

Explorations in animist materialism: Notes on reading/writing African literature, culture, and society.

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## Explorations in Animist Materialism: Notes on Reading/Writing African Literature, Culture, and Society

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

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Explorations in Animist Materialism:

## Harry Garuba

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In front of the National Electric Power Authority of Nigeria headquarters is a larger-than-life statue of Sango, the Yoruba god of lightning, clad in his traditional outfit, presiding, as it were, over the offices of the major power generation and distribution corporation of the country. Sango, a sixteenth-century ruler of Oyo, is an anthropomorphic deity who was in his lifetime reputed to have had the ability to "call down" lightning to destroy his enemies and burn their houses and homesteads. The Sango myth, carefully preserved and nurtured by his devotees, is so well known in Yorubaland that to this day Sango priests are believed to possess the power of obtaining retribution through the agency of lightning. *Oba Koso*, an excellent traditional operatic drama that focuses on the life of Sango, was hugely popular with audiences both in Nigeria and abroad in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>1</sup> The acclaim that greeted the production of the play at that time may have **[End Page 261]** been due partly to the theatrical skills of Duro Ladipo, whose dramatic evocation of this historical/mythical figure has since become one of the great moments of Nigerian theater and performance. However, in those heady days of postindependence cultural nationalism, the Sango myth may also have provided an avenue through which the new elite could reconnect with its historical and cultural heritage. The Sango statue was particularly meaningful to the new "educated" leaders who were supposedly alienated from their traditions by their Western education. For them, Sango was not only a figure from the historical past; he was more importantly a symbol of the meeting point between "tradition" and "modernity."<sup>2</sup> He was a mythological figure whose incipient scientific consciousness was demonstrated in his ability to harness the electrical charges of lightning to serve his own sometimes undisclosed purposes.

Apart from this attribute, Sango's life is not exactly a tale of nobility and selflessness. On the contrary, he is the usual tyrant of history and mythology whose pettiness leads him to overplay his hand in the end. Employing characteristic divide-and-rule tactics in one instance, he sets two of his powerful warriors against one another in the hope that they will be so weakened by war that neither of them will be able to pose a threat to his power. In the ensuing battle, Gbonka, one of the warriors, defeats Timi, the other, but spares his life. Not satisfied with this outcome, Sango contrives another scheme that leads to another battle, which Gbonka once again wins. This time, however, Gbonka recognizes Sango's duplicity and invades Oyo. Deserted by his supporters, Sango suffers defeat, withdraws from the capital, and hangs himself in humiliation. His followers band together and deify him: the king did not hang (*oba koso*), they claim, he simply metamorphosed into a god. For his present-day adherents, the details of his life story are eclipsed by his power to "call down" lightning, which Sango supposedly bequeathed to his priests. But to those for whom Sango possesses only a symbolic significance, these details become irrelevant when set beside his "discovery" of electricity, a discovery extrapolated from the myths of his dexterity in the manipulation of lightning. It is this association with electricity that has made Sango the **[End Page 262]** patron god of electricians and the deity who presides over Nigeria's power corporation.

This account of the life of Sango, its appropriation by a traditional elite, and its symbolic deployment by a modern elite underscores a form of sociocultural practice that has become quite pervasive in contemporary Nigeria, if not in all of Africa. Commenting on the Sango phenomenon in the essay "From a Common Back Cloth," Wole Soyinka writes: "The deistic approach of the Yoruba is to absorb every new experience, departmentalize it and carry on with life. Thus Sango (Dispenser of Lightning) now chairmans the Electricity Corporation, Ogun (God of Iron) is...

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This essay was first presented as a paper at the Africa Seminar Series of the Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town. I have benefited from the comments of Brenda Cooper, who chaired that seminar, and Isidore Okpeshe, who kindly read through the first draft of the paper. A somewhat different and abridged version, entitled “Explorations in Animist Materialism and a Reading of the Poetry of Niyi Osundare,” is scheduled to appear in Abdul Rasheed Na’Allah, ed., *The People’s Poet: Emerging Perspectives on the Poetry of Niyi Osundare* (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World, forthcoming).

1. See Duro Ladipo, *Oba Koso*, in *Three Yoruba Plays: Oba Koso, Oba Mose, Oba Waja*, trans. Ulli Beier (Ibadan, Nigeria: Mbari, 1964).

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