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Author(s): William Pietz

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The problem of the fetish, I

WILLIAM PIETZ

But there is one term the indiscriminate use of which, I believe, has done infinite harm, the word 'fetish'. The story of its origin and introduction into West Africa is so well known that I need not here repeat it.

R. S. Rattray, *Ashanti* (1923)

(tout objet historique est fétiche)

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *working note to Le Visible et l'invisible* (1964)

"Fetish" has always been a word of sinister pedigree. Discursively promiscuous and theoretically suggestive, it has always been a word with a past, forever becoming "an embarrassment"¹ to disciplines in the human sciences that seek to contain and control its sense. Yet anthropologists of primitive religion, sociologists of political economy, psychiatrists of sexual deviance, and philosophers of modernist aesthetics have never ceased using the term, even as they testify to its conceptual doubtfulness and referential uncertainty. It seems this word's usage is always somewhat "indiscriminate," always threatening to slide, as in Merleau-Ponty's tentative proposition, into an impossibly general theory. Yet it is precisely in the surprising history of this word as a comprehensive theoretical term indispensable to such crucial thinkers as Comte, Marx, and Freud that the real interdisciplinary interest of "fetish" lies.

This essay is intended to provide the introductory discussion to an extensive exploration of this history, an exploration that must begin with a study of the origin of the fetish as a word and as a historically significant object. My thesis is that the fetish, as an idea and a problem, and as a novel object not proper to any prior discrete society, originated in the cross-cultural spaces of the coast of West Africa during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Of course, origins are never absolute. While I argue that the fetish originated within a novel social formation during this period through the development of the pidgin word *Fetisso*, this word in turn has a linguistic and accompanying conceptual lineage that may be traced. *Fetisso* derives from the Portuguese word *feitiço*, which in the late Middle Ages meant "magical practice" or "witchcraft" performed,

1. Wyatt MacGaffey, "Fetishism Revisited: Kongo *Nkisi* in Sociological Perspective," *Africa* 47 (2), 1977: 172.

often innocently, by the simple, ignorant classes.² *Feitiço* in turn derives from the Latin adjective *facticus*, which originally meant "manufactured." The historical study of the fetish must begin by considering these words in some detail, only then going on to examine the initial application of *feitiço* on the African coast, its subsequent development into *Fetisso*, and finally that word's textual dissemination into the languages of northern Europe, where national versions of the word developed during the seventeenth century. The study of the origin of the fetish concludes at the beginning of the eighteenth century with the text of Willem Bosman, for his *Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea* provided the image and conception of fetishes on which Enlightenment intellectuals based their elaboration of the notion into a general theory of primitive religion.³ The elaboration of this general Enlightenment theory, as developed from Bayle to de Brosses and then adopted by philosophers of the late eighteenth century, constitutes a second period of the history of the fetish. Its dissemination into a host of popular and social scientific discourses in the nineteenth century marks a third large period, and one could view twentieth-century theoretical discourses that seek to make a unity out of the diversity of earlier fetish discourses as the last historical development of this idea.

The essentially theoretical nature of the interest in the history of the term, as well as the need for an initial schematism to establish criteria of relevance for the subsequent historical discussion, call for a preliminary consideration of the nature of the problem named by the word "fetish."

The problem of the fetish

In taking a historical approach that stresses the importance of the word itself, I am opposing both universalist and particularist arguments that dismiss the fetish as a proper object with its own singular

2. Further conceptual and evaluative implications of this term as it was used by churchmen in late medieval Portugal will be discussed in the second, historical part of this essay.

3. See my "Bosman's Guinea: The Intercultural Roots of an Enlightenment Discourse," *Comparative Civilizations Review* (fall 1982).

significance. By particularist arguments, I am referring primarily to those of ethnographers who would dismiss "fetish" as a corrupt genus that obscures the true meaning of the socioreligious practices and artifacts of various non-Western societies. For instance, this was R. S. Rattray's position when he discussed "what the Akan-speaking African calls a *suman* — a word which I would like to see substituted altogether for 'fetish'."⁴ Such arguments are now used to justify a method for reclaiming stigmatized colonial-era ethnographic texts by translating terms such as "fetish" back into the native terminology of the particular society being described.⁵ This method ignores the historical and cross-cultural status of these texts in an attempt to reconstruct the unique cultures of primitive societies in their self-contained purity. It is equally possible, however, to study these colonial texts, and earlier voyage accounts, as novel productions resulting from the abrupt encounter of radically heterogeneous worlds; as descriptive records they are often phantasmal, but because of this it is possible to view them as remnants of the creative enactment of new forms of social consciousness. Similarly, the pidgin word *Fetisso* as it developed in the cross-cultural spaces of the West African coast may be viewed either as the failed translation of various African terms or as something in itself, a novel word responsive to an unprecedented type of situation.

Universalist dismissals of the specificity of the fetish tend to be either empiricist and psychological or philosophical and analytic. Psychological universalists subsume fetishism to an allegedly universal human tendency toward privileging phallic symbolism.⁶ The analytic philosopher subsumes the concept of fetishization to the general category of hypostatization and errors of logical type.⁷ While there was indeed a marked sexual dimension to the discourse about fetishes

"from the beginning," the conception that the fetish's ultimate referent is the phallus was articulated only in the late nineteenth century. The earliest fetish discourse concerned witchcraft and the control of female sexuality. As for philosophy's dismissal of the fetish as the logical mistake of hypostasis (the "fallacy of misplaced concreteness," to use Whitehead's popular phrase), I would argue that the discourse of fetishism represents the emerging articulation of a theoretical materialism quite incompatible and in conflict with the philosophical tradition.⁸

Finally, there is the dismissal, both universalist and historical, that the discourse about fetishes is nothing but a continuation of the traditional Christian discourse concerning idolatry. The relation of the fetish to the idol, and of the notion of fetishism to Christianity's internal conception of its false other (idolatry), is a complex question that a historical study must discuss in some detail. Far from representing a continuation of the idea of idolatry, the emergence of the distinct notion of the fetish marks a breakdown of the adequacy of the earlier discourse under quite specific historical conditions and social forces.

This novel situation began with the formation of inhabited intercultural spaces along the West African coast (especially that stretch known as the Mina coast) whose function was to translate and transvalue objects between radically different social systems. Specifically, as I will detail in the historically detailed sequel to this introduction, these spaces, which endured for several centuries, were triangulated among Christian feudal, African lineage, and merchant capitalist social systems.⁹ It was within this situation that there emerged a new

4. R. S. Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927), p. 9.

5. See the introductory argument in MacGaffey, "Fetishism Revisited," pp. 172–173. MacGaffey does not himself dismiss the term "fetish" as hopelessly corrupt and useless.

6. An ironic instance of this position, applying the notion to the observers instead of the observed, underlies Edmund Leach's remark that, Lévi-Strauss and the structuralists aside, "everything that the anthropologists have ever had to say about 'fetishism' and 'magic' and the meaning of religious symbolism has its roots in an interest in the 'phallic' components of Hindu iconography . . ." (in "Review of Gananath Obeyesekere's *Medusa's Hair*," *London Times Literary Supplement*, December 18, 1981: 1459).

7. This is the Kantian usage of the term "fetish." The logical positivist Ernst Mach had occasion to denounce the notion of physical causality as a fetish.

8. When Gilles Deleuze in *Différence et répétition* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1972) asserts that "le fétiche est l'objet naturel de la conscience sociale comme sens commun ou reconnaissance de valeur" ["the fetish is the natural object of social consciousness as common sense or recognition of value"] (p. 269), he uses "fetish" as an affirmative term of fundamental theoretical significance congenial to that book's Nietzschean project of radically revaluing and "reversing" the tradition of Western philosophical thought. This is not at all accidental, but is the result of the historical origin and development of the word, a development I hope to trace in a series of studies.

9. I hesitate to say "modes of production." While merchant capital was not yet a true mode of production, fifteenth-century Portuguese feudalism was already developing those absolutist political forms able to accommodate commercial forces within feudal society (see Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: NLB, 1974), pp. 40–44). Many of the African societies, especially those in Senegambia, were highly Islamicized, while others, such as Benin, had developed despotic tributary political structures.

problematic concerning the capacity of the material object to embody — simultaneously and sequentially — religious, commercial, aesthetic, and sexual values. My argument, then, is that the fetish could originate only in conjunction with the emergent articulation of the ideology of the commodity form that defined itself within and against the social values and religious ideologies of two radically different types of noncapitalist society, as they encountered each other in an ongoing cross-cultural situation. This process is indicated in the history of the word itself as it developed from the late medieval Portuguese *feitiço*, to the sixteenth-century pidgin *Fetisso* on the African coast, to various northern European versions of the word via the 1602 text of the Dutchman Pieter de Marees.

The fetish, then, not only originated from, but remains specific to, the problematic of the social value of material objects as revealed in situations formed by the encounter of radically heterogeneous social systems, and a study of the history of the idea of the fetish may be guided by identifying those themes that persist throughout the various discourses and disciplines that have appropriated the term. This method studies the history of the usage of “fetish” as a field of exemplary instances that exemplify no model or truth prior to or outside this very “archive” itself; it views the fetish as a radically historical object that is nothing other than the totalized series of its particular usages. Nevertheless, these usages, like all language, are embedded and function within a total historical reality; and the historical specificity of the fetish’s problematic can provide criteria for the construction of a preliminary theoretical model of the fetish from the recurrent themes of fetish discourse.

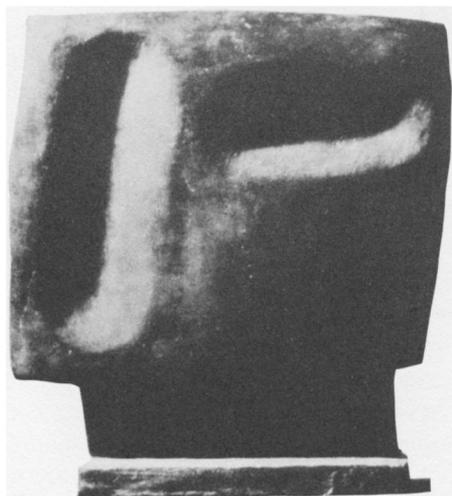
The first characteristic to be identified as essential to the notion of the fetish is that of the fetish object’s irreducible materiality. The truth of the fetish resides in its status as a material embodiment; its truth is not that of the idol, for the idol’s truth lies in its relation of iconic resemblance to some immaterial model or entity. This was one basis of the distinction between the *feitiço* and the *idolo* in medieval Portuguese. For Charles de Brosses, who coined the word *fétichisme* in 1757, the fetish was essentially a material, terrestrial entity; fetishism was thus to be distinguished from cults of celestial bodies (whose truth might be a sort of proto-Deist intimation of the rational order of nature rather than direct worship of the natural bodies themselves). For Hegel, the African culture of the fetish represented a moment just prior to History, since the fetish was

precisely that object of the Spirit that failed to participate in the Idea, which never experienced a negation and *Aufhebung* to a truth beyond its natural materiality.¹⁰ Marxism’s commodity fetish, psychoanalysis’s sexual fetish, and modernism’s fetish as art object all in an essential way involve the object’s untranscended materiality.

Second, and equally important, is the theme of singularity and repetition. The fetish has an ordering power derived from its status as the fixation or inscription of a unique originating event that has brought together previously heterogeneous elements into a novel identity. As MacGaffey stresses, “a ‘fetish’ is always a composite fabrication.”¹¹ But the heterogeneous components appropriated into an identity by a fetish are not only material elements; desires and beliefs and narrative structures establishing a practice are also fixed (or fixated) by the fetish, whose power is precisely the power to repeat its originating act of forging an identity

10. Africa “is no historical part of the World,” writes Hegel, “it has no movement or development to exhibit. . . . What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which has to be presented here as on the threshold of the World’s History” (G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree [New York: Dover, 1956], p. 99). Hegel’s characterization of Africans and of the religion of fetishes that actualizes “the African Spirit” typifies the accepted European understanding of African fetishism in the early nineteenth century. “The peculiarity of the African character,” according to Hegel, is that it lacks “the principle which naturally accompanies all our ideas — the category of Universality” (p. 93). Africans worship “the first thing that comes their way. This, taken quite indiscriminately, they exalt to the dignity of a ‘Genius’; it may be an animal, a tree, a stone, or a wooden figure. . . . [I]n the Fetich, a kind of objective independence as contrasted with the arbitrary fancy of the individual seems to manifest itself; but as the objectivity is nothing other than the fancy of the individual projecting itself into space, the human individuality remains master of the image it has adopted. If any mischance occurs which the Fetich has not averted, if the rain is suspended, if there is a failure in the crops, they bind and beat or destroy the Fetich and so get rid of it, making another immediately, and thus holding it in their power. Such a Fetich has no independence as an object of religious worship; still less has it aesthetic independence as a work of art; it is merely a creation that expresses the arbitrary choice of its maker, and which always remains in his hands. Hence there is no relation of dependence in this religion” (p. 94). Paradoxically, this implies the second characteristic of African religion for Hegel: *absolute dependence* on the kings and priests who act as human intermediaries with the transcendent power. That is, the “natural man” can only slavishly worship the abstract power of command endowed in those who control the chaotic power of Nature. The function of this view of Africans, which was far from being peculiar to Hegel, as an ideology justifying the slave trade by explaining Africans as slavish by nature is obvious enough.

11. MacGaffey, p. 172.



Alberto Giacometti, *Head* (1928), bronze, 15 $\frac{3}{8}$ " high. Florence May Schoenborn and Samuel A. Marx Collection. (Photograph from *Alberto Giacometti*, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1965, p. 32.) Leiris included a photograph of this work in his 1929 article on Giacometti in *Documents*.

of articulated relations between certain otherwise heterogenous things.

One of the most common statements about the nature of the primitive's fetish in texts from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century is what may be called the "first encounter" theory. Bosman's principal informant at Ouidah,¹² when asked how many gods his people worshiped, replied

that the number of their Gods was endless and innumerable: For (said he) any of us being resolved to undertake any thing of importance, we first of all search out a God to prosper our designed Undertaking; and going out of doors with this Design, take the first creature that presents it self to our Eyes, whether Dog, Cat, or the most contemptible Animal in the World, for our God; or perhaps instead of that any Inanimate that falls in our way, whether a stone, a piece of Wood, or any thing else of the same Nature.¹³

This fantastic explanation of African religious behavior according to the notion of a first encounter between a

12. The informant was precisely that "educated African" whom Rattray denounces as a corrupt source for understanding the fetish, since he had been alienated from his own culture: "The educated African, however, has been cut off from, and is out of sympathy with, the life of his own people. . . . Concerning the past he really knows nothing, and generally cares less. Bosman, writing two hundred years ago, mentions 'the negro who ridiculed his own country's gods'" (R. S. Rattray, *Ashanti* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923], p. 87).

13. Willem Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea*, ed. John Ralph Willis (London: Cass, 1967), p. 376a.

new purposive desire and a material object, whereby the thing becomes the divinized emblem of the project, was a commonplace among Muslims and Christians even prior to the development of the idea of the fetish. As I shall discuss in my essay on "The Origin of the Fetish" (to appear in *Res* in 1986), it became an essential component of the fetish idea as that notion came to be defined in opposition to idolatry. Unlike idolatry, which medieval Europe understood as a Faith and Law — that is, as a principle of social order comparable to Christianity, Judaism, and Islam — the fetish idea as elaborated in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries expressed the perception of a social order generated, paradoxically, by a purely natural and lawless process.

This paradoxical idea of Africans generating a social order out of a chaotic principle of contingency is evident both in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century voyage accounts and in eighteenth-century theoretical statements, such as Linnaeus's characterization of the social principle of Africans as "caprice."¹⁴ Such an explanation of the origin of "irrational" social beliefs in the "mechanisms" of the natural primitive mentality was basic to de Brosses's elaboration of a general theory of fetishism (and distinguished it from the fear-theory of the

14. The social principle of American Indians was "custom" and that of Orientals "opinion." The social principle of Europeans was, of course, "law." (See Carolus Linnaeus, *A General System of Nature through the Three Grand Kingdoms of Animals, Vegetables, and Minerals* (London, 1806), vol. I, section "Mammalia, Order I, Primates," cited in Richard H. Popkin, "The Philosophical Basis of Eighteenth-Century Racism" in *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture: Racism in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Harold E. Pagliaro [Cleveland: Case Western Reserve, 1973], p. 248.) The characterization of African society and mentality as being based on caprice was reinterpreted during the eighteenth century to mean something more on the order of the Lockean category of the "arbitrary." That is, as Foucault has discussed in *Madness and Civilization* (trans. Richard Howard [New York: Random House, 1965], p. 29 *passim*), the Renaissance notion of caprice as evidenced in Cervantes' *Don Quixote* or Shakespeare's *Lear* or in the figures in Bosch characterized reason's other as a fanciful madness that through its extremity revealed the depths and essence of the human condition. With Locke and the thinkers of the Enlightenment, irrational mental activity was conceived merely negatively as "arbitrary" and unmotivated by external reality or any essential truth. The notion of the arbitrary as unmotivated random association had, of course, not only psychological but also linguistic and political implications. The Saussurean conception of the arbitrary sign really goes back to Locke (a lineage that Hans Aarsleff has tried to track in *From Locke to Saussure* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), while the liberal theory of politics was articulated against its denunciation of the "arbitrary" power of the absolute monarch. For a synthesis of both the psychological and the social implications of liberalism, see Roberto Mangabeira Unger's *Knowledge and Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1975).

origin of “natural religion” propounded by Hume and others).¹⁵ It was the notion of a historically singular social construct able to create the illusion of natural unity among heterogenous things that, in part, attracted Marx to the idea of the fetish (see especially his discussions of the commodity-form fetish and the “Trinity Formula”). For Marx the term was useful as a name for the power of a singular historical institution to fix personal consciousness in an objective illusion. For August Comte and late nineteenth-century psychologists such as Alfred Binet — who first gave the word currency to denote sexual fetishes¹⁶ — the origin of the fetishistic fixation was in the power of a singular personal event to structure desire. The idea of traumatic fixation upon a specific intense experience as the source of a repetition compulsion is, of course, fundamental to the psychoanalytic notion of the sexual fetish. Similarly, the idea of an enduring effect of aesthetic unity produced by the singular chance encounter of heterogenous elements (the umbrella and the sewing machine) is fundamental to modernist art.

The final two themes basic to the fetish problem have already been introduced in discussing the materiality and repetitive power of a singular fixation of heterogenous elements: these are the themes of social value and personal individuality. The problem of the nonuniversality and constructedness of social value emerged in an intense form from the beginning of the European voyages to black Africa. Thus, one of the earlier voyagers to West Africa, the Venetian Alvise da Cadamosto, who sailed to Senegal under Portuguese charter in the late 1450s, was moved to write of the blacks of Gambia, “Gold is much prized among them, in my opinion, more than by us, for they regard it as very precious; nevertheless they traded it cheaply, taking in exchange articles of little value in our eyes. . . .”¹⁷

The mystery of value — the dependence of social value on specific institutional systems for marking the

value of material things — was a constant theme in transactions on the Guinea coast during this period. The problem was especially expressed in the category of the trifling: European traders constantly remarked on the trinkets and trifles they traded for objects of real value (just as the socioreligious orders of African societies seemed to them founded on the valuing of “trifles” and “trash”). When he tried to formulate an aesthetic explanation for African fetish worship in 1764, Kant decided that such practices were founded on the principle of the “trifling” (*läppisch*), the ultimate degeneration of the principle of the beautiful because it lacked all sense of the sublime.¹⁸ Nineteenth-century economic, sociological, anthropological, and psychological discourses about the fetish constantly stress the idea of certain material objects as the loci of fixed structures of the inscription, displacement, reversal, and overestimation of value.

Marxist and structuralist writers have done little to develop the notion of the fetish as a genuine problem of general theoretical significance. At most they tend to stress the institutional structuring, and hence the objectivity, of constructed value consciousness. Marxist fetish theory explains this as false consciousness based upon an objective illusion (hence alterable only by institutional transformation, not mere subjective “consciousness raising”): material objects turned into commodities conceal exploitative social relations, displacing value-consciousness from the true productive movement of social labor to the apparent movement of market prices and forces.¹⁹ Structuralism either dismisses the fetish as a significant problem²⁰ or else views it as nothing but a nonverbal material signifier, sometimes “animated,” with the pure status of sign-vehicle for a process of signification.²¹ In stressing the social

18. Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, trans. John T. Goldthwait (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960), p. 111.

19. For such a discussion see Maurice Godelier, “Market economy and fetishism, magic and science according to Marx’s *Capital*” and “Fetishism, religion, and Marx’s general theories concerning ideology,” in *Perspectives in Marxist Anthropology*, trans. Robert Brain (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), pp. 152–185.

20. Lévi-Strauss enables his structuralist reinterpretation of “totemism” precisely by dividing off overly particularistic or singular religious objects from the “true” class of totems; these are the fetishes that, unconnected with clan identity or whole species, are uninteresting because socially less significant, at least according to the structuralist. See *Totemism*, trans. Rodney Needham (Boston: Beacon, 1963).

21. “Tout fétiche apparaît donc comme une des deux limites du symbolisme. . . . Le fétiche d’un côté, le mot abstrait de l’autre

15. See Charles de Brosses, *Du Culte des dieux fétiches, ou parallèle de l’ancienne religion de l’Egypte avec la religion actuelle de Nigritie* (Geneva, 1760). De Brosses claims that Africans’ fetishes can be “le premier objet qui flatte leur caprice” [“the first object which strikes their fancy”] (p. 21) and hence that the “manner of thinking” involved is not “figurism” or allegory or even Euhemerist distortion but something more arbitrary because based on contingency (chance encounter).

16. “Le Fétichisme dans l’amour,” *Revue Philosophique* (1887), vol. XXIV, pp. 142–167, 252–274.

17. In *The Voyages of Cadamosto, and other documents on Western Africa in the second half of the fifteenth century*, ed. and trans. G. R. Crone (London: Hakluyt Society, 1937), p. 68.

objectivity of the fetish, however, these theories tend to dismiss the problem of the relation of the fetish to the individual person (just as psychological and psychoanalytic theories ignore the social dimension of the fetish). Both Marxist and structuralist theory view the fetish as situated at the point at which objective institutional systems are "personified" by individuals, and this in two senses: first, an order of material entities (the market, natural species) is understood to constitute the order of personal relations (social production, culture), thereby establishing a determinate consciousness of the "natural value" of social objects; second, personal activity comes to be directed by the impersonal logic of such abstract relations, as guided by the institutionalized systems of material signifiers of value arranged according to this logic.

Fetish discourse about the relations of the personal individual to the material fetish object is characterized by an even more basic theme, however: that of the embodied status of the individual. The labor theory of value is only one example of this theme of the fetish as relating the activity of the embodied individual to the value of material objects. One way in which the medieval Portuguese *feitiço* was distinguished from the *idolo* was that, whereas the idol was conceived as a freestanding statue, the fetish was typically some fabricated object to be worn about the body. Moreover, the idea of the idol emphasized worship of a false god or demonic spirit, whereas *feitiços* were practiced to achieve certain tangible effects (such as healing) upon or in service of the user. The fourth theme found in the idea of the fetish is, then, that of the subjection of the human body (as the material locus of action and desire) to the influence of certain significant material objects that, although cut off from the body, function as its controlling organs at certain moments. It was, of course, psychoanalysis that developed most fully this theme of the effective symbolization of the sexual human body "fixated" in relation to certain material things. In modernist art, the surrealist object was often constructed to be a material thing that resonated throughout all the registers (ethnographic, Marxist, psychoanalytic, and modernist) of fetish discourse by appearing as a perversely anthropomorphized or sexualized thing. The appeal by social scientists to surrealist theory to explain the efficacy of traditional

African healing practices might be viewed as a nice closure of the historical circle developing this theme.²²

The truth of the fetish

In this discussion of the problem of the fetish I have tried only to delineate the most basic themes that recur throughout the history of fetish discourse: irreducible materiality; a fixed power to repeat an original event of singular synthesis or ordering; the institutional construction of consciousness of the social value of things; and the material fetish as an object established in an intense relation to and with power over the desires, actions, health, and self-identity of individuals whose personhood is conceived as inseparable from their bodies. These themes might now be used to guide an investigation of the history of fetish theory that would try to understand in what way these ideas form a unity and why this unique "problem-idea" emerged out of this particular historical situation — a mercantile cross-cultural space of transvaluation between material objects of radically different social orders. Since the interest of studying this history lies in its general theoretical implications, however, it is perhaps appropriate here to attempt a preliminary sketch of the theory of the fetish as may be derived from the history of fetish theory.

First, let us agree that from the standpoint of particularist ethnography, structural sociology, and institutional history, "fetish" must be considered a factitious universal. The term "fetish" has never been a component in a "discursive formation" (in Foucault's sense in *Archaeology of Knowledge*, the exception being the sexual fetish of twentieth-century medical-psychiatric discourse). Unlike, say, the *suman* in Ashanti society or the *nkisi* in Kongo society (or, for that matter, the Eucharist in Christian culture), the fetish has never enjoyed the social actuality of being an institutionally defined object within a particular culture or social order. (I would, however, argue that *Fetisso* was a central term in routinized practices and discourse on the West African coast from the sixteenth century on — but these cross-cultural spaces were not societies or cultures in any conventional sense.) From this standpoint, the fetish must be viewed as proper to no historical field other than that of the history of the word itself, and to no

déterminent le champ symbolique; ils font partie du même système qu'ils fondent ensemble" (Jean Pouillon, *Fétiches sans fétichisme* [Paris: Maspero, 1975], p. 119).

22. Ousmane Silla, "Langage et techniques thérapeutiques des cultes de possession des Lébou du Sénégal," *Bulletin de l'I. F. A. N.*, vol. XXXI, ser. B, no. 1 (1969): 217.

discrete society or culture, but to a cross-cultural situation formed by the ongoing encounter of the value codes of radically different social orders. In Marxist terms, one might say that the fetish is situated in the space of cultural revolution,²³ as the place where the truth of the object as fetish is revealed.²⁴

In what sense, then, is there such a thing as a fetish? If “fetish” does name some specific “problem-idea,” what is the truth it names?

In a 1929 note on the sculpture of Giacometti, Michel Leiris speaks of “le fétichisme qui, comme aux temps les plus anciens, reste à la base de notre existence humaine” and of the power of certain exceptional art works to respond to this “vrai fétichisme”:

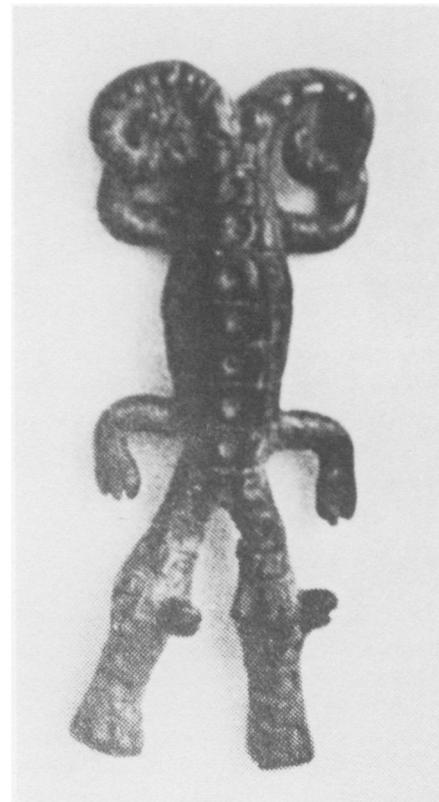
C'est à peine si, dans le domaine des oeuvres d'art, on trouve quelques objets (tableaux ou sculpture) capable de répondre à peu près aux exigences de ce vrai fétichisme, c'est-à-dire à l'amour — réellement amoureux — de nous-mêmes, projeté du dedans au dehors et revêtu d'une carapace solide qui l'emprisonne entre les limites d'une chose précise et le situe, ainsi qu'un meuble dont nous pouvons user, dans la vaste chambre étrangère qui s'appelle l'espace.²⁵

23. See Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), pp. 95–97.

24. This is precisely Marx's point in the first chapter of *Capital* when he writes that “the whole mystery of commodities, all the magic and necromancy that surrounds the products of labour on the basis of commodity production, vanishes [or is revealed as fetishism] as soon as we come to other forms of production” (*Capital*, vol. I, trans. Ben Fowkes [New York: Random House, 1977], p. 169). Marx's constant use of religious terminology to critically characterize commodity ideology, and vice versa, was the expression of a comparative method for critically analyzing the value system of one type of society by framing it in terms of the value systems of societies with other modes of production. As I hope to discuss in another essay, the rhetorical structure of this analytic method is evident in Marx's earliest uses of the term “fetish” (in 1842 after reading a German translation of de Brosses's book). As Lucio Colletti states in his criticism of the Marxism of the Second International, “Marx's theory of value is identical to his theory of fetishism” (Colletti's italics; *From Rousseau to Lenin: Studies in Ideology and Society*, trans. John Merrington and Judith White [London: NLB, 1972], p. 77). The theory of fetishism is the theory of value articulated from that comparative standpoint located (if only in imagination as with the young Marx) at the point of encounter between the values and value-consciousness of societies with different modes of production (say, at the point of conflict between peasant feudal privileges and bourgeois property rights in criminal cases concerning the “theft” of firewood in the Rhinelands, as judged from the value perspective of Afro-Caribbean society).

25. Michel Leiris, “Alberto Giacometti,” *Documents*, vol. I, no. 4 (1929): 209. My thanks to James Clifford for showing me this indispensable little text.

The “true fetishism which remains at the base of our human existence” is here called “a love — truly amoureux [infatuated] — of ourselves, projected from inside to outside and clothed in a solid carapace which imprisons it within the limits of a precise thing and situates it, like a piece of furniture [*meuble*, a movable property] which we can use in that strange, vast room called space.” The fetish is, then, first of all, something intensely personal, whose truth is experienced as a substantial movement from “inside” the self (the self as totalized through an impassioned body, a “body without



Two crocodiles with one body, Akan goldweight (reproduced from Garrard, *Akan Weights and the Gold Trade*, 1980, p. 283). This figure refers to a famous Asante proverb: “The ‘two-headed crocodiles’ have but one belly, yet when either of them get anything, they fight among themselves for it, for though they have but one belly for each of their separate heads, each wants the food to pass down its own throat” (translated by R. S. Rattray in *Ashanti Proverbs*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1914, p. 66). Garrard glosses the moral to be: “Relatives should not quarrel for all belong to one family and depend on it for their well-being.” According to Rattray, “This clever metaphor clearly states the ideas of a communistic people.”

organs'') into the self-limited morphology of a material object situated in space "outside." Works of art are true fetishes only if they are material objects at least as intensely personal as the water of tears:

. . . les gouttes d'eau, jolies petites sphères liquides susceptible au moins de nous rappeler la forme, sinon le goût, de nos larmes, et cette humidité, cette fluidité correspondant à la douceur qui coule dans nos membres, quand nous aimons ou bien quand nous nous sentons touchés.²⁶

The teardrop or the fetish object "corresponds" by "recalling" the amorous flow or sense of being touched within the embodied self as this was made conscious in singular moments of "crisis" in which the identity of the self is called into question, put at risk, by a sudden encounter with the life of the outside world:

Il y a des moments qu'on peut appeler des crises qui sont les seuls qui importent dans une vie. Il s'agit des moments où le dehors semble brusquement répondre à la sommation que nous lui lançons du dedans, où le monde extérieur s'ouvre pour qu'entre notre cœur et lui s'établisse une soudaine communication.²⁷

These crisis moments of singular encounter and indefinable transaction between the life of the self and that of the world become fixed, in both places and things, and as personal memories that retain a peculiar power to move one profoundly.

Leiris continues:

J'ai quelques souvenirs de cet ordre dans ma vie et tous se rapportent à des événements en apparence futiles, dénués aussi de valeur symbolique et, si l'on veut, gratuits: dans une rue lumineuse de Montmartre, une négresse de la troupe des Black Birds tenant un bouquet de roses humides dans ses deux mains, un paquebot à bord duquel je me trouvais monté se séparant lentement d'un quai, quelques bribes de chansons murmurées au hasard, la rencontre dans une ruine de Grèce d'un étrange animal qui devait être une sorte de lézard géant. . . . La poésie ne peut se dégager que de telles "crises", et seules content les oeuvres qui en fournissent des équivalents.²⁸

26. Leiris, p. 209 ("drops of water, pretty little liquid spheres able to call back at least the form, if not the drop, of our tears, and this moisture, this fluidity corresponds to the sweetness which flows in our limbs when we love or just when we feel touched").

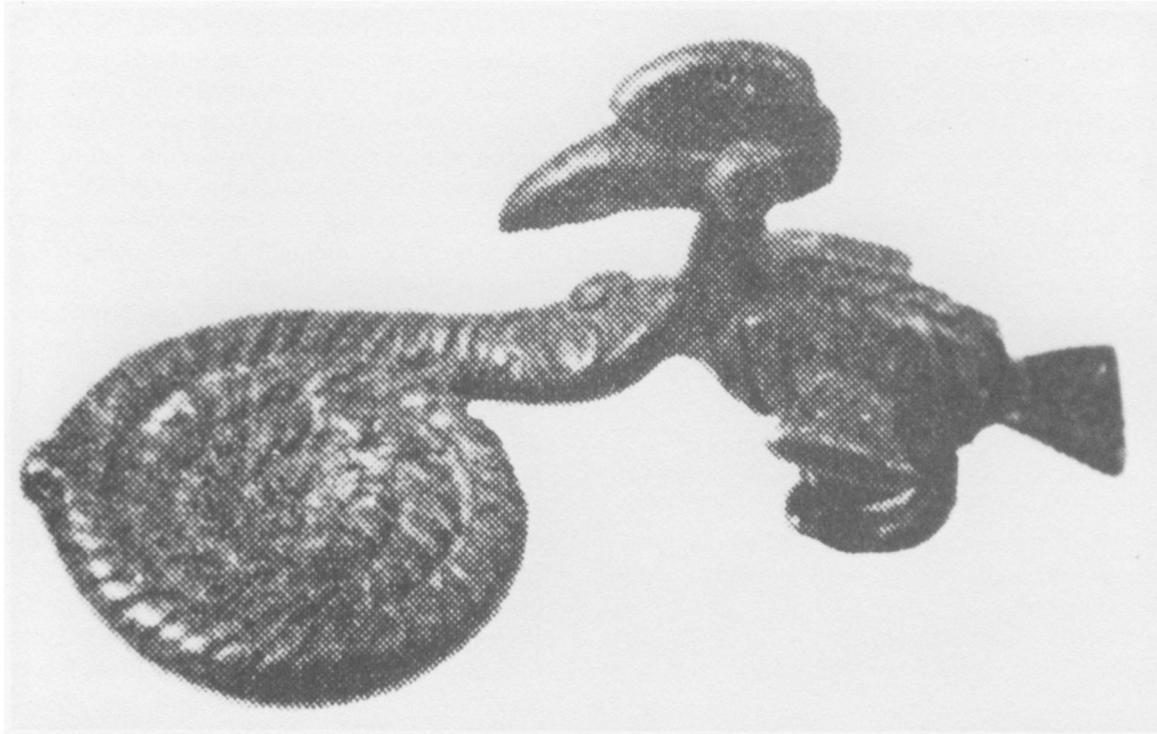
27. Leiris, p. 209 ("there are moments which one can call the crises which alone are important in a life. These are moments when the outside seems abruptly to respond to the sum of what we throw forth from within, when the exterior world opens to encounter our heart and establishes a sudden communication with it").

28. Leiris, p. 209 ("I have some memories of this order in my own life, and all relate to events which were in appearance futile and

The quality Leiris attributes to these four vivid memories of crisis is that of being "gratuitous," unmotivated and unearned, and in appearance "futile" — perhaps because such encounters lack any adequate formal code to transform them into meaningful communications or coherent narrations. Such a singularly fixating encounter is "stripped of all symbolic value" and, paradoxically because of this degradation from any recognizable value code, becomes a crisis moment of infinite value, expressing the sheer incommensurable togetherness of the living existence of the personal self and the living otherness of the material world.

Such a crisis brings together and fixes into a singularly resonant unified intensity an unrepeatable event (permanent in memory), a particular object or arrangement of objects, and a localized space. Were one to elaborate a theory of the fetish, one might then adopt the following as fundamental categories: historicization, territorialization, reification, and personalization. The fetish is always a meaningful fixation of a singular event; it is above all a "historical" object, the enduring material form and force of an unrepeatable event. This object is "territorialized" in material space (an earthly matrix), whether in the form of a geographical locality, a marked site on the surface of the human body, or a medium of inscription or configuration defined by some portable or wearable thing. The historical object is territorialized in the form of a "reification": some thing (*meuble*) or shape whose status is that of a self-contained entity identifiable within the territory. It is recognizable as a discrete thing (a *res*) because of its status as a significant object within the value codes proper to the productive and ideological systems of a given society. This reified, territorialized historical object is also "personalized" in the sense that beyond its status as a collective social object it evokes an intensely personal response from individuals. This intense relation to the individual's experience of his or her own living self through an impassioned response to the fetish object is always incommensurable with (whether in a way that reinforces or undercuts) the social value codes within which the fetish holds the

stripped of symbolic value and, if one wishes, *gratuitous*: in a luminous street of Montmartre, a Negress of the Black Birds dance troop holding a bouquet of damp roses in her two hands, a steamer on board which I found myself standing slowly separating itself from a quay, some snatches of song murmured at random, the encounter in a Greek ruin with a strange animal which seemed to be a sort of giant lizard. . . . Poetry expresses itself only out of such 'crises,' and only those works count which furnish their equivalents").



Puff-adder with hornbill, Akan goldweight (reproduced from Garrard, op. cit., p. 296). "The puff-adder on the ground has caught the hornbill," an Asante proverb that, according to Garrard, can have two meanings: (1) "A man should not despair of getting anything, however difficult it may seem"; (2) "Behave well and be kind to others, for one day you may need to depend on their kindness." The proverb refers to the following folktale: "The hornbill had a mother-in-law who was always troubling him for money, or so he said. So he went to borrow money from the puff-adder. But the hornbill failed to repay the money on the appointed day. The snake saw other birds in the bush, and asked them to tell the hornbill to pay his debt. On hearing that the snake wanted his money, the hornbill sent back a scornful message that if the snake was brave he should fly up into the trees to get his money. The snake took this quietly, but told the other birds to inform the hornbill that it only takes a day to catch a thief. Now it soon happened that the streams and ponds began to run dry, for the sun was very hot, and when the hornbill came down to drink he could only find one tiny stream just behind the puff-adder's house. The snake looked out and chanced to see the hornbill there, so he darted out and seized him by the leg 'You told me to fly up for my money, and I did not ask you to fly down. Now I meet you on the ground, so I will have my money by all means.' The hornbill started weeping, and pleaded with all the other animals to intercede for him. They all pleaded but the snake refused to let him go. He wept and pleaded, but was not forgiven. Only after a long time did he manage to escape from the snake, and that is why he always flies very high in the sky, because he fears the puff-adder" (Garrard, op. cit., pp. 205–206).

status of a material signifier. It is in those "disavowals" and "perspectives of flight" whose possibility is opened by the clash of this incommensurable difference that the fetish might be identified as the site of both the formation and the revelation of ideology and value-consciousness.

Each fetish is a singular articulated identification (an "Appropriation," *Ereigenes*, in Heidegger's language²⁹)

29. See especially Heidegger's "The Principle of Identity" in *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper and Row, 1969).

unifying events, places, things, and people, and then returning them to their separate spheres (temporal occurrence, terrestrial space, social being, and personal existence). Certain structured relationships — some conscious, others unconscious — are established, constituting the phenomenological fabric (the "flesh" in Merleau-Ponty's sense in *The Visible and the Invisible*) of immediate prereflective experience. As Deleuze says, "The fetish is the natural object of social consciousness as common sense or recognition of value."³⁰ Fetishes

30. See n. 8.

exist in the world as material objects that “naturally” embody socially significant values that touch one or more individuals in an intensely personal way: a flag, monument, or landmark; a talisman, medicine-bundle, or sacramental object; an earring, tattoo, or cockade; a city, village, or nation; a shoe, lock of hair, or phallus; a Giacometti sculpture or Duchamp’s *Large Glass*. Each has that quality of synecdochic fragmentedness or “detotalized totality” characteristic of the recurrent, material collective object discussed by Sartre.³¹

If the fetish, as theorized out of the entire history of the term itself, can be taken as a name for the total collective material object, at once social and personal, then Merleau-Ponty is right in saying that “tout objet historique est fétiche.” This may also be read, however, in the sense that the fetish is a special type of collective object that reveals the truth of all historical objects, just as for Heidegger the work of art *reveals* and hence *is* the truth of “the thing.”³²

The fetish might then be viewed as the locus of a sort of primary and carnal rhetoric of identification and

31. “When we say there are only men and real relations (for Merleau-Ponty I add things also, and animals, etc. [such a large et cetera!]), we mean only that we must expect to find the support of collective objects in the concrete activity of individuals. We do not intend to deny the reality of these objects, but we claim that it is parasitical. . . . Marxism remains uncertain as to the nature and origin of these ‘collectives’. The theory of fetishism, outlined by Marx, has never been developed; furthermore it could not be extended to cover all social realities. Thus Marxism, while rejecting organicism, lacks weapons against it. . . . It is necessary to take up the study of collectives again from the beginning and to demonstrate that these objects, far from being characterized by a direct unity of a *consensus*, represent perspectives of flight. . . . For us the reality of the collective object rests on *recurrence* [repetition of the same property within the members of a series]. It demonstrates that the totalization is never achieved and that the totality exists at best only in the form of *detotalized totality*. [In the sense, as Sartre writes a few pages later, that ‘a city is a material and social organization which derives its reality from the ubiquity of its absence. It is present in each of its streets *insofar* as it is always elsewhere. . . .’] As such these collectives exist. They are revealed immediately in action and in perception. In each one of them we shall always find a concrete materiality (a movement, the head office, a building, a word, etc.) which supports and manifests a flight which eats it away. I need only open my window: I see a church, a bank, a cafe — three collectives. This thousand-franc bill is another; still another is the newspaper I have just bought. . . . Marxism has never been concerned to study these objects for themselves; that is, on all levels of social life” (Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes [New York: Random House, 1968], pp. 78, 80).

32. See Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), pp. 17–87.

disavowal that establishes conscious and unconscious value judgments connecting territorialized social things and embodied personal individuals within a series of singular historical fixations. It would thus be the site of articulation both of ideological reification and hypostasis, and of impassioned spontaneous criticism. Leiris speaks of the “true fetishism” only while in the same breath criticizing the “bad fetishism” of “the meager phantoms that are moral, logical, and social imperatives . . . a fetishism transposed, falsely resembling the one which profoundly animates us. . . .”³³

The discourse of the fetish has always been a critical discourse about the false objective values of a culture from which the speaker is personally distanced. Such was the rhetorical force of negative revaluation when Portuguese Catholics named African religious and social objects *feitiços*, and such was the force when commodity-minded Dutch, French, and English Protestants identified African religious objects and Catholic sacramental objects equally as fetishes, thereby preparing the way for the general fetish theory of the Enlightenment. This negative critical force continued as part of the word throughout the various nineteenth- and twentieth-century discourses about the fetish. “Fetish” has always named the incomprehensible mystery of the power of material things to be collective social objects experienced by individuals as truly embodying determinate values or virtues, always as judged from a cross-cultural perspective of relative infinite degradation, “dénusés de valeur symbolique.” Fetish discourse always posits this double consciousness of absorbed credulity and degraded or distanced incredulity. The site of this latter disillusioned judgment by its very nature seems to represent a power of the ultimate degradation and, by implication, of the radical creation of value. Because of this it holds an illusory attractive power of its own: that of seeming to be that Archimedian point of man at last “more open and cured of his obsessions,”³⁴ the impossible home of a man without fetishes.

The historical field of the fetish

The preceding section elaborated a tentative theoretical model of the fetish out of the diverse themes fundamental to the history of fetish discourse. From the

33. Leiris, p. 209 (“de maigres fantômes qui sont nos impératifs moraux, logiques, et sociaux . . . un fétichisme transposé, faux semblant de celui qui profondément nous anime . . .”).

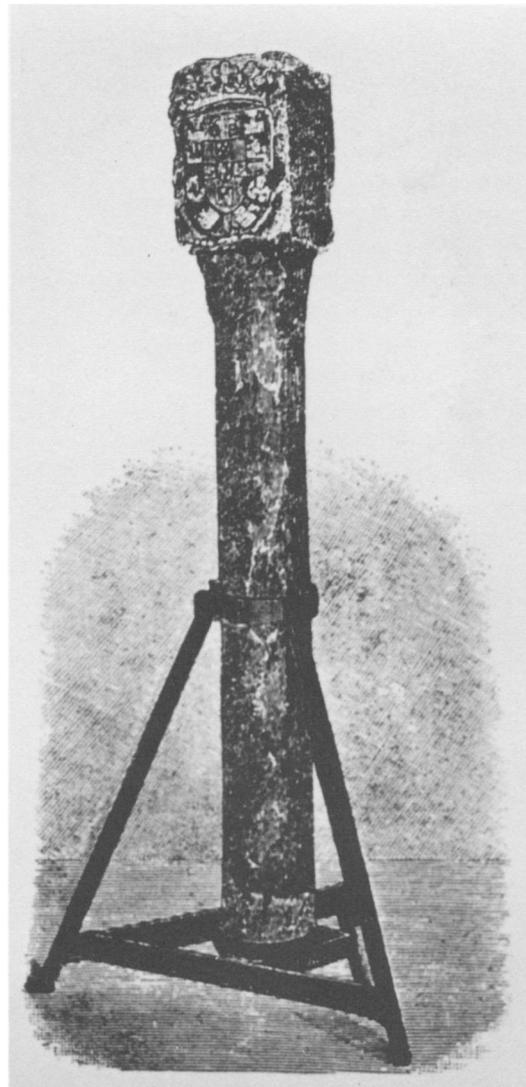
34. Michel Leiris, *L’Afrique fantôme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), p. 3.

theme of the essential materiality of the fetish — that is, the fetish is precisely *not* a material signifier referring beyond itself, but acts as a material space gathering an otherwise unconnected multiplicity into the unity of its enduring singularity — the category of “territorialization” was established. From the fetish’s essential power of singular fixation and ordering repetition there emerged the peculiar “historicization” proper to the fetish. The term “reification” formalizes the fundamental theme of the institutionalized or routinized³⁵ codes of social value between which a given fetish provides a determinate structure of mediation. “Personalization” provides a name for the dimension of the reified object’s power to fix identifications and disavowals that ground the self-identity of particular, concrete individuals. The ultimate usefulness of this model depends on its applicability outside the historical field of fetish discourse as presently constituted; such application lies outside the scope of the present project.

Even if this conception of the fetish as an analytic model proves unsatisfactory, the present historical project stands on its own. This theoretical introduction to the study of the historical problem of the fetish should then conclude with a delineation of the historical field to be studied.

The field is defined first of all by the usage of the word itself. As I have already argued, this is the only approach that preserves the specificity of the problem, since it does not reduce the notion of the fetish to one or another (particular or universalist) metacode. This historicolinguistic approach makes it impossible to say whether a given object is or is not a fetish in any simple, ahistorical sense. For instance, it is only from the perspective of twentieth-century medicojuridical discourses about sexual fetishism that the case of Rétif de la Bretonne can be considered one of fetishism. Although for these discourses Rétif was the classic shoe fetishist (some psychiatric dictionaries of the second quarter of the twentieth century even preferred the term “Rétifism” to “fetishism”), the usage of *fétichisme*

35. It is perhaps worth mentioning here that it was because of his focus on routinization that Max Weber had little interest in the problem of the fetish, which he mentioned only once (in the opening pages of his *Sociology of Religion*) as a kind of objective correlate of charismatic authority. Durkheim’s lack of interest in the term derives from the same source as Weber’s: both were concerned with nonsubjective, sociological determinants of social existence, and after 1887 the new (to Durkheim and Weber overly subjectivist) social science of psychology had appropriated the term “fetishism.”



Padrão of Saint Augustine, erected by Diogo Cão in 1482 on Cape Saint Mary, Angola, now at the Lisbon Geographical Society (drawing from *História da Expansão Portuguesa no Mundo*, eds. António Baião, Hernani Cidade, and Manuel Muñias, vol. I, Lisbon, Editorial Atica, 1937, plate opposite p. 374). Nowell (*A History of Portugal*, p. 54) translates the inscription on this pillar: “Year of the creation of the world six thousand 681, year of the birth of Our Lord Jesus Christ one thousand four hundred 82, the very high, very excellent and powerful prince King Joao second of Portugal sent to have this land discovered and these *padrões* placed by Diogo Cão, squire of his household.”

during Rétif’s lifetime did not denote sexual perversities of the sort that characterized Rétif’s desire. Our approach, then, must respect the specific sense of the

term in any given period or situation in order to grasp the theoretical implications of the term's specific usages within an overall perspective on the history of fetish theory.

Despite the necessary restriction to the history of the word itself, the unifying principle of the notion of the fetish does not derive from the ground of discourse, of the "logos." This essay instead argues that the problem-idea of the fetish arose within and remains specific to a particular type of cross-cultural experience first engaging European consciousness in ongoing situations on the West African coast after the fifteenth century.

Within these philological and historical parameters, objects traditionally considered fetishes, such as the famous Kongo nail fetishes or the *suman* of the Akan-speaking peoples of West Africa, must be situated in the cross-cultural problematic proper to the application of the term "fetish" to these objects. This approach also requires, however, that objects at times termed "fetishes" that were produced specifically within these cross-cultural situations be considered as well. Examples include, from the non-European side, such productions as the Akan goldweights and, from the European side, objects such as the fifteenth-century *padrões* of the Portuguese king John II. Both, at least in some instances, were accepted as fetishes by those on the other side of the cultural barrier. The Akan goldweights were a direct cultural response to the impact of gold-seeking European (and Arab) traders, and to the resulting quasimonetarization of domestic Akan economy through the circulation of gold dust as a measure and store of value. In a fine recent study of the little brass figures used as counterweights in gold weighing, Timothy F. Garrard writes that

the primary purpose of goldweights was for use in trade, but some of the figurative weights could serve other purposes. They were occasionally worn by sick children to restore them to good health, and also as charms or amulets to bring good fortune or to preserve the wearer from harm. . . . In Ghana it is sometimes said that these weights could be sent to a person as "messages," the particular proverb associated with the form of the weight serving as a reminder of some debt or obligation, or as a warning, a piece of advice or a token of friendship.³⁶

36. Timothy F. Garrard, *Akan Weights and the Gold Trade*, (London: Longman, 1980), p. 201. Garrard quotes the following document recording the account of a local man: "'As a white man writes a letter, so do we send these weights to one another. *The Crab's*

The goldweights, then, functioned precisely to relate incommensurable social values, those from traditional Akan culture as expressed in proverbs or traditional healing, with the newer market values introduced from outside. The brass figures constituted a new cultural territory embodying the possibility of movement across diverse value codes: the weights were singular productions of Akan artists (students of these objects often remark on the seeming infinity of different forms given to these figures) that could function in the market activity of gold weighing, communicate the traditional wisdom of some native proverb, or be endowed with power to protect or to heal sick individuals when worn upon the body.

A comparable example from the European side is the fifteenth-century *padrão dos Descobrimentos*. In 1482, with the revival of Portuguese exploration of the African coast under John II, Diogo Cão made his first voyage, reaching the Congo and Angola for the first time. The *padrões* were monumental stone markers carried on board ship and set up on newly discovered river mouths and capes both as claims of possession and as navigational landmarks.³⁷ For example, at Cape Saint Mary in Angola, to mark the farthest southward point of his voyage, Cão set up the *padrão de Santo Agostinho*, a pillar with an inscribed square capitol: the side facing north bore the arms of the royal house of Portugal; the west face situated the moment of erection in time

Claw. As you know, the crab is a very tenacious animal, and what he once holds with his claw he will never let go; even though it becomes severed from the body, it will still hold on, until crushed to atoms. If I were to send this to another chief, who had done me an injury, he would at once know what I meant, without a long palaver, and if he meant to compensate me, send me some suitable weight in return; if not, another crab's claw, then that meant that we would have to fight'" (p. 202).

37. The pioneering work on the *padrões* is Luciano Cordeiro, *Descobertas e Descobridores, Diogo Cão* (Lisbon: 1892). In *A History of Portugal* (New York: Van Nostrand, 1952), Charles E. Nowell writes, "In Prince Henry's time the voyagers had sometimes marked their discoveries with wooden crosses or carvings on trees, but these were perishable monuments. Diogo Cão's *padrões* were made of *lioz*, a kind of limestone marble quarried near Lisbon. A cross surmounted the pillar, but the most important part was the shaft, because on it would be found carved the discoverer's name, the date of discovery, and the name of the king sending out the expedition. Much of the *padrão* could be prepared before leaving home, but a few details, such as the date, had to be left until the time of erecting the pillar. Needless to say, it was planted firmly enough to withstand all foreseeable weather conditions" (p. 53).

reckoned in relation to the death of Christ; the south face situated the moment of the pillar's fixing in the time of the reign of John II; and the east side declared the act of fixing the pillar in place to be the deed of the Portuguese noble Diogo Cão. The *padrão* thus functioned to territorialize the codes of Christianity and Portuguese feudalism into the African landscape, thereby "reifying" this space in terms of these value codes through Cão's singular noble act of founding. As in cases such as that of the *padrão de S. Jorge* set up at the mouth of the Congo River, a pillar might come to be accepted as a mark of enduring Portuguese presence by local Africans; the Europeans understood that the

Africans had come to regard the *padrão* as a fetish.³⁸

I have concluded part I of this essay with these two examples of the Akan goldweights and the Portuguese *padrões* simply to indicate some of the less familiar objects proper to the historical field of the fetish. Adequate discussion of these objects must await their treatment within the complex historical context that will be explored in part II.

38. "That [the *padrão*] of St. George at the mouth of the Congo served as a fetish until 1859 when some British seamen, attempting to remove it, dropped it overboard" (H. V. Livermore, *A New History of Portugal* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967], p. 129).