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Animist materialism in Femi Osofisan's *No More the Wasted Breed* (1983) and *Once Upon Four Robbers* (1980)

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Abstract

In his oeuvre, Femi Osofisan challenges class inequalities by upbraiding the materialistic predilections of the upper class. Therefore, critics view his plays as revolutionary manuscripts designed for social awakening and interpret them from a Marxist perspective. Marxist interpretation has, to a good degree, undermined other ideological potential and evident discursive engagements which abound in multiple hierarchies in his plays. This study advances the frontiers of interpretations in Osofisan's plays by providing alternative meanings in them besides Marxism. Through the theoretical praxis of Material Culture, I argue that beyond Marxist, class proclivities, Osofisan in *No More the Wasted Breed* (1983) and *Once Upon Four Robbers* (1980) commits to cultural rebirth in Africa through animist materialism, a spiritual, sociocultural appropriation process which inputs lifeforce to natural objects like rivers, plants, and animals. In addition to their material, totemic, sublunary significance, these natural objects acquire mystical and magical essence, thus contributing to the reification of African spiritual practices found in the plays. The spiritual practices rehabilitate African culture, promoting and re-enchanting its symbolic orthodoxy in the modern world. The study demonstrates that, instead of rejecting modernity, animist materialism as an African spiritual practice accommodates aspects of modernity, incorporating them as part of Africa's cultural heritage.

Keywords: Animist materialism, culture, cultural materialism, lifeforce, Marxism



Public Interest Statement:

This study provides an animist materialistic perspective to Femi Osofisan's dramaturgy hitherto subsumed in the domineering chambers of Marxism. It also presents animist materialism as a spiritual practice which constitutes an important aspect of African culture. Animist materialism does not seek to oppose or reject modern, Eurocentric religion. Through its practices, it accommodates and reinforces modern culture while also promoting African cultural heritage.

Introduction

The ideological taxonomy of Femi Osofisan's literary corpus primarily ranges from historical revival, mythical revalidation and more conspicuously, social conflict occasioned by lopsided material distribution of economic resources within the classes that make up society, namely the upper, affluent class and the penurious, groveling masses. Richards (2002) reinforces the later idea by succinctly remarking that "Osofisan champions the power of the common man and woman in an age when late capitalism has apparently caught the entire world in its seductive stranglehold and an indigenous elite class further stripes the nation of its tremendous physical and moral resources" Richard's view presupposes a dramaturgy firmly grounded in the inexorable dialectics of class consciousness towards protecting the less-privileged in a world dominated by capitalism. From a different perspective, Awodiya (1996) insists that "Osofisan's drama revises history, challenges and reinterprets myths and legends, and questions consensus opinion". Muyiwa's idea expands the canonical parameters of Osofisan's drama beyond mirroring class-fractured societies but also anchored on history, myth, and legends as part of social evolution. These cross-currents sum up the plurivocal, critical consciousness towards Osofisan's literary and ideological effulgence. In fact, it is an onerous task to genuinely identify any interpretive plank of his plays outside the familiar trajectory highlighted above. Interestingly, given the multiple creative and aesthetic heritages that abound in his plays, they lend themselves to diverse critical explications which catalyze the present study, granting it the analytical impetus to uncover other strands of meaning in them. However, Osofisan (2008) moderates critics who consistently gravitate towards employing Western analytical paradigms in interpreting African plays while jettisoning the obvious African cultural tropes in them. According to him "our dramatists were inadvertently brought to adopt the Western world view in their interpretations of our culture. Hence our ancient mythologies and the dramas they enacted were more or less interpreted to align with the liberal-humanist ideology of the capitalist world". Therefore, he advocates for a more Afrocentric interpretations of African literature which operate within the fundamental tenets of African cultural lineaments and worldview.

A closer look at Osofisan's artistic arena indicates a conscious effort to propagate cultural nationalism within Africa's traditional cosmos mostly characterized by terrestrial spirituality localized in natural, material objects as agential of lifeforce with regenerative energy. In this study, I argue that Osofisan, beyond his Marxist orientation, advances Africa's cultural, spiritual gradience through natural objects such as rivers, stones, plants, and other diverse entities as possessing supernatural powers, a soul and life which places them in positions to regulate and determine human affairs. Incisively, animist materialism connotes the sentient infusion of lifeforce, supernatural, magical, and mystical energy into natural objects because they are believed to possess a soul and spirit. Thus, humanity ascribes various qualities to these natural objects ranging from healing, retribution, benevolence, malevolence, and other existential strategies for reformative continuity. In his opinion, Garuba (2003) infers that "animism is often simply seen as belief in objects such as stones or trees or rivers for the simple reason that animist gods and spirits are located and embodied in objects: the objects are the physical and material manifestation of gods and spirits. Instead of erecting graven images to spiritualize the spiritual being, animist thought spiritualizes the object world thereby giving the spirit a localized habitation". However, Dos Santos (2023) thinks that animism has metamorphosed to new categories. According to her "animism, in its new conceptualization, lies more on a phenomenological basis and a dialogue with the other-than-human and less on a theory of the cultural evolution of religion". Given

its widespread acceptance in different parts of Africa, animist materialism has gradually metamorphosed into a practical religion at the individual level and in most family units. We can also profitably contend that animist materialism is not the recognized faction of a specific, identifiable religion but an ideology which encompasses the totality of spiritual expressions located in natural objects in the external, material world. In animist materialism, the revered objects of spiritual recognition assume symbolic psycho-social, spiritual connotations within the cultural milieu where they occur beyond their material, natural characteristics. In animist sensibilities, nature is the focal symbolic element given that it accommodates different spiritual categories. Kroesbergen and Kroesbergen-Kamp (2021) observe that “nature consists of fellow spirits just like humans. On the one hand, this is more respectful than a blunt modern perspective that treats nature as an object to conquer or a property. On the other hand, it means that we can make deals with nature as equals. African animism treats natural entities as equals”. Such practices abound in African religious credence where natural phenomenon such as rivers, plants, and different wands are viewed as possessing the power to relate with humanity and attend to its sundry preoccupations. Animist materialism can also be understood as portending a cosmotheistic worldview – the belief that the power of the Supreme God is diffused through different, material natural objects which subsequently permeates the spiritual psyche of cultural consciousness.

In many parts of Africa and the world, different traditional practices and cultural expressions grant gods and mythical images abode in natural objects for regular propitiation and supplication. The spiritual and other importance accorded nature is what Winslow (2023) calls “the significance of directed attention to nature for physical, emotional and spiritual connection, community and communion”. The aforesaid is clearly demonstrated when the traditional African man, before periodically relating with the natural objects recognized as incubating lifeforces, must first pay homage to the Almighty, omnipotent Being. Then libation and spirituality are easily carried out. Cosmotheistic worldview recognizes the hierarchical ordering of spiritual authority which commences from a Supreme Being and trickles down to natural objects with full complements. Proponents of modernity, principally subscribing to civilization and all of its profound deployment through science and technology, view such African traditional cultural practice as evidence of uncompromising, inflexible orthodoxy, a cognitive misadventure which rejects new global spiritual currency. However, such cultural practices in Africa assimilate multilayered ideas of modernity into the matrix of traditional, religious indulgence. Christianity and Islam are modern religions that recognize the existence of one supreme God. Although it is quite fashionable for people to assume that traditional African religion and spirituality are antithetical to the Christian/Islamic supreme God, cosmotheistically, the modern religions’ supreme being is harnessed, preserved, and rehabilitated through animist materialism. The argument for modern religious practice and animist materialism could be valid in terms of ramifications, but if we view religious practices as sources of spiritual recalibration through which man safeguards his life and community, then a synergy can be established between modern religion and animist materialism. The striking difference is that while modern religion believes that spirits are free agents without an abode, animist materialism believes that spirits are domiciled in natural objects which serve as their habitation. In some cases, these natural objects are treated as human beings. According to Eyghen (2023) “regarding objects or animals as spirited means that objects or animals are approached in a similar or analogous way as humans are. In doing so animists (tacitly) accept that spirited objects or animals have similar capacities or abilities to those of humans”. If human beings possess all the trappings of modernity, it follows that, animist objects and their material practices, which constitute indelible marks of humanity, are inevitable properties of the modern world. Both the traditional African man and his modern elite counterpart recognize and identify with these realities.

In Osofisan’s *No More the Wasted Breed and Once Upon Four Robbers*, (henceforth, *No More and Four Robbers*) humans confer natural objects with spiritual qualities, thus determining and controlling an aspect of their cultural sphere. *No More* primarily invokes the innate power of the river in the Egure community to respond to the people’s neglect for lack of propitiation for twenty-five years. Before then, the people

conferred on the river the ability to protect and give them rich harvest, acting as their guardian spirit in the face of life's vicissitude. Such conferment of spiritual power and mystical verve establishes and sustains the animist consciousness in the play. For the people, the river has a soul and emotion which is why it continually demands propitiation. On the other hand, *Four Robbers* recounts the activities of four disoriented armed robbers committed to devastating public spaces through acts of banditry, robbery, and other forms of social destabilization. However, in their search for a magical wand that would aid their daredevil escapades, the robbers come in contact with a religious marabout, Aafa, who promises to infuse spiritual powers into a magical wand to assist them commit their dastard acts and escape unhurt and unscathed. It is this belief and upward conviction that the river and material objects possess a soul and spiritual, magical power that has occasioned the interpretation of the two texts through the critical prism of animist materialism. This study follows in the tradition of locating aspects of cultural renaissance in African drama by establishing in Osofisan's *No More the Wasted Breed* (1983) and *Once Upon Four Robbers* (1980) animist materialism as a cultural, spiritual practice. The interpretation of the two plays in this study along animist materialistic vista coheres with cultural, spiritual practices in many parts of Africa. Animist materialism could be viewed as the obverse of the plays' precise ideological kernel since the river and the magic wand point to the dramatic impulsion which leads to their denouement. This kind of animist consciousness draws attention to the broad spectrum of many African communities where the river is recognized as possessing spiritual, renewing powers and objects like magic wands are also imbued with the same kind of spiritual verve. Although Osofisan's animist materialistic thematic commitments are muted in all the critical interpretations of his plays, the dispositions of the river and a magic wand in the two texts presupposes a sociocultural, spiritual practice which forms a major aspect of the people's way of life. The animist materialistic reflections in the texts constitute a method of re-enchanting the world through the dynamic, subliminal lens of literary studies. In many parts of Africa, rivers are recognized to possess spiritual powers which is why people give them names and worship them. Also, magic is a distinct reality where various forms of materiality and natural objects can be infused with supernatural powers to accomplish different objectives. This study therefore is significant by locating in Osofisan's plays animist materialistic predilections as a cultural, spiritual practice in Africa which also accommodates Western modernity heritages. This is one of the few studies that have departed from interpreting Osofisan's plays from a Marxist perspective. By so doing, it provides a fresh insight into Osofisan's dramaturgy as a celebratory kernel of Africa's cultural, spiritual practice.

Animist Materialism: An Appraisal

Cultural materialism can be situated within the alluring ambience of cultural studies defined by Milner (2002) "as the social science of the study of the production, distribution, exchange and reception of textualized meaning". In a way, cultural study is the spine of cultural materialism. The understanding and appreciation of cultural materialism as an aspect of cultural study has become amorphous and variegated since Raymond Williams rejected Karl Marx's dialectical materialism to precipitate a new idea of material evolution through concretizing culture mostly for social advancement. According to Williams (1977) "cultural materialism is a theory of the specificities of material, cultural, and literary production within historical materialism." Williams' postulations on cultural materialism can be distilled as the prevailing or operating ideology which shapes a work of art, in this case literature, expressed through language, a dominant, sometimes tyrannical aspect of culture. Where Williams' idea of cultural materialism falls short, Marvin Harris provides a more germane precept of the theory synthesized into infrastructure, structure, and superstructure. However, Sabastian Job offers a more penetrating introduction of Marvin's idea on cultural materialism. According to Job (2006) "societies survive and successfully reproduce themselves only insofar as they meet the elementary material needs of a certain minimum of their members. This observation is the starting point for cultural materialism, a living theoretical tradition founded and defined by the American anthropologist Marvin Harris (1927-2001)". Job's idea of 'elementary material needs of a certain minimum of their members' provides a lucid overview of cultural materialism.

Cultural materialism insists that culture is communicated and ventilated through the instrumentality of linguistic and literary expressions within the specified era when a work of art is produced in a society. For cultural materialists, culture must advance the frontiers of different specific expressive possibilities which includes politics, economic productions, and even religious practices. *No More and Four Robbers* both accommodate the plural, dualistic designation of African culture instantiated by a river and a magic wand. The texts rehash the prevailing socio-economic consciousness prevalent in Nigeria at the time they were written, profoundly dramatized by Osofisan to demonstrate the continual re-enchantment of the modern world through animist materialistic complexions. The former specifically objectifies the cultural realities of the people of Egure community which finds expression in the worship of a river which in turn empowers them economically by ensuring rich harvest and supplying its economic content, through sundry aquatic ingredients. This belief in the ability of the river to protect the living, safeguard the unborn and preside over the entire community surreptitiously becomes a defining method of the people's existential standard. The later text was written at a time in Nigeria when, following the military government's policy, it was fashionable to display apprehended armed robbers at the Lagos Bar Beach and through a public spectacle, execute them by firing squad. The four robbers in the text, in their bid to continue plundering public spaces take solace in the popular believe and culture of the people that they can, through magic hypnotize and paralyze their victims while they succeed in their acts of brigandage. Thus, in animist materialism, objects can be manipulated for benevolent or malevolent purposes.

At the heart of the plays are traditional religious practices which suggest a convergence of African spiritual conviction located in the material world. The cultural material elements of the plays sustain a potent reflection of power dynamics and economic empowerment within the immediate social spaces highlighted in them. Perhaps that explains Soqandi and Basirizadeh's (2020) remark that "according to cultural materialists, texts always have a material function within contemporary power structures". Beyond the immediate societies of the two plays and the relevance of the material culture in them, rivers and magical wands are still relevant spiritual sources in contemporary Africa. It is improbable that rivers, stones, trees, sun, stars, and other diverse phenomenon found in nature could have a soul, a distinct life comparable to that of human species. However, in Africa and most parts of the world, these objects have become the cornerstone of multiple spiritual practices where they are ascribed with different human qualities.

The practice of relating with objects as human beings and ascribing lifeforce to them has also found its way into the socio-economic amoury of the people where the objects are materialized with faithful immediacy and conviction. In Yoruba South West of Nigeria, iron is recognized as representing Ogun, the god of iron, and guardian to all crafts involving the use of iron. In this category, motor mechanics, goldsmiths, and armed robbers offer sacrifices to Ogun, the god of iron and of war for protection. Iron thus, becomes a symbolic instrument which represents Ogun, acquiring a spiritual lifeforce to enforce and protect those who offer sacrifice to the god. In the same vein, Sango is recognized as the guardian of the sky in charge of thunder and rainfall. Therefore, farmers and all forms of economic trade connected to rainfall offer sacrifice to the god for rich harvest. Although Sango does not have any natural object which represents it, the image of Sango, a sixteenth century deity in Yoruba land, adorns most office complexes of Nigeria's power generation corporation. Sango, it must be stated, is famed to achieve retribution through the swift agency of thunder and lightning. Usually, his image is erected in most places where electricity or rainfall is primarily recognized as an essential instrument that aids the people's existence. Whatever represents Sango, therefore is related to as possessing a life of its own. In Igbo land South East of Nigeria, Amadioha, the god of thunder and of rainfall is recognized and identified as a young, white unblemished goat. Therefore, the carved image of a young unblemished goat is used to represent Amadioha and people relate to it as a supreme, spiritual force offering sacrifices to it and sometimes speaking to it like a real human being.

If we consider culture as the totality of a people's way of life, then animist materialism has gradually crept into the inner recesses of the peoples social and spiritual beings as part of their culture. In different instances, various forms of the people's culture are materialized in the form of objects for spiritual

worship and recognition. Totems, graven images, and other items become part of the people's collective process of spiritual regeneration. These realities are sometimes consciously or unconsciously conveyed and demonstrated in literature where inanimate objects are inscribed with a soul and as beings with the capacity to intervene in the affairs of humanity. In Christopher Okigbo's poem "Heavensgate", the river named Idoto assumes the identity of a divine mother where the poet persona kneels and begs to be forgiven as a prodigal son. There are many instances in Africa where indeed, inanimate objects have been materialized to the extent that they become a source of tourist attraction and revenue for the people. A tree is believed to have spoken openly in many parts of Nigeria. A cross-road has risen to protest the absence of sacrifices in many parts of Nigeria and people believed to possess spiritual powers spoke to the road, appeasing it with goats and other animals as sacrifice. These practices have become essential part of the people's culture and are recognized as regular patterns which safeguard the living and unborn. For Osofisan, the Egre river acquires a life of its own, dictating to the people what it wants to the extent of demanding sacrifices in order to remain available for fishing and also banish sickness from the land. The river, in addition to serving as a natural source of water, also serves the people as an embodiment of supernatural powers and influence. Also, a marabout is able to communicate with a magic wand, giving it instructions to protect daredevil, marauding armed robbers. These realities define a cultural consciousness which does not mean a rejection of Western values but a way of re-enchanting the world and creating a sub-category of cultural practice subsumed in the lives of the people. Animist materialism has transmuted into new forms which accommodates the totality of human interaction with different inanimate objects which enhance human objectification of the world. Generally known as neo-animism, it accounts for new ways of understanding the relationships between humanity and diverse objects including cars, computers and electronic gadgets. Marenko opines that "neo-animism prompts us to rethink our relationships with the world, and where the frontier between human and non-human, living and non-living, might be located". This view examines the reciprocal interaction of all matter whether human or non-human for mutual benefits.

Literature review

To understand "animist materialism" as an assemblage of two distinct words, we must first consider their individual semantic potential and then return to their usage in the context of this paper. Both animism and materialism have polysemic attributes, in which case they can accommodate different meanings depending on the context. However, animism is strictly delineated in this paper as the believe that natural objects possess a soul, a spirit and a life. Bird-David (1999) concedes that "Animism, a 19th-century representation of an ethnographically researchable practice particularly conspicuous among indigenous peoples but by no means limited to them, is depicted by them all as an "object" in-the-world". Bird-David's view presupposes that animism is tied to the believe in objects especially among natives who view them as sources of spiritual regeneration. Materialism on the other hand deals with matter, objects with physical presence. Jon Mills (2002) surmises that "what is material is anything that perceives or exists in space and time". Krebs (2023) buttresses the functionality of materialism in human spaces by asserting that "matter is inert, solid, measurable (has length, breadth, width), is quantifiable, subject to cause and effect and ontologically other to Descartes' *res cogitans*, which is, on the contrary, agentic, immaterial, and capable of manipulating and reconfiguring matter". Put together, animist materialism is spiritualizing material objects as a source of revival and renewal. Objects in the two Osofisan's plays under reference in this study are spiritualized in the people's cultural and religious pursuits. It is a new dimension in the critical engagement of Osofisan's dramaturgy hitherto circumscribed in the constricting chambers of Marxist sensibilities. Critics like Obasi and Orjinta (2013) while arguing to debunk Osofisan's Marxist leaning also concede that "Osofisan devotes his plays to championing the proletariat revolt against oppressive state structures. His drama charges the poor and the down-trodden to shake off the shackles of docile acceptance of the tyranny and authority, and rebuff the oppressor and all his agents". In addition to its acclaimed dogmatic Marxist bent, Osofisan's dramaturgy consistently strives to resuscitate African spiritual system through an indigenous traditional

protocol either as an accomplice and collaborator in entrenching class dichotomy or an avenue for cultural revival and renewal. The African spiritual system and its animist material enclosures in Osofisan's plays are easily located in diverse natural objects which become channels of spiritual veneration in all their anthropomorphic potential. His plays rely richly on African traditional resources which abound in culture, myth, history, and different spiritual essences through which humanity locates corporal sustenance and communal reclamation. Essi (2022) posits that "Osofisan's dramatic oeuvre equally draws inspiration from traditional culture, but he uses devices of oral literature and songs as insignia of his alienation technique". The oral aspect of Osofisan's art is effectively utilized in *Four Robbers* when the Aafa instructs the armed robbers to sing a song as a catalyst to activate the supernatural powers in the magic wand in order to ensure efficacy and hypnotize their victims.

Africa's cultural and metaphysical continuum provides the ideological substratum for Osofisan's creative and aesthetic commitment in most of his plays where he establishes the inevitable matrix between the physical realm and supernatural realm, humanity and gods, people and their ancestors. Olu-Osayemi and Adebua (2022) note further that "the gods as an idea or an aspect of African (Yoruba) metaphysics occupies a significant place in the construction of Osofisan's plays serving aesthetic, cultural and ideological purposes". The gods in African spiritual worldview serve different objectives for Osofisan which includes 'aesthetic, cultural and ideological' concerns. The existence of gods and mythical images as spiritual sources in Africa is sacrosanct but their mode of expression is upheld and maintained through diverse natural objects which some modern purists, proponents of various aspects of Western modernity, especially religion and its variegated spiritual machinery, have misnamed as idol worship. The idol worship identity of Africa's spiritual realities by Western critics has not diminished the continual propensity of African writers to impute spirituality in natural objects in their works. Affiah et al (2022) observe that "a cursory reading of African literary texts shows a preponderance of the indigenous features of rituals, myth, folklore, drum poetics, music, songs, dance, mime, gestures, symbolism etc.". For African writers, including Osofisan and his contemporaries, these African resources play spiritual roles even in their incipient, inchoate mode because they are believed to harness existential energy to guarantee social stability. Animist materialism, in addition to manifesting as an immutable psychological impulse of a people, could be seen to accommodate a sort of cultural binarism where the modern elite and his traditional counterpart coalesce.

In *No More* and *Four Robbers*, Osofisan uses the Egre River and the Magic wand in Aafa's hands as immediate creative facilities to propel a spiritual dimension urgently needed in the cosmic environments of the two plays. While the Egre River can guarantee good health and rich harvest, the magic wand has the power to guarantee success for armed robbers to ply their trade unhurt. These cultural, spiritual artefacts in the two plays, while evoking a model of African indigenous spiritual worldview also preserve aspects of Western idiosyncrasies, thus establishing what Igweonu (2014) calls a form of "transcultural practice". According to him, "the term is used here to describe the system by which a society absorbs aspects of another's culture, and in the process assumes ownership of these 'foreign elements' by building them into its own popular traditions". In a way, African spiritual practices, which find expressions in the worship of natural objects and promotes cosmotheism also accommodates and reinforces aspects of Western culture. The exploration and projection of African culture and spiritual system enthrone both tradition and modernity offering an all-inclusive structure where both complement each other. The physical and material symbol of most African deities are appropriated into Western instruments and expressive medium found in science and technology which become relevant in ritual procedures and festival celebrations. We can argue that modernity has facilitated the rationalization of global developments riding at the back of civilization. Therefore, traditional developments that do not align or conform with modern realities are negatively measured and consequently displaced for lack of global acceptability.

In a way, rituals and sacrifices are regarded as expressive modes of African cultural foundations through which the people find relevance and establish their spiritual regeneration. The people of Egre community in *No More* it is part of the culture of the Egre community to always offer propitiations to

the water goddess Elusu since they recognize her immense spiritual powers to protect and grant them rich harvest. It is in the same vein that the old women, forming the chorus in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* (411BC) gather at the Acropolis and invoke the power of the river god Achelous to put out the fire ignited by the men meant to burn down the Acropolis edifice. This means that ascribing supernatural powers to natural objects such as rivers as a form of animist materialism is not only peculiar to Africa. It was a regular practice in ancient Greece. Various societies in their pre-literate days basically indulged in animist materialism as a form of spiritual rebirth and restitution. Omigbule (2017) is of the opinion that African cultural practices through rituals and sacrifices have not been utilized enough to propagate the African traditional, indigenous imagination and worldview. According to him, "rather than exploiting the resources of African indigenous ritual practices as cultural material for generating knowledge about Africa for Africa and the rest of the world, the ritual practices are constituted into arsenal for racial struggle". Perhaps Omigbule contends that ritual practices as part of Africa's cultural renewal should be duly celebrated and recognized as a symbolic part of the African identity instead of designating them as derogatory emblems of racial identity. Indeed, Osofisan, by demonstrating how the failure to participate and indulge in ritual and sacrifices for the Egure community can lead to fatalistic consequences, establishes the extent of the peoples believe in the supernatural power of the river. Traditional, cultural elements such as rituals, sacrifices, proverbs, ballads, myths, legend and magic are not only peculiar to Africa as part of their cultural expression. Other parts of the world have their peculiar indigenous forms of cultural expression which are not utilized for racial categorization. Many critics take advantage of this situation to conceive of cultural indigenous practices as a monopoly of African artists' anti-modern inclinations expressed in African literature. Therefore, Ilo (2006) thinks that "the oral tradition of proverbs, riddles, ballads, and stories from which modern African literature draws is often spoken of as though such tradition is an exclusive patent of Africa. It seems easily forgotten that other societies had similar traditions in their pre-literate era, which came to feature in their written literature".

The peculiarity of different cultural expression is tied towards beliefs and worldview so that when these cultural expressions are recreated in African literature, they only serve to emphasize the African heritage. In *Four Robbers*, Aafa's magic wand with which he assisted the armed robbers underscores the belief in Africa that magic exists and diverse material elements can be conjured and infused with supernatural powers to affect or participate in human affairs effectively. In as much as Osofisan cannot be tagged with the identity of a cultural ambassador in his corpus, through what Olaniyan (1999) calls "uncommon sense", two of the playwright's works here under scrutiny reveal an unheralded concern and projection of African cultural practice reinforced through animist materialism. According to Olaniyan "uncommon sense is a discriminatory, analytical perception produced by a reflection on reflection, that is, a second-order, metacritical contemplation, a discourse on discourse. It is a contingent, goal-driven knowledge that is alert to the particular circumstances that call it into being. On those circumstances, it directs unsanctioned ways of viewing and interpretation, or reconfigures entrenched methods in ways that reveal new possibilities". It is the critical "uncommon sense" searchlight that has revealed Osofisan's animist materialistic predilections in this study. Providing further illumination to Osofisan's animist materialistic intensity Akinyemi and Falola (2009) argue that "he uses cultural elements such as history, myth, festivals, riddles, proverbs, metaphors, idioms, folktale, music and songs creatively adapting them for artistic purposes. His works reflect both the physical environment as well as culture of the Yoruba people". Indeed, Osofisan's drama operates within the traditional circumference of African culture.

Textual analysis

Osofisan's *No More* occurs as a direct response to Wole Soyinka's play *The Strong Breed* (1963) where the latter isolates a group of people as carriers, those who have the onerous responsibility to sacrifice their lives for the wellbeing of society. In response, Osofisan avers that those designated as the 'strong breed' by Soyinka are victims of capitalist, exploitative tendencies of the ruling class, therefore he urges them to

reject any fatalistic identity and bear their destiny in their hands. Beyond the ideological dialectics between the two accomplished writers based on sacrificial motives, there lies a deep message of cultural expression where in the two texts, sacrifice to a recognized god as a form of cultural expression bulks large. Although Soyinka and Osofisan disagree on the choice of the carrier among the people for rituals and sacrifices, they distinctively uphold their ideological convictions about the attitude and responses of the people towards ritual sacrifice as a form of cultural expression. While Soyinka believes that human sacrifice is a redemptive gesture to salvage the community, Osofisan takes a more radical stance. Although Osofisan establishes the immutability of sacrifice as a form of cultural validation, he disagrees in the object and motive of that sacrifice. He argues that human beings should not be sacrificed to the gods and even if they should be sacrificed, it must not always be the poor and downtrodden among them. While this study moves away from the familiar prism of class ordering and interpretations which have all along characterized and defined the critical interpretations of Osofisan's play, it subliminally situates natural objects as an emblem of spiritual and supernatural force as recognized by the people.

No More dramatizes the clash between the people of Egure Community and Elusu, wife of Olokun, god of the inland waters in charge of the Egure river. For twenty-five years, the people failed to offer sacrifices to the goddess of the river and in anger, the goddess inflicted them with the dreaded bubonic plague which caused deaths among the people. The people recognized Elusu as the supreme deity and incorporated her into the amourey of their mythical, spiritual, and oral repertoire. Alex Roy-Omoni observes that "the worship of gods and ancestors, for instance, in African societies, still thrives up to the present age. The incorporation of this oral tradition in modern Nigerian drama is not only to preserve tradition, but also to show its relevance in modern day Nigeria". It is the failure of the people to offer propitiation to the goddess of the inland waters that provokes the inevitable cross-fire between the supernatural and the physical realms of existence in the play. An exchange between Olokun and Elusu, god and goddess of the sea reveals the extent of the damaged the goddess had done to the people:

- OLOKUN: Look at your work. Just look at your work, Elusu.
ELUSU: Yes. Am I not beautiful?
OLOKUN: Beautiful! Look at the wreckage you've made of the town.
For how many months now you have surrounded them, suffocated them, till their land has ceased to breathe. You have spread your water everywhere, like a terrible carpet, so that wherever they put their feet, even within their doors, they swim in you.
ELUSU: You should see their farmlands, which I have turned to swamp. Roots of their precious crops, I held so tight in my embrace, till they rotted away. I am a terrible goddess of vengeance (Osofisan, 1983, p. 88).

The audience gains an insight into the economic dislocations caused by the anger of the goddess through Raji's (2008) apt assessment of the situation that "the inhabitants of the community are in the throes of a plague. The waters of the rivers have crashed over the banks and have invaded the farmlands, and the houses. Strange times, so the people say, especially with food supply that is in acute shortage, with crops that have all rotted away and with a strange epidemic that is feeding on the flesh of small children". In addition to the deaths, the sea dried up and the fishes died. Given that the people are mostly fishermen living in the riverine area, the drying of the sea and the death of the fishes negatively affect their economic fortunes. The people's animist materialistic sensibilities uphold the existence of Olokun, god of the sea and his wife Elesu. Given their continual rehabilitation by the people, the supernatural couple demand to know why the people have ceased to offer the usual sacrifices. Ilori Atanda corroborates the foregoing

by remarking that “Olokun – god of the ocean – and Elesu – goddess of the inland waters – disguise as Old Man and Old Woman to ask from humans why the seasonal rites have ceased”. An indigene of the community, Biokun, whose son, Erindo is sick and about to die as a result of the plague, takes him to Togun, the Olokun priest for an urgent cure to forestall his death. Ajidahun (2012) remarks that “Biokun, at the beginning of the play is seen carrying a sacrifice to the goddess Elusu because his son, Erindo has taken ill and all efforts to cure him have failed. The boy’s ailment appears to have been provoked by the gods. Biokun needs to placate the goddess before his son can be cured”. Togun, the Olokun priest tells Biokun that he is a carrier, therefore must sacrifice his life vicariously for the sake of the peaceful, continual existence of the community. To this suggestion, Saluga, Biokun’s friend interjects and queries why the gods will always ask for human sacrifices among the poor while sparing the rich. The god and goddess of the sea, Olokun and his wife Elusu appear to both men immediately and Elusu strikes Saluga dead. However, Olokun her husband sees reasons with Saluga’s perspectives and raises him to life. Olokun out of annoyance, banishes his wife to the afterlife while Biokun and Saluga go home happy. At the Marxist ideological level, Osofisan presents the gods as accomplices in exploiting the people by constantly demanding sacrifices as a condition to protect and guarantee good harvest and long life in the land. However, such stance by the playwright also throws up the significance of the people’s spiritual inclinations located in the river as an animist materialistic object. Saluga, Biokun’s friend tries to dissuade him from offering the sacrifices and blames the gods for the misery of the people. By implicating the gods and goddess of the river, Olokun and his wife Elusu, Saluga incurs Elesu’s wrath. However, Osofisan’s call for the rejection of the gods and their powers is called to question when Olokun, god of the river raises Saluga from the dead and banishes his wife Elesu to another realm. Ehiemua (2020) posits that “Elesu’s death rather signifies the community’s victory over, and liberation from cosmic powers. It elevates humanity’s potential up to the level arrogated to the supernatural forces”. Therefore, man and the god of the river complement each other to build a new symbolic beginning.

Olokun’s supremacy and intervention in the rift between humans and his wife establishes the powers inherent in the supernatural forces in this case located in the river. While it could be argued that Osofisan tries to rouse humans to reject a destiny determined by the gods, the same god of the river intervenes and grants the people victory. Olokun’s abode is the river. Animist materialism recognizes lifeforces residing in natural objects. Thus, Osofisan validates the existence of lifeforce in the form of a god with habitation in the river. So, while the playwright, through Saluga blames the gods for conspiracies with the rich against the poor, while Saluga blames the gods for their insensitivity to the plight of the poor, the same gods also come to the rescue to affirm humanity and restore their denied, wounded ego. The interest of this paper is the power that resides in the sea which has the capacity to either punish or complement humans. The Egure river as an existential metaphor in all its animist materialistic potential is able to straddle between malevolence and benevolence, inflicting harm with one hand and meting out justice with the other hand. There is therefore a synthesis of the ideological and cultural provenance but with the former having a more significant impact on the overall literariness in the text. Anwar (2015) observes that “the commingling of traditional elements and formal techniques, as in the case of Osofisan’s dramaturgy, creates a sense of cultural, class and ideological affinity with the events on stage”. These ‘cultural, class and ideological affinity’ clearly defines the multilayered cultural materialistic intensity in the text.

Also, *Four Robbers* operates in the same ideological environment where Osofisan censures the upper, capitalist government class blaming them for various forms of inappropriate, abhorrent social conditions. Beyond the playwright’s ideological musings lies the deep animist materialistic reality which serves as a plot motivator in the text. Four-armed robbers Major, Hassan, Angola, and Alhaja, are set adrift because their leader had just been executed by the police. However, in their determination to continue with their nefarious activities, they encounter an Islamic marabout Aafa, who fulfils a promise by giving them a magic wand that guarantees them success in their operations without their weapons. According to Amal Ibrahim Kamel “If the robbers sing the formula/verse, traders and clients in the market who hear it will join them in singing and dancing and they leave their properties. Aafa’s magic formula works well”. The encounter between the

robbers and the marabout throws up magic and its efficacy as a controlling, supernatural device within humanity. The Aafa hands the robbers a magic wand, a stringed object believed to possess spiritual powers. Faniran (2016) asserts that “Aafa, a Muslim cleric, brings out the paraphernalia of Ifa and divines for the robbers before making them rich”.

AAFA: I'll put a power in your hands that will take you out of the gutters. Into the most glittering palaces. (Osofisan, 1980, p. 26)

He however warns the robbers of the immediate caveat attached to the magic wand. First, he warns them never to rob poor people, second that they should only rob in public places, and finally that they should be careful not to kill anyone in the cause of their operations. According to Adeleke (2016) “the right sacrifice the Aafa gives them is in the form of ofo (incantation), characteristic of Yoruba oral poetry. It is to enable the robbers escape arrest by causing whoever hears the incantations to start dancing”.

AAFA: Three promises and you will be on the highway to riches.
MAJOR: The first?
AAFA: Never to rob the poor.
ANGOLA: But we've just told you-
AAFA: Promise! (holds out his 'tira) I know the poor, they do not love each other.
MAJOR: (licking the 'tira) Promised. (they do so in turn.)
ANGOLA: And the second promise?
AAFA: To rob only the public places. Not to choose your victims as you do among solitary women. Not to break into homes.
MAJOR: Alright! Promised! (Again the ritual of assent)
HASAN: Now let's hear the third.
AAFA: The most important. You must promise never again to take a human life. (Osofisan, 1980, p. 28)

In addition, he also charges them to only rob three times after which the potency of the magic wand will wane and it will lose its efficacy. The robbers put the magic wand to good use and recite the associated incantations as instructed by the Aafa. Upon rehashing the songs and incantations, they hypnotize their victims and rob successfully.

AAFA: Yes, sing and dance. It's an irresistible power. Once you begin to sing, anyone within hearing distance stops whatever he is doing and joins. He will sing and dance and then head for his home to sleep. And he won't wake till the next morning. (Osofisan, 1980, p. 49)

By introducing magic and its subtleties in the text, Osofisan dramatizes the inherent possibilities in the African spiritual system to control the affairs of men through the infusion of supernatural powers on diverse objects. The African conception of animism is continually sustained by a remote conviction that indeed, every object, no matter how insignificant, has the capacity to embody supernatural influence and power. The magic wand which Aafa hands over to the robbers actually performs the expected responsibility because it enchants the robbers' victims and allows them to rob unhindered and unmolested. In African metaphysics,

before the advent of literacy, people were convinced that objects and other natural elements possess a spirit and a life which can be harnessed to address humanities warring, multiple impulses. In most parts of Africa, some families have what is generally regarded as a 'family tree' which harbours the family's guardian spirits, protecting members from harm. In return, the family offers periodic sacrifices in form of propitiation to appease the guardian spirits and ensure the continual protection of the family. These beliefs are not peculiar to Africa but can be found in some parts of the world.

Having successfully used the magic wand twice to rob as instructed by the Aafa, the robbers use the last chance to good effect on the day when one of the apprehended robbers was to be executed by the soldiers. On the execution day, the robbers enact the incantation associated with the magic wand on stage and freeze everyone including the murderous soldiers getting ready to execute the robbers. With the stalemate on stage, the playwright uses the opportunity to enact an audience participation technique where the audience is asked to decide the fate of the robbers, whether they deserve to die by firing squad or not. However, besides this dramatic technique, the question of the efficacy of a magic wand to control the outcome of a firing squad spectacle immediately identifies with the objective of this study – to analyse Osofisan's deployment of spirituality from an African indigenous perspective where supernatural powers are proved to reside in diverse natural objects.

The animist materialist complexion in *Four Robbers* is deployed in a way where it becomes a determining factor in social transmutation. The magic wand introduced by the Aafa underscores a deep lying spiritual provenance which can be appropriated to influence societal developments in Africa. Boh (2017) remarks that "the play builds to its climax when Aafa gives the robbers a charm that will help them not to get caught as far as they stay together, or united, do not steal from poor and do not kill". Aafa's charm is a natural object infused with supernatural powers which possess the capacity to alter human conditions and circumstances through chants and music. Adiele (2023) remarks that "part of Osofisan's theatrical fervent is located in his use of African cultural components such as chants, songs and dance. These constitute the first literary elements which contribute to the growth and acceptance of his creative repertoire". However, the modernist critic may question why such spiritual powers that reside in natural objects have not been harnessed to address the increasing socio-political and economic malaise that continue to beset Africa. When Aafa warns the robbers that they can only use the magic wand three times, he inadvertently sets limiting possibilities within the operating spiritual powers that reside in the magic wand. It also proves the temporality of magic and its incapacities for long-term, enduring solutions to public issues. Osofisan's use of the magic wand to aid and perpetuate evil against humanity demonstrates that the animist materialistic ideology can portend positive and negative outcomes depending on how the precursor wields available spiritual powers in them. In Africa, charms have been proved to be conjured to protect armed robbers and evil-doers in the community. Charms have also proved to initiate positive outcomes and victory at war. However, Osofisan's introduction and dramatization of these animist realities in his two plays can be interpreted as artistic embellishments which also provide a peep into the cultural behaviour of the people. Perhaps the animist materialistic symbols in the plays offer a huge opportunity for the accommodation of African spirituality and further interrogation of their operating dynamics.

Conclusion

This study locates animist materialism in two of Osofisan's plays as cultural and spiritual emblems which have hitherto escaped the critical searchlight of many scholars. The Egure river in *No More* and the magic wand in *Four Robbers* both establish a cultural sphere which represents a form of spirituality expressed through natural objects. In the two plays, both animist elements represent a cultural affinity between modern sophistication and traditional, spiritual mechanism. While the river can be appropriated by the local people to locate their spiritual revival and regeneration, it can also serve other purposes for the modernity-inclined critic so that instead of a unitarian perception of animist objects, it provides a new way of re-enchanting and appraising the world. The magical enactment in *Four Robbers* open a new scene to the phenomenon of

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magic and its operative outline. Africans believe in magic for diverse purposes. Various objects, according to the spiritual instincts of the people have the capacity to engineer negative or positive energies within humanity. Certainly, there abound different animist credo in many African literary texts which the writers have conveyed without being aware while pursuing their ideological and creative objectives. This study therefore provokes further debate and inquiry into African texts to demonstrate the level to which animist materialistic concepts are conveyed. Overall, we can agree with Ajayi (2012) that “Osofisan conceptualizes his plays from a ritual consciousness. Looking at some of his plays, the fixation to a ritual consciousness is evident. His plays exhibit ritualization even as they are steeped in contemporary Yoruba worldview with which he analyses socio-political events”. Indeed, animist materialism is a functional aspect of contemporary cultural and spiritual expressions all over Africa and in different parts of the world.

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