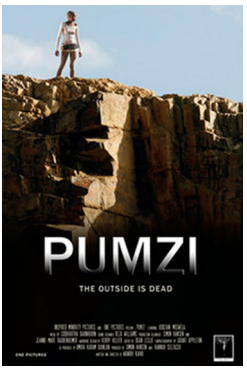
Pumzi (2009)

Moira Marquis

dir. Wanuri Kahiu; prod. Simon Hansen, Hannah Slezacek; screenplay Wanuri Kahiu; photography Grant Appleton; music Siddhartha Barnhoorn. digital, color, 21 mins. Goethe Institut and Focus Features, distrib. Inspired Minority Pictures.



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Pumzi is an Afrofuturist melodrama in which a young woman breaks from a technologically rich African state existing in the ecologically destroyed aftermath of World War III, the »Water War,« in order to reestablish a traditional ecological culture. *Pumzi* traffics in conventional melodramatic depictions of a repressive state that masquerades as benevolent. The escape of the protagonist, Asha (played by Kudzani Moswela) from this regime is achieved only through self-sacrifice. Aesthetically, the film is innovative through its depiction of Gĩkũyu epistemology as the solution to both environmental and social ills. Through its affectively charged return to the traditional reverence for Mũgumo trees, it makes an emotive appeal for ecological social change through the revival of tradition, even as it conforms to Western melodramatic conventions that promise freedom for the virtuous (Anker).

The film opens in a Sahara-like desert. Tubular white structures appear, which viewers are informed constitute the East African Maitu state: a society that has survived the Water War. Within this structure is the Virtual Natural History Museum, which catalogs flora and fauna that have gone extinct, including a jar that holds a dried seed pod with a label that identifies this as Maitu (»mother«) seed, which comes from *maa* (»truth«) and *itu* (»our«) in Kikuyu (in English, also spelled »Gĩkũyu«). Another exhibit features a newspaper clipping that details greenhouse gas and climate change, titled »There Goes the Last Tree.« This is positioned below the petrified roots of the final tree. These exhibits introduce the major theme of the short film: the environmental collapse that precipitated the Water War. Water and trees—specifically the Mũgumo tree, which is a maternal figure, a giver and restorer of life, in Gĩkũyu epistemology—play a central role in the decolonial narrative the film embraces (Karangi 127). The main character, Asha, whose name means hope, desire, or life, is a curator at the museum. We first see Asha as she appears in her own dream, standing in the vast desert when a majestic tree suddenly appears, leafy and green. She reaches out to touch it and her face alights with joy. This dream is abruptly interrupted by a computer voice, reciting

»Dream detected. Take your dream suppressants.« Asha wakes with a start and reaches for a bottle of pills with the directions »Take 1 tablet immediately after an attack« printed on the side.

Asha is a dutiful member of this dystopian society, which is hierarchical and oppressive even as it inverts the gender and racial order of colonially inherited monoculture. Women are in charge, and the lighter complexioned characters are in more menial positions (bathroom attendant, security guard). The Maitu state is also supremely ecological, from recycling water to carbon neutrality. However, water usage is monitored with military enforcement, and urine and sweat are recycled for drinking water. None of the characters in the film speak. Instead, they communicate through computers, because speaking would release water vapor through breath and necessitate more water consumption. In *Pumzi*, which means »breath« in Swahili, people are literally silenced in order to achieve ecological sustainability. As Shirin Assa notes, although Maitu claims traditional lineage through its moniker, this society instrumentalizes its people. The regimentation of daily life, the hierarchy among people, and the restriction of peoples' movement is explained as a concern for their safety and seemingly has achieved the liberal goals of female and Black empowerment and ecological sustainability. And yet, its portrayal constitutes a critique of the colonially inherited global monoculture's techno-fix environmentalism and establishes the need for broad social change to achieve both human freedom and ecological sustainability.

After the initial dream, Asha receives a mysterious soil sample at her desk, which she is told to report to security. She disobeys and finds out that the test results indicate abnormally high water content and no radioactivity—two markers of a healthy ecosystem. These qualities also mark the soil as part of a Mũgumo grove, since »Mũgumo has an enormous capacity to conserve the soil moisture and […] fertility« (Karangi 118). She places some soil in her hand, lowers her face to her palm, and inhales deeply. Her head then falls to the desk, as if fainting. Similarly, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's canonical short story »Mugumo« (1975) depicts the tree as having this soporific quality: The main character falls into sleep repeatedly under the influence of the tree, having dreams that blend with reality and reveal deeper truths. In her dream, Asha plunges into a pool of clear water, clothed in a traditionally patterned, flowing dress—quite a contrast from her real-life neutral colored, futuristic unitard—which billows around her under the water. In this darkly lit water, we see what appear to be tree roots. Mũgumo grows by water, and this therefore further marks the tree from her dreams as a Mũgumo.

Asha wakes with a start and raises her head from the desk. She turns and sees one of her specimens: the »mother seed« from the beginning of the film. This marks the point when Asha begins pursuing the decolonial ecology that her dreams encourage, by evoking the Mũgumo tree that is foundational in the identity of the Gĩkũyũ (Karangi). Gĩkũyũ culture traces its nine different matrilineal lines to a single female ancestor: the mother seed (Mũkũyũ). The central role of the Mũgumo is ecological as the tree provides habitat and food for a greater variety of species than any other tree in Africa (Deeble and Stone). It is due to its role in ecological well-being that the Mũgumo is so central in Gĩkũyu culture, as in the transferring of government from one generation to the next in the ituĩka ceremony (Karangi 119). The film draws a contrast between the oppressive environmentalism of the state that appropriates the Mũgumo and the traditional culture that instead reveres it and argues that the future needs to break from colonial inheritances to achieve a non-oppressive environmentalism.

Asha tries to leave Maitu to plant the seed, which has begun to sprout, but her request is denied. Her subsequent punishment marks her as unwarrantedly persecuted, raising her virtue for affective appeal. Asha's integrity is further enforced when she escapes and smuggles the plant out into the desert, searching for the coordinates from the soil sample. Asha walks through the desert alone. Her lips appear cracked, and just before she runs out of water, she waters the seed. She becomes disoriented from dehydration and drops her compass. Wandering through the desert, Asha sees the tree from her dream, vibrant and green. However, when she arrives, this mirage fades and the tree is revealed as a dead and wind battered trunk with no sign of life. Surrounding it are similarly dead trunks, most of which appear to have been cut. This image evokes a dispute occurring in contemporary Kenya, between people who want to maintain traditional culture and those who want »progress« through a neocolonial policy that sanctions the cutting of Mũgumo trees. *Pumzi* aligns with the traditional Gĩkũyũ reverence for these trees and alludes to the ecosystem's collapse due to the colonially inherited desanctification of the trees. Asha digs a hole in the sand in what was once a Mũgumo grove and plants the sprout, watering it with the last of her remaining water from her canteen. She then wipes the sweat from her body and wrings it out and onto the seed. Pulling her shawl over her head, she lies down, shading the sprout from the direct sun. The camera pans up, and from above Asha cradles the sprouted plant. As the camera pans out, a tree's crown blooms and covers Asha. As the camera continues to zoom out, this lone tree becomes an ever-fainter dot in the midst of a vast desert. As the title of the film, *Pumzi*, appears at the end of the film, the view expands to include high mountains, on the other side of which appears a vibrant green forest with low hanging clouds as the sound of thunder cracking breaks through high-pitched singing.

This ambiguous ending invites several possible interpretations. If Asha's sacrifice creates this forest, and if the distance between her tree and the forest is a temporal, not a spatial one, then Asha's act is in keeping with tradition and against the repressive Maitu state. This asserts that traditional Gĩkũyũ culture is morally right in opposition to a culture inherited through colonialism—even as the Maitu state enacts ecological, feminist, and pro-Black policies. Asha's sacrifice is a gesture of reciprocity, which is an epistemological claim found throughout ecologically minded societies worldwide. Juxtaposing the militarized, dystopian, and colonially inherited techno-ecology of the Maitu state with this kind of reciprocity creates two possible environmental futures: highly repressive and environmentally scarce, or free and ecologically abundant. Asha plants the mother seed of traditional culture: a tree, whose shade she will never partake of, but which will create a better future for others.

Another possible interpretation is that the distance between Asha's tree and the forest is spatial. In this reading, the ecological scarcity of the Maitu community is fabricated but presented as a fact of nature. The construction of artificial scarcity is designed to maintain rigid social hierarchies and benefit some—although the beneficiaries are never represented in the film. The intentional obfuscation of natural abundance is accomplished through media representations, as the newspaper articles and Virtual Natural History Museum exhibits show. If this is the reality, Asha's sacrifice is unnecessary. The Earth is already abundant—some are just hoarding all its resources. While it would have been impossible for Asha to know that the lush forest lies just on the other side of the mountains, she perceives ecological ruination as total. This interpretation undermines the sacrifice of her life as necessary for the revival of non-human life.

In either interpretation, *Pumzi* leverages the classic melodramatic sacrifice of the virtuous against the oppressor, for ecological purposes. As Thomas Elsaesser notes, melodramas enjoy high popularity at times of »intense social and ideological crisis« (70) in part because of their moral goals. Environmental collapse is an existential crisis. The Maitu state's environmentalism is not a solution that most viewers, even of the most ecologically inclined, would embrace. *Pumzi* advocates for the healing of environments and colonially inherited social ills through a decolonial turn to traditional culture by depicting Asha as a parallel to the Mũgumo: a foundational maternal figure that ushers in reciprocity and ecological abundance, in contrast to the cruel motherhood that the colonially inherited Maitu state enacts.

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