

To Article XIV (1995b: "Links West Africa")

On the basis of field research in Kebbi and published studies on Oyo, this article proposes detailed comparisons between West African and Mesopotamian legends, myths and cult-mythologies. More precisely it considers the oral accounts of the legendary figures Kanta and Şango and compares them with the available written narratives of Sargon of Akkad and Baal. While with respect to

Kanta considerable parallels can be shown to exist between the two legends, the shift from the priest-king *šangû* to the mythological figure *Šàngó* presupposes a confusion between the divine and the human spheres. The solution to this enigma seems to be the New Year festival, when the king, acting then as *šangû* (priest-king), assumed the role of the weather-god Bel or Baal. For the people assisting in the cult-dramatic performances of the New Year festival, the king and the god must then have become one and the same being. In other words, in their minds the king changed into the god (Bel) and the god changed into the priest-king (*šangû*). This popular view of things reached West Africa not as abstract knowledge but as the result of personal experiences.

For Africanists used to considering African cultures in isolation, any consideration involving ancient Mesopotamia must appear far-fetched. Contrary to the Canaanite culture of the Phoenicians in North Africa there was apparently no geographical bridge between Mesopotamia and sub-Saharan Africa. However, it should be noted that the Phoenician mother towns on the Levantian coast paid tribute to Assyria from the middle of the ninth century BC, and that from the first half of the eighth century BC they were subject to direct Assyrian administration lasting until the end of the seventh century BC. During the latter period, the Phoenicians – as also the Israelites – were certainly subjected to considerable cultural influence exerted on them by their Assyrian overlords. A number of historians suppose that the Israelites participated in the Phoenician colonization of North Africa.³⁷ Similarly, Assyrians or Assyrian-influenced Canaanites may have established themselves in the North African trading towns of the Phoenicians. Some of these emigrants and refugees might easily have joined the Phoenician traders on their way across the Sahara.