

# If a hippo smiles, beware of polecats!

ONE of my favourite words is *anthropomorphism* which is “the attribution of human characteristics or behaviour to a god, animal, or object”.

It probably had its origins in the words of Reginald Pecock in his 1449 work *The Repressor of Over Much Blaming of the Clergy* where he wrote of “the sect of Antropomorfitis, whiche holden that God in his godhede hath hondis and feet and othere suche membris”.

The thing defined by the word has been with us since the dawn of civilisation. The elephant-headed Hindu deity Ganesha is probably the most iconic representation thereof. Think also of the Egyptian Sphinx and Anubis, the Greek Minotaur and Pan. More recently, we see this played out in popular culture through animated movies such as *The Lion King* or *Finding Nemo*.

We see the anthropomorphic principle being applied on a daily basis when we think rocks look like faces of people, when we speak of a “raging” storm or a “gentle” breeze.

But more often than not, the consequences of anthropomorphism can be dangerous or even catastrophic – for example when some people (generally obnoxious kids of bunny-huggers with bad shoes and

bad hair) assume that wild animals are “cute” or “smiling” and proceed to try to hug them. The inevitable tragic headline which follows is “Hippo kills American tourist”.

I like using the word for different reasons. I also apply it to the way we as humans perceive other humans in that we see in them something of ourselves, but that perception is often (and sometimes tragically) not grounded in reality.

In 1995, President Nelson Mandela was pursuing a policy with the rest of the continent which my colleagues in the media referred to as “quiet diplomacy”. This is not dissimilar to a policy pursued by US president Ronald Reagan in the 1980s which he called “constructive engagement”. Essentially, it means not publically criticising actions of leaders while trying to get them to change their ways in private.

Mandela was motivated by the belief that many of the people regarded as polecats of the world at the time (Libya and Nigeria, for example) had supported the ANC during the struggle years and therefore were our friends and needed to be dealt with in the same way as one would deal with an errant family member.

Mandela stuck to his guns in this regard until November of 1995 when



**KANTHAN PILLAY**

Nigerian dictator Sani Abacha – ignoring diplomatic overtures from South Africa and others – ordered the execution of nine human rights activists including playwright Ken Saro-Wiwa.

Mandela, correctly, described the execution as a “heinous” act. He called for expulsion of Nigeria from the Commonwealth, and called on other members of the then Organisation of African Unity to condemn Nigeria’s actions.

Only one other president – Zimbabwe’s Robert Mugabe – joined us in

condemning Nigeria. All of the other 52 members of the OAU remained silent.

Anthropomorphism – they look like us, they dress like us, they sound vaguely like us, so we expect them to behave the same way.

Not long after, Thabo Mbeki stirringly declared “I am an African!”

He went on to ensure the demise of the OAU, replacing it with the African Union which he hoped would lead an African Renaissance.

Last month, the same African Union sat down to elect a new chairperson. We submitted the name of our highly-competent Minister of Home Affairs, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, as our candidate for the position.

Our African brothers and sisters turned their backs on us. A majority once again voted for Jean Ping of Gabon. The difference this time is that Ping failed to attain a requisite two-thirds majority; which means new elections in six months time.

Clearly our brothers and sisters on the continent don’t like us.

Why are we surprised? It goes back to anthropomorphism – they look like us, they dress like us, they sound vaguely like us, so we expect them to behave the same way.

But we believe in universal hu-

man rights, we believe in freedom of expression, we believe in gender equality, we believe in freedom of religion, we believe in equal rights for gay people. These are largely foreign concepts on this continent.

Would Swaziland as a monarchy want our constitution? Would Uganda with its anti-gay fanaticism want our constitution? Would Zimbabwe with its land-grabbing want our constitution? Would the 29 African countries which have not ratified the Maputo Protocol against Female Genetic Mutilation want our constitution?

So let’s start a serious national dialogue about a new cultural imperialism. Let’s focus on an on-going campaign of bludgeoning the rest of the continent with the values enshrined in our constitution.

When their people rise up and overthrow their corrupt leaders and embrace our values, we will welcome them with open arms.

Until then, an African Renaissance is a pipe dream.

■ *Kanthan Pillay is MD of the Yired group of companies and CEO of 99.2 Yfm.*

*He writes in his personal capacity. email: Kanthan.Pillay@gmail.com Twitter: @kanthanpillay*