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RESEARCH ARTICLE

African History and the Thingly Past: A Yoruba Example

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Abstract

This study examines the significance of nonhuman actors in writing African history. It asks why things and animals are at the margin of African history. It probes how the intersection of presence and absence manifests in things, and how this can aid historians' imagination of the past. Finally, it seeks to know how the recognition and integration of things in the historical narrative can help understand the unaccounted past. The article draws from the Yoruba visual and verbal arts, particularly the *oriki* and Ifa corpus to argue that "things" are important historical sources that are methodologically useful and theoretically relevant.

Résumé

Cet article examine l'importance des acteurs non humains dans l'écriture de l'histoire africaine. Il demande pourquoi les choses et les animaux sont restés en marge de l'histoire africaine. Il étudie comment l'intersection de leur présence et de leur absence se manifeste dans les choses, et comment cela peut aider l'imagination du passé par les historiens. Enfin, cet article cherche à savoir comment la reconnaissance et l'intégration des choses dans le récit historique peuvent aider à comprendre le passé longtemps ignoré. L'article s'appuie sur les arts visuels et verbaux yoruba, en particulier les corpus *oriki* et *ifa*, pour soutenir que les « choses » sont des sources historiques importantes, utiles sur le plan méthodologique et pertinentes sur le plan théorique.

Keywords: things; material turn; thingly past; archive; artifacts

Introduction

In "People Without Things" Severin Fowles described the tendency in social science (including history) to bury things but privilege human actors as "the tyranny of the subject."[1] The practice of marginalization of things in history was

[1] Severin Fowles, "People Without Things" in *An Anthropology of Absence: Materializations of Transcendence and Loss*, ed. Mikkel Bille, Frida Hastrup, and Tim Flohr Sørense (New York: Springer, 2010), 3.

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also described by anthropologist Daniel Miller as "the beginning of things-suppressed" which can be located in the religions that ascribed wisdom to those spiritual figures who had suggested that materiality represented "the mere apparent, behind which lies that which is real."[2] This voice was echoed by Leif Jerram when he observed that materiality has been marginalized by scholars through "a casual vocabulary and a vigorous a priori epistemological holism."[3] Like Daniel Miller, who recognized illusiveness of material culture,[4] Olson argued emphatically that the materiality of social life has not only been marginalized but also stigmatized.[5] Fowles noted that the turn to things by social scientists should be understood as a critical response to the textual turn of the 1970s and 1980s which had reduced the world into ever-shifting texts and privileged human interpreters and melted the material world into a mere "semantic placeholder."[6]

My goal in this paper is to explore a crucial but neglected way of understanding and interpreting African history. The objective is to answer three important questions on the significance of nonhuman actors in writing African history. Why have things and animals remained relegated to the subaltern status in African history? How do Africans view and relate with nonhuman agents, animals, and material objects? In what ways does the intersection between presence and absence manifest in things, and aid historian's imagination of the past? How can the recognition and integration of things in the historical narrative help understand the unaccounted past? To answer the first question on why things are marginalized in historical narratives, I explored different definitions of history as a subject matter and examined methodological defects of archive as the dominant source of writing African history. The second question on the view of Africans on nonhuman actors is approached from African theoretical and philosophical standpoints. I draw on the Yoruba verbal and visual arts to understand the African theory of relationality of being in history. The third and fourth questions are engaged through deep reflection on the Yoruba cultural practice of relational ontology. For the purpose of analysis, both human and nonhuman actors are treated as things. Things are interchangeably substituted for matters, objects, and artifacts, while the age-long over-flogged conceptual delineation of organic and inorganic matters that subtly privilege the former over the latter is disregarded.

I therefore argue that recognizing animal and material turns[7] in African history is a profound theoretical approach to understand how material objects and animals mixed with humans to form that categorization called society. This theoretical frame derives from the peculiarities of African epistemology that emphasizes relational ontology of social beings. This African way of constructing sociality is crucial to understand silence in African history. Hence, integration of

[2] Daniel Miller (ed.), *Materiality* (London: Duke University Press, 2005), 1.

[3] Leif Jerram, "Space: A Useless Category for Historical Analysis?," *History and Theory* 52 (2013): 400.

[4] Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987).

[5] Bjornar Olsen, "Material Culture after Text: Re-Membering Things," *Norwegian Archaeological Review* 36, no. 2 (2003): 87–104.

[6] Fowles, "People Without Things."

[7] See Ewa Domanska, "The Material Presence of the Past," *History and Theory* 45 (2006): 337–348; Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Neil Gershenfeld, *When Things Start to Think* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1999).

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animals and things in historical narratives will help understand the unaccounted past of Africa. It is important to emphasize that the goal of this paper is not to dehumanize history but rather to recognize nonhuman actors as part of African epistemic tradition. Again, the objective of this paper is not to belittle the efforts of distinguished scholars who have written on the importance of nonhuman actors in African history. Rather, this study is a modest contribution to enrich African methodological and theoretical kits.

Demystifying archives for a thingly African history

In a compilation of definitions of history published online by Mamta Aggarwal, the intellectual thoughts of the leading figures of historical scholarship are summarized. The ideas of history – by Thomas Carlyle that "World History is a biography of great men"; Lord Acton that "History is the unfolding story of human freedom"; Will Durant that "History is a narrative of what civilized men have thought or done in past time"; and Professor Renier that "History is the memories of societies" – center humans as the subject of history while ignoring matters as part of historical development.[8] The definition of history by Professor Arthur Marwick that it is "The bodies of knowledge about the past produced by historians, together with everything that is involved in the production, communication of, and teaching about that knowledge" has left us with doubt. We are not sure whether "everything that is involved in the production, communication of, and teaching about that knowledge" are recognized as things that cohabitate, co-act, co-travel, and share experience with human actors or not.[9] In E.H. Carr's popular definition of history as "a continuous process between the historian and his facts, an unending dialog between present and the past," things are subtly inscribed.[10] It is inscribed as historical facts which Carr cherished in the archival documents as his fourteen-volume history of the Soviet Union exemplify, a product of vigorous chasing, perusing documents, and stuffing "historical narrative with properly footnoted facts."[11]

Historians study human actions in the past with a focus on significant human activities that were both transient and hardly evidential beyond the textual testimonies in archives while neglecting "matter." The historian's tasks, as Arthur Marwick argues, include imposition of order, pattern, and definition of relationships. Historians decide "what to put in and what to leave out aiming at no more than coherent narrative" without losing focus on how their narrative is shaped into an intelligent form.[12] Stephen Ellis has also observed that the role of a historian is not just to assemble "masses of verifiable facts … in a series,

[8] Mamta Aggarwal "What Are the Important Definitions of History? – Answered," https://www.historydiscussion.net/history/what-are-the-important-definitions-of-history-answered/636 (accessed 30 March 2022).

[9] Arthur Marwick, "The Fundamentals of History," https://archives.history.ac.uk/history-in-focus/Whatishistory/marwick1.html (accessed 30 March 2022). Also see Arthur Marwick, *The Nature of History*, 3rd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1989).

[10] E.H. Carr, *What Is History*, 2nd ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1987), 30.

[11] Carr, *What Is History*, 27.

[12] Marwick, *The Nature of History*, 8.

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generally in a chronological one or a set of such series" but also to penetrate the minds of the actors involved in order to weave a coherent narrative.[13] This approach of selective elimination of nonhuman actors in the writing and understanding of the past has not only denied us a comprehensive view of history but also privileged texts and imposed a regime of textual absolutism. This textual absolutism derives its strength in the fetishization of the archive. As scholars particularly from the Global South are challenging the dominance of the Western epistemologies and paradigms in social science,[14] new perspectives and theories about archive are being developed. While Bailkin suggests we look at archive as a source and a site of dismantling and reconfiguration of imperial power,[15] Ndlovu-Gatsheni is concerned with anti-colonial or decolonial archive which is "an embodiment of ideas, theories, manifestos, slogans, concepts, critiques, hopes, utopic registers, trials and tribulations, prospects and possibilities, memories, texts and images; and is constitutive of inheritance for the entire world."[16]

In the critique of fetishization of the archive as a historical source, Stoler unraveled the weaknesses of colonial documents.[17] Stoler warns us to treat these documents with suspicion and doubt. She suggests the need to move from "archive-as-source to archive-as-subject" as this will open up opportunities to engage archive as "cultural agents of fact production, of taxonomy in the making and of state authority."[18] Achille Mbembe has also echoed similar skepticism and emphasized non-reliability of archive as an ultimate historical source. Mbembe notes that over-reliance on the aspects of the Western archive that ignore other "epistemic traditions" could impede "our systematic forays beyond our current

[13] Stephen Ellis, "Writing Histories of Contemporary Africa," *Journal of African History* 43, no. 1 (2002): 1–26.

[14] See Achille Mbembe, "Future Knowledges," unpublished Abiola lecture delivered at the African Studies Association annual meeting, USA (2016); Achille Mbembe, "The Society of Enmity," *Radical Philosophy* 200 (2016): 23–35; Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, trans. Laurent Dubois (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017); W.D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); W.D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); W.D. Mignolo, "Further Thoughts on (De)Coloniality," in *Postcoloniality-Decoloniality-Black Critique: Joints and Fissures*, ed. S. Broeck and C. Junker (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2014), 21–51; V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988); Chinweizu, *Decolonising the African Mind* (Lagos: Pero Press, 1987); Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Epistemic Freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and Decolonization* (London: Routledge, 2018); Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni and S. Zondi (eds.), *Decolonizing the University, Knowledge Systems and Disciplines in Africa* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2016); Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Empire, Global Coloniality and African Subjectivity* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013); Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Coloniality of Power in Postcolonial Africa: Myths of Decolonization* (Dakar: CODESRIA Books, 2013); Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: Pearson Education, 1986).

[15] Jordanna Bailkin, "Where Did the Empire Go? Archive and Decolonization of Britain," *American Historical Review* 120, no. 3 (2015): 884–899.

[16] Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Epistemic Freedom in Africa*, 140.

[17] Ann Laura Stoler, "Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance," *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 87–109. For an alternative and metaphorical view of archive, see Carolyn Steedman's *Dust*.

[18] Stoler, "Colonial Archives," 87.

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knowledge horizons."[19] In his examination of the attitude of the nineteenth-century historians to facts, Carr notes that:

> The nineteenth-century fetishism of facts was justified by a fetishism of documents. The documents were the Ark of Covenant in the temple of fact. The reverent historians approached them with bowed head and spoke of them in awed tones. If you find it in the documents, it is so. But what, when we get down to it, do the documents – the decrees, the treaties, the rent rolls, the blue books, the official correspondence, the private letters and diaries – tell us? No document can tell us more than the author of the document thought – what he thought had happened, ought to happen or would happen or perhaps only what he wanted others to think he thought, or even only he himself thought he thought.[20]

Trouillot notes that the process of creating, assembling, retrieving, and narrating archives are characterized by many silences that weaken its evidential credibility.[21] According to Olsen, this void should be considered "as an outcome of a very effective history of things oblivion and displacement in western thinking rather than a lack of material experience and engagement. In other words, the problem is not that we lack practical knowledge. Quite the contrary, we have probably never been more experienced in dealing with things and technology."[22] As the inadequacies and the question of reliability of archives as a methodological source are coming to the fore, scholars are burdened with the responsibility to search for historical evidences beyond textual records.

Another reason why historical narratives in Africa are almost entirely bereft of thingness is the dominant effects of Western epistemology on African knowledge production. Rowland Abiodun has observed that the methodological tools inherited by African historians from Western scholarship is seriously inadequate to address the challenges of studying African history.[23] The effect of Western epistemology notwithstanding, the energy of the first crop of African academic historians was focused on three important tasks. The first was the deconstruction of the Eurocentric view and racist narratives of African culture, while the second was to rescue the undocumented African experiences from the historical abyss. The third task of these historians was to solve the methodological questions in African historiography. Leading in this area were Kenneth O. Dike, Saburi Biobaku,

[19] Achille Mbembe, "Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive.," Public lecture at the Wits Institute for Social and Econo'mic Research (WISER), University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South. Africa, May 2015, https://wiser.wits.ac.za/system/files/Achille%20Mbembe%20-%20Decolonizing%20Knowledge%20and%20the%20Question%20of%20the%20Archive.pdf.

[20] Carr, *What Is History*, 16.

[21] Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995), 26.

[22] Bjornar Olsen, *In Defense of Things: Archaeology and the Ontology of Objects* (New York: Altamira Press/Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 16.

[23] Rowland Abiodun, *Yoruba Art and Language: Seeking the African in African Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

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Isaac Adeagbo Akinjogbin, Ade Ajayi, Adu Boahen, and Adiele Afigbo, to mention just a few. The imprints of these pioneer historians remain indelible in the area of methodological questions in writing the precolonial history of Africa. While Dike, through his *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta, 1830–1885*, demonstrates the African historian mastery of the use of archive, Akinjogbin's work, *Dahomey and Its Neighbours, 1708–1818* proved the significance of oral traditions in writing the precolonial history of Africa.[24] But in their writings, nonhuman agents were subdued in the mass of human experiences. Where nonhuman agents were mentioned, they were treated as indicators, intermediaries, or mere tools in historical narratives. Hence, the gaps in their approach lie in the anthropocentric interpretation of African oral traditions and sources. It will be uncharitable to ignore the impact of exceptional contributions of the pioneer studies. In *Yoruba Warfare in the Nineteenth Century*, Ajayi and Smith recognize the role of weapons in the Yoruba inter-group relations and wars of mutual destruction of the nineteenth century.[25] In a follow-up essay published in 1967 by the *Journal of African History*, Smith treats the Yoruba armament as a co-historical actor along with human agents. His description of the features and functions of the *agedengbe* sword, "a single-edged iron blade curving backwards which like the European falchion, would have a great shearing force," was both vivid and impressive. Smith focuses on the attributes and functions of these weapons and thus ascribes roles to nonhuman agents, things, that participated in the war. A similar effort was made by Adejuwon from an art history perspective.[26]

Deji Ogunremi's *Counting the Camels* draws the attentions of African historians to nonhuman agency in history. The work is an exploration in the history of transport economy of the trans-Saharan trade with a particular reference to the camel as a powerful actor in the trans-Saharan trade.[27] The recent work on the history of animals by Saheed Aderinto is another great effort in recognizing animal agency in human history.[28] In the work, Aderinto draws our attentions to the little-explored aspect of colonialism in Africa, the animal experience in the encounter with the colonial rule. He notes that while most studies of colonial rule in Africa centers human agents in their narratives, at the core of colonial experience in Africa were also nonhuman agents, particularly animals. Aderinto demonstrates that, like the humans, animals were treated as colonial subjects and subjected to colonial policies. He notes that while social variables such as class, ethnicity, geographical regions, and religion contributed to the ways Africans shaped and were shaped by the colonial rule, animals experienced, shaped, and were shaped by factors such as habitats, geographical locations, biological, and psychological features. Similar scholarly efforts have been made by Sandra Swart.

[24] Kenneth O. Dike, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta, 1830–1885* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956); Isaac Adeagbo Akinjogbin, *Dahomey and Its Neighbours, 1708–1818* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967); Saburi Biobaku, *The Egba and Their Neighbours, 1842–1872* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957).

[25] J.F. Ade Ajayi and Robert Smith, *Yoruba Warfare in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press in association with the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, 1964).

[26] Akin Adejuwon, "'Art of War': Analysis of Weapons of the 19th Century Yoruba Civil War," *Revista Universitaria de Historia Militar* 8, no. 17 (2019): 174–202.

[27] G.O. Ogunremi, *Counting the Camels: The Economics of Transportation in the Pre-Industrial Nigeria* (New York: Nok Publishers International, 1982).

[28] Saheed Aderinto, *Animality and Colonial Subjecthood in Africa: The Human and Nonhuman Creatures of Nigeria* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2022).

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In *The Lion's Historian: Africa's Animal Past*,[29] Swart calls on historians to recognize animals' agency and pursue a more inclusive history. She adeptly weaves animals' attributes and experiences into intelligible narratives and thus proposes animal-sensitive history. In *Riding High*, Swart emphasizes the centrality of horses in South African history. In short, Swart argues that horses matter in accounting for the South African past. She highlights the importance of horses in transportation, race, and war, particularly in the Cape Colony before 1850.[30] Perhaps in the future we will have more of the history animals made in Africa.

While the current study not only acknowledges the efforts of previous writers on the need to articulate animals' agency in African history, it proposes methodological and theoretical lenses that view animals as one of the nonhuman historical actors that possess capacities to act and be acted upon. With particular focus on the Yoruba of West Africa, the paper provides an insight into the relational ontology of being in African history.

Animals in Yoruba history

In the introduction to *Beast and Man*, Mary Midgley states that "We are not just rather like animals; we are animals."[31] Humans are animals, but a rational one. They are things, but a thinking thing. Charles Darwin's analysis of the origin of man concludes that the biological status of human is akin to the apes from whence it evolved.[32] To think of the human body as an organic substance that is anatomically and physiologically composed of living cells and extracellular materials, is to think of the human as a living organism or animal. Citing Julia Adeney Thomas's proposition of a dialog between history and biology,[33] Findlen argues that the human body contains bacteria, fluid, and mostly metallic elements.[34] In René Descartes' dual principles of mind and substance, *res cogitans* (a thinking thing) and *res extensa* (extended substance) are mutually exclusive. Descartes notes that man is "a rational animal," a "thinking thing," *res cogitans.*[35] By a "thinking thing" Descartes means "a thing that doubts, that understands, that affirms, that denies, that wishes to do this and does not wish to do that, and also imagines and perceives by the senses."[36] This Cartesian ontology of man as a thinking thing and extended substance represents the fusion of mind and body. But the somatic reality of man is not limited to his endogenous power to

[29] Sandra Swart, *The Lion's Historian: Africa's Animal Past* (Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2023).

[30] Sandra Swart, *Riding High: Horses, Humans and History in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Wit University Press, 2010).

[31] Mary Midgley, "Introduction to First Edition," *Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature*, rev. ed. (London: Routledge Classics, 2002).

[32] George Gaylord Simpson, "The Biological Nature of Man," *New Series* 152, no. 3721 (1966): 472–478.

[33] Julia Adeney Thomas, "History and Biology in the Anthropocene: Problems of Scale, Problems of Value," *American Historical Review* 119, no. 5 (2014): 1587–1607. Also see Charles Darwin, *Delphi Complete Works of Charles Darwin* (Hastings: Delphi, 2015).

[34] Paula Findlen, "Objects of History: The Past Materialized," *History and Theory* 59, no. 2 (2020): 270–282.

[35] René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy with Selections from the Objections and Replies*, trans. Michael Moriarty (New York. Oxford University Press, 2008), 18 and 20.

[36] Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 20.

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think, doubt, understand, deny, and affirm. Man is also shaped by his exogenous experience. Bjornar Olsen has warned that social scientists should overcome the feeling that "human body is the only flesh in the world" and that the world is not bound together only by human cognition.[37] Findlen also reminds us that this Cartesian argument holds when we delimit the line between mind and matter.[38]

There is present in most African cultures a relational sense of being about human, animal, and things. Among the Yoruba of West Africa, for instance, the relationship of the more-than-human world is central to their epistemology. In their universe, humans, animals, and things are interrelated and relational. For them, the beginning of time is the beginning of things.[39] In the Yoruba story of origin and creation of the earth, both animals and things feature prominently. The most popular Yoruba myth notes that when the surface of the earth was watery without form, Olodumare (the Prime Mover) sent some heavenly beings led by Oduduwa to create solid land, plant, animals, and humans. Olodumare provided them with a quantity of sand, a chicken, snail, and one palm nut. Oduduwa poured some sand on the water. He lowered the chicken and the snail on the surface to spread and to compress the earth respectively. The palm nut was planted and the heavenly beings descended on the earth through the chain to create life. Hence, the beginning of life.[40] This story is not just about the creation of the earth, it is also about the order of existence of beings. The animals, palm nut, and the chain in the story preceded the creation of humans. The presence of animals and the chain in the story also testifies to how the Yoruba and other African societies conceive their reality. Within this holistic reflective view, the African universe therefore includes all actors and recipients of actions.

Animals feature prominently in African totemic discourse. Animals are inserted as actors in the human system of moral conduct and to solve their problems in nature. Richard Tapper's observations of two major ways through which animals are problematized in human society are very relevant and useful to analyze the Yoruba view of animals.[41] Tapper notes that the first way is the cultural construction of animals as metaphors in a dialectic manner. In this case, animals are treated as human agents with an idealized model or standard of order. Thus, animals are treated as agents and social beings, "with motives, values and morals; difference between them and human are implicitly denied."[42] Second, animals are treated as the other, "The Beast, Brute, the model of disorder or the way things should not be done."[43] He further observes that by featuring in didactic stories, animals fulfill the purposes of allowing "the teachers and learners to avoid articulating difficult and embarrassing truth about humanity;

[37] Bjornar Olsen, "Material Culture after Text: Re-Membering Things," *Norwegian Archaeological Review* 36, no. 2 (2003): 88.

[38] Findlen, "Objects of History."

[39] Oral interview with Chief Awolola Idowu Oyelakin, the Amukinro of Awo, Ibadan Oyo State, Age 50 years (7 October 2024).

[40] S. Adebanji Akintoye, *A History of the Yoruba People* (Dakar: Amalion Publishing, 2014).

[41] Richard Tapper, "Animality, Humanity, Morality, Society," in *What Is an Animal*, ed. Tim Ingold (London: Routledge, 1994), 47–62.

[42] Tapper, "Animality, Humanity, Morality, Society," 51.

[43] Tapper, "Animality, Humanity, Morality, Society," 51.

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at another level they create a distinction between humans and animals; and they reinforce human morality by giving it a natural basis."[44]

In the African social system, animals are constructed as social beings and idealized as agents in their own right. They are classified into two, namely domestic and wild animals. While domestic animals co-live with humans in the house or compound, wild animals occupy forest regions or space in Africa. This classification notwithstanding, agency of animals in human society are derived from their natural features and their social values. Their natural features are usually constructed on the nature of their endogenous and exogenous values.[45] These features are recognized and coded in African traditional archives such as proverbs, poems, chants, traditions, and so on.

An indispensable lens through which relational theory of being and existence between human and nonhuman agents/animals in African history are coded is through the Yoruba system of personal and collective *oriki. Oriki* is the Yoruba verbal art that traces the origin, evokes the essence and the praise of its character. The Yoruba hold the belief that everything – humans, animals, natural and material things – possess *oriki.* This verbal art takes different forms and includes praise poems, chants, incantation, vocalized curse, satire, proverbs, songs, cognomen, and dirge.[46]

Through the art of *oriki*, the Yoruba exemplify the importance of a relational system between humans, animals, and things.[47] This verbal art unveils nonhuman attributes exhibited by human actors. While *oriki* such as *Omo Ekun* (the child of Tiger) and *Ogidan* (Lion) depict toughness, bravery and power, *Ajanaku* (Elephant) portrays might and splendor. These attributive features associated with human characters are underlined by some historical experiences that are linked to the ancestors of their lineages.

Some of these animal totems are also engraved on doorposts or walls as the family emblems. The verbal invocation of these *oriki* not only recalls the historical experience of the ancestors but also inspires and reminds the living of their personality and expected roles in society.

Oriki Ile Otutu

Omo Otutu bi Osun
Omo Adalemofoogun loto
Omo Oba a ji boyinbo seleri

[44] Tapper, "Animality, Humanity, Morality, Society," 51.

[45] Oral interview with Baba Awo Famoriyo Ojo Awo Agboola, the Olori Awo of Ifa priests in Oyo town (age 63, Oyo town, Nigeria, October 2, 2024).

[46] Rowland Abiodun, *Yoruba Art and Language: Seeking the African in the African Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

[47] For more on the Yoruba concept and system of Oriki, see Abiodun, *Yoruba Art and Language*; Tunji Vidal, "Oriki in Traditional Yoruba Music," *African Arts* 3, no. 1 (1969): 56–59; Karin Barber, "Yoruba 'Oriki' and Deconstructive Criticism," *Research in African Literatures* 15, no. 4, Special Issue on Oral Poetry and Song (1984): 497–518; T.O. Oruene, "The Cult of Ibeji as Reflected in the Oriki Ibeji," *Anthropos* 80, no. 1/3 (1985): 230–237; Thomas Lindon, "Oriki Orisa: The Yoruba Prayer of Praise," *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 20, Fasc. 2 (1990): 205–224; Olabiyi Babalola Yai, "Traditions and the Yoruba Artist," *African Arts*, 32, no. 1, Special Issue: Authorship in African Art, Part 2 (1999): 32–35.

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Odadanda, Irunmole agba
Oba Ooni Ajagun, Oba ti ndoka dere to si derin
Bo wajagun a si dekun pasebi je.
Omo paramole to koro iwosi
Omo osinlade mero odundun
Omo osinlade mero alubosa
A kii Jagbare ka sina ti mo ba ja lori esin otutu ni mo nre
Odunrun esin ni nje ni koto otutu
Eyi o ri o mugun esin olojo
Eyi o ri o mugun esin kimoyero
Kimoyero moko ti baba re tori tobo
Omo ariigbin loko fi dooro he omo akindindin rin esa.
Omo kukute o la mi wo, eni mi kukute ara re lomi.[48]

The Eulogy of Otutu compound

The son of calmness like the Osun river,
The son of house structure that separates not its charms,
The son of king that negotiate with the white men,
With all means an elderly irunmole (deity),
The Ooni King Ajagun, the king that turns into python and anaconda,
If he wishes he turns into a tiger and kills the evil doer.
The son of paramole (snake) that detests insults,
The son of a crown maker that knows the secret of odundun,
The son of a crown maker that knows the secret of onions.
We don't mount and miss the way once I have mounted Otutu's horse I locate my destination,
Over hundreds of horses eat in Otutu's pit,
Which ever pleases you, you mount, horse has no specified day to mount,
Which ever pleases, you mount
Horse has no specified number of riders
Kimoyero established farmstead beside his father's farm because of monkeys
The son of the branch of a felled tree that no one can attempt to fell no more, anyone that attempts to fell a tree's branch falls himself.

The image in Figure 1 and the above poem/*oriki* describe the ancestral lineage, attributes, political, and social status of the Otutu family. While the sculpted lion at the entrance door personifies the majesty and the royal lineage of the Otutu, the *oriki* is a verbal poem that documents various attributes of the ancestors. It is also assumed that every member of the Otutu lineage has the tendency to display the attributes wholly or in part. Both the animal totem at the compound entrance and the *oriki* exemplify how humans deploy animal images and metaphors to explain animality in human nature and social relations.

Like humans, animals also possess their *oriki.* An animal's *oriki* usually combines physiological features of the animal as idealized by the humans. Two

[48] Oral interview with Mr. Babatunde Otun, Ile-Ife. Mr. Babatunde Otun is a visual and performative artist, aged 58 years.

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Figure 1. A three-dimensional sculpted animal figurine at the entrance of the Otutu Compound in Ile-Ife, Osun State. Photo by Ibrahim Owojori.

instances would suffice this claim. Among the Yoruba, a gazelle, popularly known as *etu* or *egbin*, is defined as a beautiful and elegant animal. Its beauty, comeliness, and elegance are so fascinating to the Yoruba that they often ascribe the attribute of this animal to a beautiful person or thing. Hence the saying *odara bi egbin* – as beautiful as a gazelle. When a woman is called *egbin*, it means she is attractive. *Egbin's oriki* is described thus:

Egbin tó fi papa ṣelé	Gazelle that uses grassland as its habitation
Ó fawo àrán ṣaṣo àtésùn	It uses velvet skin as its bed sheet
Dáraníjù	Pretty in the forest
Eranko abarayòyò	The animal that has a smooth body
Egbin dára títí	Gazelle is so beautiful
Elégàn Egbin kò sí nínú igbó	That nobody can despise it in the Bush[49]

Similar trends are also found in the Yoruba folklores (*alo*), oral tradition (*aroba*) myths, and legends. Animals are inserted in the stories to either teach lessons or to explain some vague experiences. These stories, often narrated as moonlight stories by the elders, combined moral lessons with humor transmitted from one generation to another. Among the Yoruba and Igbo, a tortoise is

[49] Ajibade, George Olusola, "Animals in the Traditional Worldview of the Yoruba." *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore*, 30 (2005).

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usually swapped for human character. A tortoise is cast as the primary actor or villain. It is depicted as a smart and cunning character who lives and makes rational decisions like humans. It is constructed as lazy, greedy, selfish, and opportunist, and one who likes to benefit from the toils of other animals. A similar instance is found among the Akan-speaking people of Ghana, where *Anansi* or *Ananse*, the spider, is the primary folktale character. It is associated with intelligence, knowledge, and trickery.[50] The process of inserting animal characters in African folk tales is in essence to encode important information or teach children some didactic lessons. This construction is not unconnected with the sluggishness and inactivity of the tortoise. The imagined lives of these animals are framed in African folktales and lore to teach morals and frame narratives of power relations and balance in life. Recognizing animals as social and historical actors will help historians understand how animals penetrated and exited human lives.

For some historians, anthropologists and archaeologists, animals and material culture constitute mere objects of historical interpretation and relevance as long as they serve as an indicator, intermediary, metaphor, and personification of human actors. This approach to things suppresses the role of nonhuman actors as active participants of historical events. In the introduction of *What Is an Animal?*, Tim Ingold observes that boundaries delimitation between humans and nonhuman actors is the core question of major classes of life forms.[51] Although to enlist nonhuman actors in historical enquiry may pose some methodological challenges to historians, it is the duty of historians to incorporate the experiences of these actors. Ewa Domanska has suggested that social scientists should activate "unconventional sources" that underscore animal and human relations or bonds.[52] Andrew McEwen's "'He Took Care of Me:' The Human-Animal Bond in Canada Great War," enumerates a methodological approach to this historical problem.[53] He deploys anecdotes in memoirs, interviews, memories, and poetry to understand human-animal-bonding (HAB) in the Canadian army during the Great War. This approach helps him reveal that along with the human soldiers, animals such as horses and mules served in the war. Like humans, these animals were exposed to danger, inclement weather, diseases, and psychological traumas.[54] In addition, these animals were great companions and supporters during the hours of stress and depression. He notes that this methodological approach, unlike empirical data, lacks precision, is subjective, and often relies on hindsight. African historians also have epistemic responsibilities to listen and air the voices of animals in order to construct coherent narratives of unaccounted past.

[50] https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ananse (accessed 12 November 2024).

[51] Tim Ingold, "Introduction," in *What Is an Animal*, ed. Tim Ingold (London: Routledge), 1–2.

[52] Domanska, "The Material Presence of the Past."

[53] Andrew McEwen, "'He Took Care of Me:' The Human-Animal Bond in Canada's Great War," in *The Historical Animal*, ed. Susan Nance (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2015), 272–288.

[54] McEwen, "He Took Care of Me," 272.

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Things in African history: Yoruba thoughts

The bifurcation of being into living and nonliving things has privileged anthropomorphic narratives that translate nonhuman animals and things in a utilitarian term.[55] Thinking of humans, historical actors, as a substance, a thing, or matter (even with their thinking capability) is a useful entry point to rethink and understand how they cohabit, co-function, and relate with other things external to them. As LeCain argues, historical materialism commences when we view body as a "quintessential object lesson in material entanglements."[56]

Since the paleolithic period, humans have survived and adapted to their ever-changing environment through the development and use of tools through technologies.[57] As Olsen argues, one major historical trend from the Olduvian Gorge to the *postmodernia* is the continuous mixing of human and things as more and more tasks are assigned to nonhuman actors.[58] He notes it is "Only by increasingly mobilizing things could humans come to such experience episodes of history such as the advent of urbanization, state formations, industrialization, and postindustrialization."[59]

Things are historical actors in their own rights and should be treated as such along with other actors. In the African cosmos, all things are relational and interrelated. Among the Yoruba, things are broadly categorized into two: natural things and material things. Natural things were created by Olodumare as part of the structure and order of the world; material things were created by humans to make life easy for themselves.[60] Hence, animals, plants, stones, sunlight, trees, rivers, and so on, and material objects possess agency power. There are ubiquitous evidences of how African people construct their collective identity around natural objects and mobilize material objects in the state creation. The history of Abeokuta, a Yoruba town, for instance, is woven round the agency of a popular granite stone that served as a refuge for the Egba in the face of attacks during the nineteenth century. The agency of the stone is imagined and constructed in the form of a savior during the period of insecurity. The stone is not ascribed human attributes, yet it is framed both as a powerful mediator in the Egba historical experience and a crucial determinant in their social institution, traditions, and behavior.[61]

In some African societies, it is believed that natural things possess lives too. They believe that things in nature had once lived like humans. This cultural

[55] John Ayotunde Bewaji, "Yoruba Values and the Environment," *Caribbean Journal of Philosophy*, 7 (1) 2015.

[56] Timothy LeCain, *The Matter of History: How Things Create the Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

[57] Sherwood L. Washburn, "The Evolution of Man," *Scientific American* 239, no. 3 (1978): 194–211; Robert Boyd, Peter J. Richerson and Joseph Henrich, "The Cultural Evolution of Technology: Facts and Theories" In *Cultural Evolution: Society, Language, and Religion*, edited by P. J. Richerson and M. H. Christiansen, Vol. 12. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013. https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9894.003.0011.

[58] Olsen, *In Defense of Things.*

[59] Olsen, *In Defense of Things*, 9–10.

[60] Oral interview with Chief Famoriyo Ojoawo Agboola, the Olori Awo of Oyo town (age 63, Oyo town), 24 October 2024.

[61] Biobaku, *The Egba and Their Neighbours.*

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intelligence is variously expressed among the Yoruba. Instances abound in the Yoruba Ifa corpus. Throughout the 256 chapters (Odu) of Ifa, natural and material things are personified in human figures. An instance of how natural things assumed human attributes is reported in the Odu *Ate Inu Ilosun*:

Odi lai, Odi kanrin kese	*For ever, and ever*
Lodifa fun efufulele	*Divine for whirlwind*
T'oni ohun yio mu ohun ilele jegbe	*Who plotted to steal from land*[62]

The verse talks about *Efufu lele* (whirlwind) that plotted to rob *Ile* (land) of all its properties. *Efufulele* consulted its *babalawo* (Ifá priest) who counseled it to perform sacrifice. It neglected the advice and proceeded with the plan. When *Efufu lele* attacked *Ile*, it swept all materials off the ground. After a few minutes, all the objects that were swept off the ground fell back to the earth. Hence, the Yoruba usually say, "*Laala to ba losoke, ile lon bo*," which means whatever goes up will eventually come down. Both whirlwind and land in the above story are natural things conceptualized as beings capable of motives, morals, values, and actions.

In one of the verses of *Odu Iwori-Okanran*, Ifá relates the story of three friends, *Ile* (House), *Ona* (Road) and *Oja* (Market) who consulted their *babalawo* (a diviner or Ifá priest who is also the representative of Orunmila) on what to do to attract people to their company. Their *babalawo* advised them to perform some sacrifices. Of the three friends, only House performed the sacrifice. Road and Market did not heed the advice of their *babalawo.* Hence, people do not live on the Road or Market but in the House. When people wake up in the morning, they set out on the Road and walk to the Market to trade but return home in the evening to sleep. Road's and Market's experience of people is transient. In the evening, people carry all the money and items witnessed by the Road and Market back home. The verse is as follows:

Iwori, a se rin enikan?	Iwori, why should you walk alone?
Adifafun ile	Divine for the house
Iwori, a se rin enikan?	Iwori, why should you walk alone?
Adifafun ona	Divine for the road
Iwori, a se rin enikan?	Iwori, why should you walk alone?
Adifafun oja	Divine for the market
Won sunkun wipe awon koni eni	They were all crying because they had no people
Won ni ki awon meteta ru ebo	The three were counseled to perform sacrifice
Ki won le di eleni	So that they can have people
Ile nikan lo nbe leyin to nse ebo	It was only the house that performed the sacrifice[63]

[62] Oral interview with Chief Famoriyo Ojoawo Agboola, the Olori Awo of Oyo town (age 63, Oyo town), 24 October 2024.

[63] Oral interview with Awoyomi Ifamakinde, Ibadan (age 32, Ibadan City), 14 October 2024.

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In the above two Ifa verses, land, whirlwind, house, road, and market are accorded human attributes. This personification is derived from the Yoruba belief that human-made objects had lived like humans in the remote past.

In most African societies, material objects are recognized as part of agents of sociality. Their positions oscillate between subject and object of social action. For the Yoruba, material objects are capable of initiating or receiving actions. Latour has aptly argued that objects are capable of authoring actions.[64] For some historians, anthropologists, and archaeologists, material culture constitutes mere object of historical interpretation and relevance as long as it serves as an indicator, intermediary, metaphor, and personification of human actor. This approach to things suppresses the role of nonhuman actors as active participants of historical events. Whenever things are suppressed in historical narrative, historians limit the range of probable causes or explanations for a historical event. In other words, the place of material things is not limited to the object position; they also act as and target other material things as objects. This view is reflected in the story of gun in the Odu Ifa Ogundameji thus:

Ogunda-ji lodifa fun ibon nigba ti n mura ogun	Ogunda-ji divine for gun
Won ni ko rubo pe ohun enu re ni yio ma fi segun ota	Counseled to do sacrifice to be victorious
Ibon gbo ruru ebo oru	Gun hearkened to the counsel and sacrifice
Won ni ti ibon ba ti lanu soro ogun ti se	they said whenever he talked, he will conquer his enemies
Igba ti ibon do ju ogun to ba ti lanu e soro to ni Ogunda-ji	Whenever gun said Ogunda-ji at the war front,
Gbogbo awon ota re ba sa lo	And all his enemies scattered[65]

The above Ifa verse frames gun as a living thing or object that possesses capacity to initiate action. Gun is not constructed as a mere mediator in human actions but as an actor in its own right. For instance, the history of violence in Africa can be understood through the lens of firearms. African historians can frame history of things such as gun to understand complex folds of human past. The recent work of Saheed Aderinto, *Gun and Society in Colonial Nigeria*, testifies to this.[66] Aderinto treats firearms as a commodity, "a vital global commodity, which possessed divergent symbolic meaning and characters across locations...."[67] By putting firearms squarely at the center of armed conflict and criminality, he does not just examine the dynamics of violent encounter between the British and Africa but also proves that without gun, there was no gun society in pre-twentieth-century Africa. The "gun frame" adopted by Aderinto tells the stories

[64] Latour, *Reassembling the Social*; Bruno Latour, "Where Are the Missing Masses? The Sociology of a Few Mundane Artifacts," in *Shaping Technology/Building Society: Students in Sociotechnical Change*, ed. Wiebe E. Bijker and John Law (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 225–258.

[65] Oral interview with Chief Famoriyo Ojoawo Agboola, the Olori Awo of Oyo town (age 63, Oyo town), 24 October 2024.

[66] Saheed Aderinto, *Guns and Society in Colonial Nigeria: Firearms, Culture and Public Order* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2018).

[67] Aderinto, *Guns and Society in Colonial Nigeria*, 4.

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of colonial experience and signifies the view that within the very colonial society, there were many societies of which the gun society was an integral part. A similar instance is found in *Yoruba Warfare in the Nineteenth Century* by Ajayi and Smith. These authors recognize the roles of weapons in the Yoruba inter-group relations and wars of mutual destruction of the nineteenth century.[68] In a follow-up essay published in 1967 by the *Journal of African History*, Smith treats Yoruba armament as a co-historical actor along with human agents. His description of the features and functions of the *agedengbe* sword, "a single-edged iron blade curving backwards which like the European falchion, would have a great shearing force," was both vivid and impressive. Smith focuses on the attributes and functions of these weapons and thus ascribes roles to nonhuman agents, things, that participated in the war. A similar effort was made by Adejuwon from an art history perspective.[69] Adejuwon assembles few artifacts preserved in the Ife museums and imagines as well as creatively draws the absent ones to analyze the intersection of things and humans in nineteenth-century Yoruba warfare. This approach helps us understand how the presence of things creates their absence.

History is the study of absence in the present. The presence of historical artifacts is a paradox of absence. Historical artifacts and relics are ignored by historians because they are silent and sometimes elusive or hidden even in their own materiality. This tendency to remain silent has been summarized by Miller as "the humility of things."[70] He further notes that the significance of objects lies beyond their evidential feature and physicalness and in their concealability. He notes, "the less we are aware of them, the more powerfully they can determine our expectations by setting the scene and ensuring normative behavior ... They determine what takes place to the extent we are unconscious of their capacity to do so."[71]

Conclusion

From the above analyses, things, artifacts, objects, matters, or material cultures are useful ingredients of thinking for historians. What matters is not just the materiality of presence, but the absence it reverberates and inspires or arouses in the historian. Material objects are not just evidential artifacts for historians but also things to think with. They are historical actors alongside human actors. Whether located *in situ* or housed in an artificial place like a museum, material objects occupy space that transcend here and now. They collapse space and time and bring absence into presence. As historical actors, they perform actions and are capable of creating, validating, legitimizing, or shaping human actions and identity. Things are not human-others, they are our exogenous self and the mirror through which we see and understand our complex material form. When called upon or activated, things perform the role of actors either as subjects or

[68] Ajayi and Smith, *Yoruba Warfare in the Nineteenth Century.*
[69] Adejuwon, "Art of War."
[70] Miller, *Materiality.*
[71] Miller, *Materiality*, 5.

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objects. Without things, we are nothing. It is within a frame that flattens the mountain top ascended and occupied by the human to the plain ground-level of things that history could be an objective study of the past. Lest anybody declares my intention as an anti-anthropocentric or posthuman advocate, this is a trek towards recognizing and understanding the role of pluriversal actors in historical events. When we redefine the world of social, sociality, and sociability of history, and do not just assign responsibility but allow each thing to take center stage to play its natural role, history will become more meaningful, intelligible, and rational.

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