

Harry Garuba

On Animism, Modernity/ Colonialism, and the African Order of Knowledge: Provisional Reflections

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It might even be said that the fetish is the consummate form of power for Marx insofar as it mystifies and materializes in the same gesture, insofar as it crystallizes the necessity and inevitability of mystification for materialization. Indeed, if fetishism is that process whereby power as a relation is obscured through reification, through the guise of an object, then what Marx calls material life, with its thoroughly objective, tangible and concrete character, is always already fetishized.

– Wendy Brown, *Politics Out of History*¹

Because of the colonizing structure, a dichotomizing system has emerged, and with it a great number of current paradigmatic oppositions have developed: traditional versus modern; oral versus written and printed; agrarian and customary communities versus urban and industrialized civilization; subsistence economies versus highly productive economies. In Africa a great deal of attention is generally given to the evolution implied and promised by the passage from the former paradigms to the latter.

– V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*²

How do we account for the recent resurgence of interest in animism and animist thought? Once considered a kind of cognitive error, as evidence of cognitive underdevelopment and epistemological failure, animism has once again become an object of discursive attention and intellectual inquiry, in addition to serving as a platform for political action, particularly around issues of ecology and the environment. It has become an acceptable if not entirely respectable way of knowing and acting in the world. Although E. B. Tylor's nineteenth-century definition of the concept has remained foundational, we have come a long way from the modernist understanding of it which Emile Durkheim summed up in these words:

For Tylor, this extension of animism was due to the particular mentality of the primitive, who, like an infant, cannot distinguish the animate and the inanimate. [...] Now the primitive thinks like a child. Consequently, he is also inclined to endow all things, even inanimate ones, with a nature analogous to his own.³



Film still from Alain Resnais' and Chris Marker's 1953 film *Les Statues Meurent Aussi*.

This new interest has overturned the old prejudice which equated animism with everything that was childlike and epistemologically challenged, everything that was the negation of the mature, the modern, and the civilized.

It is fairly safe to say (as Bruno Latour has shown) that those same modern technological innovations that led to the creation of “hybrids,” “quasi-objects,” and so forth have also made the Cartesian distinction between object and subject no longer tenable, at least not in those categorical terms.⁴ The literature on animism, animistic thought, animation, and so forth across a range of disciplinary domains, from science studies and philosophy to sociology and anthropology, all seem to support this revaluation, with some going so far as to proclaim the end of objectivism and its dualistic epistemology. This may be overly optimistic, but that it can be proclaimed without sounding entirely absurd is worth noting.

As Alf Hornborg asserts in his essay “Animism, Fetishism, and Objectivism as Strategies for Knowing (or not Knowing) the World,” “We might begin by suggesting that the ‘object’ – in the sense of a material intrinsically meaningless, but essentially knowable reality – is a thoroughly modern invention.”⁵ It is important to recognize this. What has led to this recognition is that after the work of environmental/ecological movements that have increasingly invoked animistic understandings of the world derived from indigenous communities, postmodernism’s relativist epistemologies, New Age spiritualism, and contemporary anthropologists’ talk of relational epistemologies and different conceptions of personhood across cultures, it would appear that the boundary between Nature and Society, the world of objects and subjects, the material world and that of agency and symbolic meanings, is less certain than the modernist project had decreed. These recent developments may collectively or in conjunction be said to be responsible for the return of animism to discursive attention. This interest, however, opens up a significant series of questions.

If the “object” – in the sense in which Hornborg describes it above – is a thoroughly modern invention, and the dualist epistemology of modernity is being contested on many fronts, what has happened to the order of knowledge it enabled and universalized? It is all well and good to announce the end of the grand narratives of the Enlightenment and modernity, but what has happened to the structure of knowledge on which it is grounded? What are the epistemic legacies of this regime of knowledge, especially in areas of the world defined by their “animist”

worldviews and thus seen as outside of the modern? Have they been left largely untouched by the dualist episteme of modernity or have they been captured by it?

A number of theorists writing about this “other” world have argued that once touched by modernity, the colonized are conscripted into its regime of knowledge/power. Masao Miyoshi, for example, claims,

Once absorbed into the “chronopolitics” of the secular West, colonized space cannot reclaim autonomy and seclusion; once dragged out of their precolonial space, the indigenes of the peripheries have to deal with knowledge of the outside world, irrespective of their own wishes and inclinations.⁶

This is another way of saying what Talal Asad said a long time ago, that we are all – whether we like it or not – “conscripts of western civilization.”⁷ This would mean that the modernist order of knowledge has not left untouched these “other” parts of the world previously governed – if you like – by an animist order of knowledge or an animist epistemology. If this is true, and if, as the Latin American decolonial theorist Ramon Grosfoguel has argued, “[t]he success of the modern/colonial world-system consists precisely in making subjects that are socially located on the oppressed side of the colonial difference think epistemically like the ones in dominant positions,” can subjects previously defined outside of the modern construct an epistemic position that does not re-inscribe the dichotomies that Mudimbe describes as the paradigmatic oppositions that define the “colonizing structure”?⁸ Recall from the second epigraph above that the colonizing structure is a knowledge structure premised on “the evolution implied and promised by the passage from the former paradigms [the animist] to the latter [the modern].” Can an animist world view enable an order of knowledge that would allow us to think outside and beyond this? These are the important questions that arise in light of the developments that have made animism an object of serious scholarly inquiry. For, while it may appear that the conditions of possibility exist for alternative conceptualizations, we also seem trapped within the epistemic structures and languages of modernity, and our attempts to speak outside them invariably return us to the same discursive archive, albeit by way of contestation or subversion.

In these brief reflections, I will explore these questions. I begin by returning to the epigraph from Wendy Brown, which daringly

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rereads Marx's work on commodity fetishism and reverses the dualisms that often characterize vulgar materialist readings of it. Following this, I suggest that animism is the spectral Other that simultaneously constitutes and haunts the modern. Rather like Giorgio Agamben's reading of the status of the *homo sacer* of ancient Roman law, it is always already included by its exclusion.⁹ Accorded the recognition of non-recognition, animist understandings of the natural and social world functioned within discourses of colonial modernity as the aberration, the past-in-the-present, to be disciplined to create civilized worlds and subjects. The colonial modernist order of knowledge, built on translating/transforming these animist worlds and subjects into modernity, spawned the various dichotomies that have defined the study of Africa. In other words, animism has functioned as the metaphoric receptacle for everything that is a negation of the modern, and the goal and structure of the African order of knowledge bequeathed by colonialism has been to *decipher* and *translate/transform* these worlds into European constructs and fit them into European theoretical models, as Mudimbe writes. After underlining this, I proceed to explore the

possibilities that animism offers for instituting a different regime of knowledge, one rid of the dualisms of the modern. Here, I argue that there is a need to reach for new conceptual vocabularies that transcend the modern episteme in order to take advantage of this recent convergence of interest in the logics of animist thought, however difficult it may be to achieve this.

“A Commodity is therefore a Mysterious Thing”: One Knowledge Domain for the Thing and Another for the Mystery

When Karl Marx spoke of the “mystical character of commodities,” I doubt that he envisaged that within the following century knowledge would have become so fragmented that there would be a field of knowledge devoted solely to the study of the commodity as an object rid entirely of the messiness of the mystical character that attaches to it and constitutes it. His perceptive understanding, from as early as the nineteenth century, that a “commodity is therefore a mysterious thing” has been of renewed interest for thinkers and scholars from a variety of theoretical and ideological persuasions, including the deconstructionist, the postmodernist, and the post-Marxist, among



Braydov B., *Dealer Services*, 2012. Courtesy of the artist.

others. If the commodity is central to economic modernity, an understanding of it as a locus of both the material and the mysterious must be of some significance, and scholars within the transdisciplinary field now known as critical theory have taken note.

Approaching Marx's view of the form of the commodity from a Foucauldian perspective that focuses on the operations of power, the epigraph taken from Wendy Brown succinctly brings together under one rubric the paradigmatic oppositions that mark the separation between the knowledge domains we broadly call "scientific" – those devoted to the study of the material world through a series of methodological protocols and practices that primarily involve the cleansing of objects of all traces of symbolic meaning – and the knowledge domains reserved for the Others. According to this reading, Marx "crystallizes the necessity and inevitability of mystification for materialization" and claims that "material life, with its thoroughly objective, tangible, and concrete character, is always already fetishized." Indeed, the epigraph should remind us, even as it overrides this division, of the construction of one knowledge domain for the "thing" and another for the "mystery," of the establishment of the hierarchy

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between the sciences and those disciplines broadly designated as the social sciences and humanities. Ever since the institution and consolidation of this disciplinary separation from the nineteenth century onward, the aspiration of those that fall within the latter domain to mimic the protocols of the former in the acceptable methodologies of knowledge production is analogous to and mirrors the promise of passage from one paradigm to the other that Mudimbe identifies as central to the "colonizing structure" and its knowledge regime.

Having drawn this analogy between the constitution and separation of the modern disciplines of knowledge production, the aspiration of the "lesser" disciplines, and the structure of the colonial order of knowledge and the promise of the so-called civilizing mission, I would go further and reiterate that the very identity of this order is constituted by that which it excludes, both in the rules of its discourse and in the protocols and practices of its enunciation. The "messiness" of the "lesser" disciplines and the "animism" of the native both come from the same inability to fully objectify, and this represents the spectral presence that shadows the objectifying imperatives of the privileged heights in the hierarchy of knowledge. As



Installation view of the series "Ethnologisches Museum Berlin III 2003," by Candida Höfer.

Frederick Cooper affirms in another context, “Without the native, without the Barbarian, without the slave, the values of the West are difficult to imagine.”¹⁰ I would extend this to say that without animism, the values of positivist science are difficult to imagine. As I argued in an earlier paper on “African Studies, Area Studies, and the Logic of the Disciplines”:

[...] it was in this process of disciplinisation and the creation of disciplinary structures of knowledge that Africa fell out of the boxes and landed in the domain of anthropology [... and that] many of the disciplines of the humanities and social sciences, being disciplines of modernity, were invariably defined in opposition to Africa – African animism, African irrationality, African orality, etc. In short, Africa was the ultimate sign of the non-modern that was not available to disciplinary attention, except within the domain of anthropological knowledge.¹¹

The fear of animism, it would appear, is the beginning of (scientific) wisdom.

Let us concede at this point that beginning as I do by foregrounding the predominant conceptions of modernity (and animism) and its dualistic framing of knowing, these reflections cannot but employ its dichotomizing language even while advocating for its transcendence. My use of the term *animism* is therefore restricted neither to the strict anthropological definition nor to the descriptions offered in dictionaries of religion or in the pages of texts on developmental psychology. Rather, my usage speaks more broadly to an epistemological standpoint in relation to the world that is radically different from the modernist. In the essay, “‘Animism’ Revisited: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology,” Nurit Bird-David characterises this standpoint in the following way:

If the object of modernist epistemology is a totalizing scheme of separated essences, approached ideally from a separated viewpoint, the object of this animist knowledge is understanding relatedness from a related point of view, within the shifting horizons of the related viewer. [...] Against “I think therefore I am” stands “I relate therefore I am” and “I know as I relate.” Against materialist framing of the environment as discrete things stands relational framing of the environment as nested relatedness. Both ways are real and valid. Each has its limits and its strengths.¹²

In placing the term “animism” in scare quotes in the title of the article, the author seeks to gesture beyond those narrower definitions inherited from E. B. Tylor and the history of the usage of the term within modernist thought. I also read the careful phrasing captured in “approached ideally” as an acknowledgement that the dichotomy inherent in the self-constitution of the modern may not have been as hermetically sealed off from its opposite as it claimed. All the same, the oppositional framing persists because it is perhaps the only way to highlight these differences within the grammar of discourse available to us.

The challenge, I believe, is to find a conceptual space and a language of discourse to restore or reclaim that constitutive co-presence that Marx recognized between the commodity as material and mystical object and to find an order of knowledge that captures this and through which this can be represented. This is what epistemologies of relation, various forms of relativism that take the Enlightenment project as their target of assault, postmodern epistemologies, and so forth attempt to do. Contesting its authority is a fine thing, but it is much more difficult to overturn its legacies.

Linear Time, Teleologies of Knowledge Production, and the Logic of Animist Thought

It should be clear from the foregoing that I broadly endorse these “new” or “alternative” epistemologies and their goal of subverting the singular narrative of modernity and its knowledge regime. However, I find that I cannot shake off my unease about the linear temporalizing of these developments. Often when the story is told, the emergence of these new discourses is presented as an epistemological advance over the previous modernist paradigm (as the name postmodern suggests, for example) in an unproblematized, linear fashion. This narrative consigns the animist worlds upon which they depend to the status of data, objects used only as sources of primary evidence, and the knowledge capital gained is inserted into a linear narrative of the progression of Western knowledge. The subject of knowledge remains the modern self, moving forward in linear time.

Addressing the issue of evolution and the naturalization and secularization of time in his book *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object*, Johannes Fabian argues that under the linear paradigm “relationships between parts of the world (in the widest sense of both natural and sociocultural entities) can be understood as temporal relations,” with some

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upstream in time and others downstream.¹³ So even though it may appear that “animism” is the ground upon which these new epistemologies stand, it is not the “real” animistic practices of other peoples and cultures that matter; what matters instead is “animism” as a knowledge construct of the West, and this is what is being revisited to derive new Western knowledge constructs and paradigms. Seen in this light, it thus becomes a post-modern advance upon a prior knowledge paradigm and practice rather than an always already recognized coeval presence (to use Fabian’s term) in the lifeworlds of those conscripted into modernity.

Presented in this manner, this conception is problematic because the West remains the “sovereign theoretical subject” of knowledge, to use Dipesh Chakrabarty’s words, while the animistic other’s lived experience and reality is yet to be disciplined into formal knowledge. Here is how Chakrabarty explains his idea of the subject of knowledge with regard to the discipline of history:

I have a more perverse proposition to argue. It is that in so far as the academic discourse of history – that is, “history” as a discourse produced at the institutional site of the university – is concerned, “Europe” remains the sovereign theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call “Indian,” “Chinese,” “Kenyan,” and so on. There is a peculiar way in which all these other Histories become variations of a master narrative that could be called “the history of Europe.”¹⁴

What appears to have struck Chakrabarty – after all those nationalist historiographies produced in the aftermath of colonialism – was that even though the “content” of these histories may have been Kenyan or Indian or Chinese, “Europe remained the sovereign theoretical subject.” This means that all of these other histories, written within the protocols and idioms of the modern and the disciplinary practices that emerged from the modern episteme, were only Kenyan or Indian or Chinese in data, not in their authorizing discursive form. I read this as further saying that the paradigms and protocols of the discourse of academic history do not provide a discursive space from which to write a “non-modern” history, if you like – a history that does not inscribe the modernist, linear conception of time. (Was this also the point Masao Miyoshi was making about the colonized and the “chronopolitics” of the secular West?) My fear is that this could also be true of all the new literature on animism, as admittedly exciting as it has been.

The question of temporality has always been central to the narrative and ethos of modernity, and the consolidation and dissemination of a linear conception of time has been one of its enduring successes. While globalization and the migrations and mobilities it has set in motion may be unscrambling in social and geographical space the spatialization that anchored this conception of time and temporal relations, the teleological imaginary of time unfolding in a linear manner remains. We may no longer use overtly optimistic terms such as “progress” and “civilization,” or the more derogatory “savage,” but we have found various synonyms for them.

If the new convergence of interest in animism is to bear any advantage for those on the other side of modernity, it is here that we should begin with a conception of time that rejects linearity but recognizes the complex embeddedness of different temporalities, different, discordant discursive formations, and different epistemological perspectives within the same historical moment. And then we should search for a language to represent this knowledge.

Concluding Thoughts

In an earlier essay entitled “Explorations in Animist Materialism: Notes on Reading/Writing African Literature, Culture, and Society,” I highlighted a characteristic feature of animist thought whereby developments in science and technology and the discourses and practices usually associated with modernity and a rationalization of the world lead instead to a *continual re-enchantment* rather than a disenchantment of the world.¹⁵ I described the process through which animist thought continually spiritualizes the object world, acknowledging and appropriating recent material developments and discoveries and animating them with a spirit. That this predisposition to continual re-enchantment is not simply a matter of religious belief has been highlighted by the Nigerian writer and activist, Wole Soyinka, who describes it as “an attitude of philosophical accommodation” that arises out of “the code on which this world-view is based.”¹⁶ I referred to this code, this logic of animist thought, as the animist unconscious, an unconscious that operates basically on a refusal of the boundaries, binaries, demarcations, and linearity of modernity.

In thinking through the questions I have posed, as well as the dilemmas presented by linear, narrative teleologies of knowledge production, we may want to return to the logic of animist thought as a site for transcending the rigid dualisms consecrated by the

modern/western epistemological order. The logic of animist thought provides an opening for thinking other histories of modernity beyond the linear, teleological trajectories of the conventional historical narrative.

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Harry Garuba is an author and Professor for African Literature and Postcolonial Literary and Cultural Theory und Director of the Centre for African Studies at the University of Cape Town. His main research interests embrace contemporary African art and African Modernity. He published a programmatic essay entitled Animist Materialism: Notes on Reading/Writing African Literature, Culture, and Society (2003; German trans. in: Animismus, Revisionen der Moderne).

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