledge 2010).

Furthermore, in many cases humans are warned not to reveal what happened to them when meeting an ogre, but still they tell their secret, with all the consequences thereof (Barrett 1912: 112-114; 1913: 10-11). Or, alternatively, humans stubbornly refuse to negotiate with the ogre and then have to face the consequences (Routledge 1910: 309-311).

So ogres and humans may be said to be equally deceitful. Yet, while humans stand a lot to gain from contact with ogres, ogres generally do not benefit from contact with humans. In most stories, the human characters ultimately escape from being captive at an ogre's place, and very

often, especially when it concerns young men, they gain in wealth and status. Ogres, on the other hand, hardly ever win from their contact with humans. Sometimes they manage to marry a girl, capture a victim or eat people, but more often than not they later have to give up their bounty again. In the final instance, the narrative often concludes with the ogres' death.

We can conclude that ogres and humans, when it comes to deception, bad intentions, betrayal, reasoning, marrying, eating and killing, etc. have a far more complex relation than is usually assumed. Viewed from the stance of the human characters in the narratives, ogres pose a threat, but usually the negative consequences do not last. For ogres, humans are regarded as a potential benefit, but in most cases the advantage does not last and the contact is fatal for the ogres.

## **Conclusions**

Monsters are often thought to be bad. And indeed in their relations to humans, ogres may be harmful: they often approach people with false pretence and they may eat them. Yet, from the perspective of ogres, it is often humans who are deceptive and treacherous. Many stories relate how people deceive ogres, betray them and in most cases kill them. Oftentimes, this leads to rewards for these humans: not only do they escape, often – especially when it concerns young men – they gain in prestige and in material wealth. For ogres, the consequences of their contact with humans, on the other hand, is often fatal.

What then is the 'strange news' that Gikuyu ogres bring? In my view, the 'promise of monsters' (cf Cohen 2013: 449-464) in this case points in various directions, several of which have clear relevance for studying present-day developments in literature and popular culture. Firstly our present monsters are informed by the past. As Cohen (2013: 451) points out, 'monsters are drawn from a shared vocabulary' and they arrive 'in the present yearning to impart an old story, a narrative from the deep past'. Also in East Africa's popular culture, 'history is a tangle, full of loops and doublings-back' (Ibid.). Hence studying monster imaginations in the past may help us to understand current monster making, related indeed to urbanity, technology and new media (eg Ogude and Nyairo, 2007), but at the same time engaging with the past. There is no popular culture without history.

Furthermore, in my view early Gikuyu reflections on monsters can also potentially contribute to the recent debates on the nonhuman, the posthuman, ecocritical approaches and queer studies. After all, ogres and other monsters are, by nature, betwixt and between: as explained, they point



to a 'category crisis'. In this they directly refer to the ideas in queer and posthuman studies: the stories reflect a sharp awareness of the problems of delineating human and non-human, men and women, this world and the underworld, etc. The current debates on nonhuman and posthuman notions are related indeed to crises: crises not only in category, but also in ecology, climate and pandemic. These early stories indicate how these crises are historical problem.

Ogres are important. Precisely because they are deemed so trivial. Narratives of global warming, ecosystems and tsunami's have been proposed instead of the spectacular aims of saving ice bears and mountain gorillas, and instead of the focus on the big five in vast national parks. Yet, also these grand narratives can become abstract to the extent of becoming meaningless. Ogres in oral narrative materialise the relations between humans and non-humans. Indeed, ogres do create a sense of vertigo, as the grand ecological and conservationist narratives do, but ogres become so palpable in these narratives that the abstraction is overcome, and we can experience our attractions and fears for them. These narratives are deeply philosophical and playful at the same time.

Through ogre narratives, Gikuyu were debating the crisis of humanity in relation to 'environment' already around 1900. The stories reveal a sharp awareness of the dangers of tampering with forces that humans cannot manage. Ogres invite people to view their position in relational terms, and to treat spaces uninhabited by people with caution and due respect. In this, as I indicated, nature and culture are not opposed: the approach is rather more ecological.

Gikuyu ogres tell us about the limits of humans' control over their environment, while at the same questioning the very notion of 'environment'. They beg the question: who is environed, surrounded, who is at the centre of the circle if other forces are so powerful? Gikuyu around 1900 already well understood that a less anthropocentric logic was a more prudent option. Long before Timothy Morton (2007), Gikuyu ogre narratives were proposing an 'ecology without nature'.

Ultimately these narratives pose the unsettling question, if monsters and people are equally good and bad, why indeed distinguish between them? Why do we have categories at all? Who is the Other for whom? Who is whose monster?

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