

The problem of the fetish, II

The origin of the fetish

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In the first part of this essay (Res 9) I argued that the terms “fetish” and “fetishism” have marked a specific problem-idea for modern social theory as it has developed since the Enlightenment. Despite the use of this terminology in a variety of disciplines that claim no common theoretical ground—ethnography and the history of religion, Marxism and positivist sociology, psychoanalysis and the clinical psychiatry of sexual deviance, modernist aesthetics and Continental philosophy—there is a common configuration of themes among the various discourses about fetishism. Four themes consistently inform the idea of the fetish: (1) the untranscended materiality of the fetish: “matter,” or the material object, is viewed as the locus of religious activity or psychic investment; (2) the radical historicity of the fetish’s origin: arising in a singular event fixing together otherwise heterogeneous elements, the identity and power of the fetish consists in its enduring capacity to repeat this singular process of fixation, along with the resultant effect; (3) the dependence of the fetish for its meaning and value on a particular order of social relations, which it in turn reinforces; and (4) the active relation of the fetish object to the living body of an individual: a kind of external controlling organ directed by powers outside the affected person’s will, the fetish represents a subversion of the ideal of the autonomously determined self. (“Fetishism” treats the self as necessarily and in essence embodied.)

If the history of the idea of fetishism that I am attempting to write has any interest, it is due to the appropriation of this word as a theoretical term by many of the major social thinkers of the nineteenth century (a “long” nineteenth century extending from Kant to Freud, that is, from Enlightenment to Modernism). The human sciences that constituted themselves in this period (sociology, anthropology, psychology) did so in part by taking a position in the ongoing debate over the explanation of the history and nature of religion proposed by the theory of fetishism. This theory was fully established in European intellectual discourse by 1800, having been formulated during the period of the Encyclopedists (the 1750s and 1760s). I believe that a study of the theoretical use of

“fetish” and “fetishism” will illuminate in a fresh manner the mentality of nineteenth-century cosmopolitan social theorists and the distinctive problematic expressed in their arguments regarding materialism, history, value, and culture.

In the present essay, I trace the origin of the distinctive notion of the fetish. The eighteenth-century intellectuals who articulated the theory of fetishism encountered this notion in descriptions of “Guinea” contained in such popular voyage collections as Ramusio’s *Viaggio e Navigazioni* (1550), de Bry’s *India Orientalis* (1597), Purchas’s *Hakluytus Posthumus* (1625), Churchill’s *Collection of Voyages and Travels* (1732), Astley’s *A New General Collection of Voyages and Travels* (1746), and Prévost’s *Histoire générale des voyages* (1748). The configuration of themes and explanatory concepts peculiar to the idea of the fetish originated on the coast of West Africa—especially along the coast from present-day Ghana to Nigeria—during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The idea first appears in the pidgin word “Fetisso.” Basically a middleman’s word, it brought a wide array of African objects and practices under a category that, for all its misrepresentation of cultural facts, enabled the formation of more-or-less noncoercive commercial relations between members of bewilderingly different cultures. Out of this practical discourse about “Fetissos” and “fatish-oaths,” Protestant merchants visiting the coast elaborated a general explanation of African social order as being based on the principles underlying the worship of Fetissos.

The alienness of African culture, in particular its resistance to “rational” trade relations, was explained in terms of the African’s supposed irrational propensity to personify material (and especially European technological) objects, thereby revealing a false understanding of natural causality. A complementary principle said to characterize Africans was their supposed attribution of causal relation to random association. This intellectual error of understanding causality through principles of chance encounter and personification (more generally, anthropomorphization) was considered responsible for the Africans’ alleged distorted manner of valuing material objects, their

superstitious religious practices, and their perverse social order, which (especially after the emergence of the African slave-trading “gun-powder empires” in the late seventeenth century) was perceived by Europeans to be based on fear, credulity, and violence. The fundamental question that determined both the perception of the problem and the terms of its explanation concerned how material objects as such could embody any sort of religious, aesthetic, sexual, or social value at all (i.e., any value not expressing the material object’s “real” instrumental and market values).

The idea of the fetish originated in a mercantile intercultural space created by the ongoing trade relations between cultures so radically different as to be mutually incomprehensible. It is proper to neither West African nor Christian European culture. Given that our interest in the idea concerns its significance for European social theory, in this essay I focus on the distinctiveness of the notion in European discourse. (I am not concerned here with the relation of the fetish idea to the actual conceptions of West African culture.) I do this by tracing the etymology of the word “fetish” itself from Latin *facticius* to Portuguese *feitiço*, attending in particular to its usage in Christian theology and jurisprudence. By considering Christian notions of idolatry, superstition, and witchcraft, it will be easier to show the novelty of the idea of the “Fetisso,” which developed on the West African coast. While the notion of the “Fetisso” centered on concepts of personified things and chance conjuncture, Christian notions of witchcraft centered on concepts of manufactured resemblance and voluntary contract. I conclude by examining three phases of the development of the novel idea of the fetish: the coming of the Portuguese to black Africa in the fifteenth century and their initial application of *feitiço* and *feitiçaria* to African objects and practices; the development of the pidgin “Fetisso” by middlemen groups outside the Portuguese empire during the sixteenth century; and the treatment of the term in Protestant—especially Dutch—texts in the seventeenth century, culminating in the influential 1704 account of Willem Bosman.

“Facticius” in Christian theology: idolatry and superstition

The terms *feitiço*, *feiticeiro*, and *feitiçaria*, which were part of the vocabulary of the fifteenth-century Portuguese who sailed to West Africa, referred,

respectively, to the objects, persons, and practice proper to witchcraft. To understand the Christian idea of witchcraft, it is necessary to consider its relation to the notions of idolatry and superstition, as these were elaborated within the essential ideological tension determined by Christianity’s central concepts of creation, incarnation, and salvation. The Christian theory of witchcraft, as it related to fetish objects, was determined by theological explanations regarding the false sacramental objects of superstition. These explanations were integrated with only partial success into the church’s general theory of idolatry, whose logic required that material “idols” have the status of fraudulent manufactured resemblances. The descriptive inadequacy of the discourse of “idolatry” led to the development of a distinct terminology of witchcraft (*fehçeria*, in Iberian languages of the time) in the Middle Ages.

Since I am also tracing the etymology of the word “fetish” itself, I begin with its development prior to its entry into Christian discourse about idolatry.

The pan-European word whose English version is “fetish” derives linguistically from the Latin *facticius* or *factitius*, an adjective formed from the past participle of the verb *facere*, “to make.”¹ The adjective *facticius* seems to have gained currency as a term in Roman commercial language around the Augustan period. So, at least, its early appearance in Pliny (ca. A.D. 23–79) would indicate. In Pliny’s *Natural History*, *facticius* means “manufactured.” It characterizes “man-made” commodities in contrast to goods produced through purely natural processes (that is, goods merely collected and sold without being shaped or otherwise altered by human effort). For instance, Pliny distinguishes between two types of ladanum (an aromatic gum): the first type, from Arabia, he terms “natural” (*terrenum*) since the gum was produced from certain plants which at times dripped sap onto the ground below, where the fluid

1. The past participle *factum*, of course, means “made.” *Facticius* was formed by joining the past participial stem *fact-* to the adjectival suffix of condition, quality, or state *-icius*, which is an enlarged form of the usual adjectival suffix *-ius*. This suffixal form, with the intensifying enlargement *-ic-*, seems to have been used to stress the enduring, substantial, or final character of the completed action named by the verb; the suffix was also added to certain substantives denoting building materials—*caementicius* means “made of *caementum*” (a crude cement) and *latericius* “constructed of brickwork.” These terms, like *facticius*, appear to have developed in Roman mercantile discourse pertaining to the manufactured commodity.

coagulated and could be collected in solid form. These dusty lumps of Arabian ladanum were distinguished from the cakes made in Cyprus, where the juice was sweated out of plants that had been rolled into bundles and tied with strings. Pliny terms these Cyprian cakes "artificial" (*facticium* rather than *terrenum*).²

In a slightly different usage, the adjective designated the character of the product itself rather than the fact of its artificial production. Natural and manufactured varieties of the same commodity might differ in certain particulars: for example, natural ladanum was friable, Pliny tells us, whereas artificial ladanum was tough. Difference in qualitative appearance could mean difference in substantive value as well:

. . . some people distinguish in twofold fashion between the mined [*fossile*] flower of copper and the manufactured [*facticium*], the latter being paler than the former and as much inferior in quality as in color.

(Pliny, 220 [Bk. 34, sec. 125])

Here a difference between natural and artificial production causes differences in appearance (color) of the thing produced, and this visible difference is itself the index of a difference in value (or "virtue" in that word's original sense) between the two varieties of the good.

But if it is possible, in such cases and more generally, for appearance to be the index of value of a useful substance, it is consequently possible for an unscrupulous entrepreneur to "manufacture" a commodity, not in its substance but in its counterfeited appearance. That is, in commodity exchange, appearance as the signifier of useful value can become a value in itself in the special case of commercial fraud. The final meaning of *facticius* found in Pliny pertains to such cases. In discussing the reddish "flower of salt" normally found along the Nile or on the surface of certain springs, Pliny cautions:

It is adulterated too and colored by red ochre, or usually by ground crockery; this sham is detected by water, which washes out the artificial [*facticium*] color, while the genuine [*verus*] is only removed by oil. . . .

(Pliny, 434 [Bk. 31, sec. 42])

Here *facticium* means "artificial" in the sense of "materially altered by human effort in order to deceive," that is, "factitious" as opposed to "genuine" (*verus*). The morally neutral opposition between "man-

made" and "naturally produced" now becomes a valuative contrast between "natural" (in the sense of "authentic," "true") and "artificial" (in the sense of "unnatural" and "deliberately false").

In short, in its original commercial usage *facticius* had three distinct but related senses. In its simplest sense, the word meant "manufactured" as opposed to "naturally formed." Somewhat more complex was the use of *facticius* to distinguish the "artificial" from the "natural" varieties of some commodity. This second sense of *facticius* indicated an equivalence in substance or function among the varieties, but a difference in manner of production and also in quality and value. Finally, the word could mean "factitious" or "fraudulent" as opposed to "genuine" — the "unnatural" fabrication of appearance, of the signifiers of exchange value, without the substance or use value that the appearance promised.

The nuances of meaning in the word embody some of the necessary distinctions and categories of the commercial mind; it was with this dialectical set of meanings that *facticius* was subsequently appropriated into Christian discourse by Tertullian and Augustine.³

The basic ideas in *facticius* appear in a new and radically different light when displaced into the Christian cosmology of a God-created natural world, a man- (and Devil-) willed fall into sin, and true

3. Outside mercantile discourse, *facticius* was not a familiar word in pre-Christian Roman culture. From the concordances we learn that it was not a term in general use: politicians such as Julius Caesar did not employ it, nor did historians such as Livy, Tacitus, or Suetonius, nor poets such as Virgil, Horace, or Ovid, nor moralists and rhetoricians such as Cicero, Seneca, or Quintilian. Nor was it a theoretically significant term in the special usages of classical materialist philosophy, whether the atomistic materialism of the Epicureans or the corporealism of the Stoics. Given the new significance the term takes on in Christian religious discourse, it is especially worth noting that *facticius* is not the word Cicero employs when he distinguishes in his *De Divinatione* (Bk. II, Ch. 11) between natural kinds of divination (such as occur through dreams, necromancy, and prophecy by the inspired or possessed) and artificial (*artificiosum*) forms of divination such as augury. Nor is that most famous deceptive cult object of classical literature, the Trojan horse, characterized as *facticius*; that "fraudulent device" (*dolus*) which the *fabricator* Epeos built guided by the *divina arte* of Athena (*Aeneid*, Bk. II) would be termed *artificiosus* rather than *facticius*. *Artificiosus* means "skillfully made"; it lacks the specific emphasis on making through human (as opposed to divine) power, and on the material status of the thing worked upon, which *facticius* connotes. It is just these connotations that make the term occasionally useful to Christian writers of the third and fourth centuries, the period in which the Latin vocabulary for Christian ideology and the essential doctrinal and liturgical components of the Catholic Christian church were developed and institutionalized.

2. Pliny, *Natural History*, tr. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1938), vol. 4, p. 57 [Bk. 12, section 75].

ecclesiastical and false idolatrous paths to salvation. We find the term used by Christian writers in three contexts: (1) in theological discussions of the natural human body as divine image,⁴ whose willful alteration constitutes idolatry; (2) in arguments concerning the human soul as an immaterial substance that is the only locus of nonsuperstitious spiritual activity; and (3) in discussions of the simultaneously personal and ecclesial status of legitimate sacramental objects. The general theory of idolatry was articulated in the course of resolving problems relating to these three topics of body, soul, and sacramental object, problems both created and solved by the fundamental Catholic tenets regarding creation, incarnation, and ecclesiastical salvation.

The first of these topics appears in Tertullian's *De Spectaculis* when he denounces body-building and the spectacle of wrestling as idolatry because these activities attempt to produce "an artificial body so as to surpass God's work" (*facticii corporis ut plasticam dei supergressa*).⁵ Tertullian situates the problem involved within the framework of Christian creationist cosmology: since God created the natural world, including Adam's body, and gave all natural things to man for him to use, how can any use of any natural object be other than good? Tertullian responds that simply because certain material objects can be used to commit murder, this does not mean murder is good or

4. That is, as the one material object in some sense bearing a nonfraudulent resemblance to God. Given the fundamental Christian beliefs in a single transcendent personal divinity, a material creation where evil tends to rule, and the saving incarnation of Christ, the question of how the material human body could in any sense be a divine image was a particularly vexing problem, as illustrated by early Christian heresies. The fourth-century Arians, referring to Genesis 1:26–27, held that God Himself had the human form; they were condemned for anthropomorphism. The Gnostic Valentinians, on the other hand, argued that Christ was a purely spiritual being with no real body (yet with real humanity). The Marcianists, holding that matter was worthless, denied the resurrection of the body. The Apollinarians and the Paulianists held that Christ did have a body and was thus a mere man, but that the impersonal power of God's Divine Word dwelt within him. The most important heresy, Arianism, claimed that Christ assumed a human body but not a human soul and, as a created being, was a secondary divinity inferior to God. The Adamite sects of early modern Europe illustrate the persistence of such issues.

5. Tertullianus, Quinti Septimii Florentis, "*De Spectaculis*" in *Opera omnia*, vol. 1 (Lipsiae: Weigel, 1854), p. 26. For the English see *The Writings of Quintus Sept. Flor. Tertullianus*, vol. 1, eds. Rev. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Edinburgh: Clark, 1869), pp. 25–26.

permissible—indeed, God made a commandment to the contrary.

Moreover, who but God, the Maker of the world, put in it gold, brass, silver, ivory, wood and all other materials used in the manufacture of idols [*fabricandis idolis material*]? Yet has He done this that men may set up a worship in opposition to Himself? On the contrary, idolatry is in His eyes the crowning sin. What is there offensive to God which is not God's? But in offending Him, it ceases to be His; and in ceasing to be His, it is in His eyes an offending thing. Man himself, guilty as he is of every iniquity, is not only a work of God—he is His image [*opus dei, verum etiam imago est*], and yet both in soul and body he has severed himself from his Maker.

(Tertullianus, p. 10)

Tertullian argues that any misuse of the material objects of the natural world constitutes idolatry (in effect murdering one's soul), even though the constituent elements of an idolatrous act of fabrication are not themselves evil. Later theologians would elaborate a theory of the divine status of "the law of nature"; willful interference in a natural process or willful alteration of a bodily form otherwise determined by natural type was held to be sacrilege. The only truth of which a natural body was capable was the achievement of a form bearing a true resemblance to its natural species type.

In Christian theory, reasoning about material bodies consistently appealed to the principle of resemblance.⁶ In his commentary on the commandment in Exodus

6. Unlike the Greek philosophic tradition, Judeo-Christian discourse holds resemblance to be an essentially material relation and as such inherently improper for representing spiritual models. The resemblance of a material individual to its eternal species form may, as in Greek thought, serve as the measure of the degree to which a given individual succeeds in embodying the virtues of its type. But the Christian distinction between the material human body (which is merely matter and not essentially human—but which somehow "resembles" God) and the spiritual substance of the immaterial soul (which acts voluntarily out of itself, not the will-less body) makes the idea of manufactured material resemblance essentially a negative one. There is no Christian Daedalus: skillful making is not a divine art. Christianity replaces the idea of such inspired artifice with the idea of mere manufacture in order to distinguish all human craft from the true divine mode of production: creation. The "unmotivatedness" of the act of creation is conceived on the logocentric model of free verbal utterance, while created matter and physical manufacture are assigned to the contrary principle of resemblance. In Genesis 1:26–27 God says, "'Let us make man in our own image and likeness' [*Faciamus hominem ad imaginem et similitudinem nostram*] . . . And God created man in His own image [*Et creavit Deus hominem ad imaginem suam*]." Here, resemblance is the relation Adam bears to

34:17, “And thou shalt make no molten gods” (*Et deos fusiles ne feceris tibi*), Augustine interprets “molten gods” to be a synecdoche (*locutio est a parte totum significans*) for the true genus of “images or any sort whatever of manufactured gods” (*genus simulacrorum au qualiumcumque facticiorum deorum*).⁸ Idols and all nonecclesial sacramental objects were characterized as at once semblances (“images”: *simulacra*) and manufactured (*facticii*). As “images” they were mere external forms, likenesses, lacking essential truth and inner spirituality. As *facticii* they were purposefully altered material bodies, and, from a spiritual viewpoint, vain acts of the will.

Idolatry, in the narrow sense, was defined as the humanly willed manufacture and worship of artificial varieties of sacramental objects whose true essence was

God, whose creation of Adam through a spoken command to be (as in Genesis 1:3 when “God said [*dixit*], ‘Let there be [*fiat*] light,’ and there was [*facta est*] light”) was neither an act of generation nor of manufacture. Man, on the other hand, is capable only of the manufacture of *facticii dei*, and these are forbidden. The God of the burning bush appears to Moses without any “likeness” (*similitudinem*) in order to discourage idolatry: “Lest ye corrupt yourselves and make you a graven image [*sculptam*], likeness [*similitudinem*], or any image of male or female [*imaginem masculi vel feminae*]” (Deuteronomy 4:15–16). This latter phrase again indicates that the human image bears a special relation of resemblance to God. Humans can manufacture *facticii* images as idols, but they cannot endow them with any true relation to God in the manner that the divine resemblance of Adam’s body (by its unity with the soul) is a true relation. Humans can manufacture but not create, and they cannot endow a body with a soul. Hence Isaiah (37:19) writes, “for they were no gods [*deos*], but the work of men’s hands [*opera manuum hominum*].” The only instance of human ability to make a material object embody a spiritual substance is the Eucharist (and the power behind this ability is the divine power of Christ); this is neither manufacture nor creation but “transubstantiation,” i.e., the original material substance of the object worked on does not remain—at least according to Catholic doctrine. Luther’s notion, of course, was precisely that of “consubstantiation” in opposition to the notion of transubstantiation. In the 1520s Zwingli and the Swiss theologians adopted the more radical view that denied the power of the Eucharist entirely (sometimes referred to as the doctrine of the “Real Absence”). To reject the power of saints and sacramental objects as mediating agencies was to challenge the authority of the church itself as the legitimate earthly agent of mediation between man and God. This was precisely the theological significance of the iconoclastic dimension of the Protestant Reformation, introduced by Zwingli and Calvin.

7. All Latin Biblical quotations are from the Vulgate: *Biblia Sacra Vulgatae Editionis*, ed. Valentius Loch, (Ratisbonae: Manz, 1895).

8. Augustini, Aureli, *Locutionum in Heptateuchum libri septem*, in *Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum*, vol. 28, part I, ed. Iosephus Zycha, (Lipsiae: Freytag, 1894), p. 566 (my translation).

spiritual fraud. Augustine interpreted “idol” to mean any manufactured cultic image not addressed to the true God. Tertullian had already proposed a far more general significance for the category of idolatry. Since salvation in this world could occur only through the church, Tertullian argued, there could be no greater wrong than actions that ran counter to Catholic forms of worship by setting up cults of idols. So important was this that “idolatry” became the general term for all deviant religious activity:

The principal crime of the human race, the highest guilt charged upon the world, the whole procuring cause of judgement, is idolatry. . . . The essence of fraud, I take it, is that any should seize what is another’s, or refuse to another his due; and, of course, fraud toward men is the greatest crime. Well, idolatry does fraud to God [*idololatria fraudem deo facit*] by refusing to Him, and conferring on others, His honors. . . . [I]n idolatry all crimes are detected, and in all crimes idolatry. But even otherwise, since all faults savour of opposition to God, but there is nothing which savours of opposition to God which is not assigned to demons and unclean spirits [*daemoniis et immundis spiritibus*] whose property idols [*idola*] are. . . .
(Tertullianus, p. 34)

All crimes, indeed, all wrong actions, were thus a species of Tertullian’s new Christian supercategory of idolatry. Wrong deeds were idolatry because, at the least, they violated the will and commandment of God, and, at the most, they served the will of some false god, one of the fallen angels or their chief, the Devil. The fabrication of a material cult object in order to worship a false god (whose “property” the material idol-object became) was thus merely the most exemplary instance of various types of wrong acts— all deviation from God’s will and law—which could rightly be classed as demonically inspired idolatry.

The final theoretical elaboration of the idea of idolatry concerned the inappropriateness of material bodies as such to be the medium of devotional activity. Surely the most vivid illustration of this argument was Augustine’s discussion of eunuchism. In this discussion he used the term *facticius* to distinguish false acts of faith (which take as their object part of the world of material bodies, specifically, the sexual organs of the human body) from the voluntary acts of true faith (such as renouncing sexual desire), which proceed from and affect the soul. In commenting on Christ’s distinction in Matthew 19:12 between three types of eunuchs, Augustine labeled *nativum* he who was born a eunuch

(belonging to the order of generation), *facticius* he who was physically made a eunuch by men (belonging to the order of manufacture, of human artifice), and *voluntarius* he who had made himself a eunuch for the kingdom of heaven (belonging to the order of creative action, of free will).⁹ Augustine explained this latter good form of eunuchism to mean “the youths of both sexes who have extirpated from their hearts the desire of marriage” (*Contra Faustum*, p. 751. [English tr., p. 525]). By a purely voluntary and spiritual act, such good eunuchs thereby transferred desire from the sexual organ of the physical body to the soul, the organ of free will and faith. The *facticius* type of eunuch, who defeated sexual desire by direct action upon the material body, rather than by means of the soul, thus omitted the voluntary component necessary in all redeeming acts of true faith. It was precisely the absence of any material effect that testified to the authentic spirituality of an act of faith: the natural body, the material image, most properly remained unaltered from the form determined for it by God in the original creation.

The general theory of idolatry elaborated the meaning of the first two commandments in accordance with the cosmological implications of creation by a transcendent divinity. Willful alteration of material bodies for religious purposes was idolatrous insofar as it disfigured their God-given natural forms, turning them into images of a fraudulent spirituality; moreover, the realm of matter as such was an improper medium for acts of worship.

The problem of the *corpus facticius* was generated by the cosmological core of Christian ideology and was resolved by the general theory of idolatry. The issue of the *anima facticia* concerned a problem in Christian ontology, specifically the problem of the substance of the human soul, and was resolved by subsuming the idea of superstition under the general category of idolatry.

Throughout the history of Christian theology, conceptual problems regarding the incarnate status of man — as an embodied spiritual agent in a cosmos

9. Augustini, Aureli, “*Contra Faustum*,” in *Corpus Scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum*, ed. Iosephus Zycha, vol. 25, parts I–II (Lipsiae: Freytag, 1894), p. 751. (For the English see Augustine, Aurelius, *Writings in Connection with the Manichaean Heresy*, tr. Rev. Richard Stothert, [Edinburgh: Clark, 1872], p. 525). Arguments on this topic took on special relevance after the Council of Elvira in 305, which first made celibacy a requirement of all clergy.

where spirit and matter are completely distinct substances — have been resolved through interpretations of the nature and powers of the soul. In his debate in 392 with his former friend the Manichean, Fortunatus, Augustine denies that the human soul can itself be God, since it is sinful whereas God is not. When asked from what substance the soul is made if not out of God’s own divine substance, he replies:

I deny the soul to be the substance of God as I deny that it is God: but nevertheless [I say] that it is out of God its author because it has been made by God [ex Deo auctore esse, quia facta est a Deo]. He who makes is one thing, that which is made is another [Aliud est qui fecit, aliud quod fecit]. He who made is wholly incapable of corruption; that which He made, however, is wholly incapable of being the equal of He who made it.¹⁰

It is to this argument that Fortunatus responds: “I did not say the soul was similar to God [*similem Deo*]. But rather I said the soul is made [*factitiam esse animam*], and is nothing other than God; I ask whence God took the substance of the soul [i.e., if not from His own divine substance]?” Augustine responds, of course, that God created the substance of the human soul out of nothing [*de nihilo fecerit* (*Contra Fortunatum*, p. 117)]. The human soul, according to Christian doctrine, is not manufactured (*facticius*) out of the material of God’s divine substance, but is a distinct substance, created *ex nihilo*, with its own human nature distinct from God’s divine nature (hence the mystery of Christ’s embodiment of both divine and human natures in one). God, then, created not only that natural world of matter that includes Adam’s body as the divine image, but also the human soul, a distinct substance that was neither manufactured from preexisting (divine or spiritual) material nor generated out of God’s own substance (only Christ, the Son of God, bears a genealogical relation to God), but rather created *ex nihilo* as a distinct type of entity specific to humans.

The human soul consists of created spiritual substance whose essence is to be united with the material body of the individual human being. Angels — including the fallen angels called “gods” by the heathens and known to be demons by Christians — also consist of created spiritual substance, but this is distinguished from that of humans by its lack of relation to a material body. Since the soul is understood to be

10. Augustini, S. Aureli, “*Contra Fortunatum Manichaeum*,” in *Patrologia Cursus Completus*, ed. J.-P. Migne, (Paris: Garnier, 1886), vol. 42, p. 117 (my translation). The Migne edition finds the use of *factitiam* unusual enough to suggest *facturam* instead in a note.

the principle of life, it becomes necessary as well to distinguish between human souls and the souls of other animate embodied beings. In the Christian worldview, plants and animals do not have immortal souls: being animate, they must have souls, but the substance of these souls is corporeal rather than spiritual. "For while the souls of brutes are produced by some power of the body, the human soul is produced by God" (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Question 75, article 6). As the forms of their bodies' life-function, such souls are subject to the principle of generation and decay that rules all beings that exist in nature. Nature is a region of creation logically distinct from that of spirits with free wills; the substance of the latter cannot be material because, even though such souls are created, they are also eternal.

While arguments about material bodies were guided by the trope of resemblance, arguments concerning the soul appealed to the category of the free action of faith.¹¹ Faith is the act of the soul's free will (analogous to God's acts of creation in its undetermined freedom), whereas the body's acts can at most manufacture a semblance or simulacrum of spiritual action. In discussions about the proper spiritual activity of human souls, the concept of idolatry was extended to cover any religious practice that attended to external forms rather than inner faith. It was in this way that the category of idolatry came to be related to traditional conceptions of superstition (*superstitio*).

The theory of idolatry concerns the objects of sacrilegious worship; the theory of superstition concerns the forms of worship caused by improper religious attitudes. Specifically, *superstitio* referred to that religious sensibility which produced exaggerated or excessive, and hence superfluous, cult practices. In *De*

11. Whereas in Neo-Platonism the soul united with the godhead through reflection on its substantial *resemblance* to God until it realized its status as in essence an emanation of the One, Christian salvation unites a man's soul and God through the radical act of the soul's *free will*, which constitutes the fact of faith, along with the equally freely given grace God may bestow on a human soul. In Platonic thought, resemblance expresses the relation between material entities and their eternal ideal forms. In Christian thought the logic of image and resemblance explains the truth within the material half of creation only (with the single exception of the human body, which is in God's image because of its unity with divine reality through having as its soul an eternal spiritual substance). In Christian theology, resemblance neither expresses the true relation between the earthly and the divine nor describes the logic of the spiritual half of creation (which is explained by a logic of identity and voluntary relation— even notions of the "imitation" of Christ are based on the idea of enacted identification rather than mimetic reflection).

Natura Deorum, Cicero mentions as the traditional example of superstition "persons who spend whole days in prayer and sacrifice to ensure that their children should outlive them . . ." (Bk. II, sec. xxviii). Since *religio* referred to a person's sense of how rightly to achieve a true bond with divine power, the fundamental definition of *superstitio*, formulated by Lactantius, was *religio veri cultus est, superstitio falsi* ("religion is the cult of the true [God], superstition that of the false").¹²

Elaborating this idea in *De Doctrina Christiana*, Augustine argues that false religious attitudes could lead to two distinct forms of idolatrous worship:

The arrangements made by men for the making and worshipping of idols are superstitious, pertaining as they do either to the worship of what is created or some part of it as God, or to consultations and arrangements about signs and leagues with devils [*consultationes et pacta quaedam significationum cum daemonibus*], such, for example, as are employed in the magical arts [*magicarum artium*] . . .¹³

Augustine goes on to distinguish between these idolatrous forms of superstition and those which came to be termed "vain observances" ("vain" in the sense of superstitious practices that cannot bring about the intended effect). In its full development, the Christian theory of superstition distinguished four basic forms of superstitious worship: superstitiously exaggerated practices within the true religious worship of the church; idolatrous worship (i.e., formal cults) of false gods; and two types of noncultic superstition— divination to gain knowledge of the future, and "vain observances" to bring about good effects or ward off bad ones. Divination was understood always to have for its object demonic spirits, whose oracular utterances were sought. Intercourse with demons was conceived in terms of verbal rather than physical action: incantation, invocation, conversation, oracle, and pact. Such essentially verbal action was voluntary in a manner, in the Christian perspective, proper to spiritual rather than material activity. Christian logocentrism attributed all voluntary action to immaterial spirit.

12. Quoted in an excellent discussion of Christian ideas about superstition by P. Séjourné in his article "Superstition" in *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*, eds. A. Vacant and E. Mangenot, vol. 14 (Paris: Letorzey, 1941), p. 2765.

13. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, tr. J. F. Shaw in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. II (Buffalo: Christian Literature Co., 1887), p. 545. For the Latin, see *De Doctrina Christiana*, in *Patrologia Cursus Completus*, ed. J.-P. Migne, vol. 34, (Paris: 1861), p. 50.

“Vain observances,” on the other hand, were conceived as physical actions that sought means whereby humans could interfere with the processes and laws of nature. The term “magic” might be applied to either of these latter two classes insofar as they claimed to be systematic procedures based on knowledge (*ars*); in Christian usage, “magic” almost invariably implied demonic invocation.

The degree to which vain observances constituted idolatry was something of a gray area (a “hard case”): for some, the absence of explicit invocation of demons suggested that the simple superstitious customs of the lower classes were to be tolerated; for others, the superstitious search for nonnatural power other than the power of God was idolatrous and damnable—even if no demons were invoked, vain observances were forms of religious self-deception, and the true author of all spiritual fraud was the Devil. Whatever position a particular thinker took, the material objects involved in such superstitious practices were always understood in terms of illegitimate sacramental objects.

The distinction between the immaterial acts of the soul proper to true faith and the merely external acts of superstitious idolatry was theoretically grounded in orthodox doctrine regarding the spiritual substance of the human soul. This view of faith might seem to imply that only aniconic forms of worship were legitimate (a position taken by “protestants” from Adelphius to Muhammad to Calvin). Almost from the beginning of the church, however, cults of relics and saints were accepted. Gregory the Great’s later affirmation of the educational value of images as the “books of the illiterate poor” authorized the use of figurative art for its anagogic value. Moreover, a material object became the focus of the central sacramental ritual of the church itself. For this reason, a clear theory regarding true and false sacramental objects was needed. Such a theory was achieved by extending the notion of divine incarnation to the institution of the church.

Christ was the sole incarnation of God on earth and, through his sacrifice, the only means to salvation. At the Last Supper, however, he endowed his disciples with the divine power of salvation and the ability to confer this power on others. Thus began the unique priestly lineage who form the officers of the church; by reference to the bread of the Last Supper, the wafer of the Eucharist celebrates the unique fact of Christ’s incarnation and reenacts the power of the church to save human souls that flowed from it. As became perfectly evident during the Protestant Reformation, to

deny divine power to any material object per se was to deny the rightful power of the Catholic church as the mediating agent of human salvation in the material world.

While the bread of the Eucharist is the principal sacramental object of the church, there are many other sacred objects (such as small crosses, medals of saints, and wedding rings) which, through the power of the church, are considered to legitimately embody the power to bless and bestow grace on the user.¹⁴ The Christian sacramental object, with its real efficacy, is distinguished from the sacramental objects of superstition and idolatry in two essential ways: the necessary voluntary component of personal faith, and the empowering of the object through the intercessory agency of the church. In particular, it is only through the church that material objects might become vehicles of faith and divine power.

All of these sacramental objects are, of course, manufactured objects (wafers, crosses, rings, images of saints); none is an unfabricated natural thing or place or animal. However, the act through which the church endows these with sacred power is distinct from the act of their material manufacture. Anyone can manufacture an object intended for worship, but only the priestly lineage of the church can empower them for the community of the faithful. All other such objects are idols (*idola*), a term used by Jerome in his late fourth-century translation of the Bible for a host of Hebrew terms. (The general category of the “idol” was itself a product of this formative Latin period of Christian ideology.)

As already discussed, the error of idolatry was understood to involve either the vain worship of mere material things and external forms or the use of a material idol as the medium through which demonic spirits were invoked and conversed with. The degree to which the general conception of idolatry should be extended to “vain” superstitious practices was debatable. In an influential passage, Augustine distinguished between practices that were clearly damnable, such as magical consultations of demons by haruspices and augurs, and “the thousands of inane

14. A recent Catholic catechism makes the same distinction in regard to these that Augustine made in distinguishing *facticii* from “voluntary” eunuchs: “Active participation indicates that sacramentals are not some kind of fetishes that work magically by just being had or worn or said. It requires voluntary effort based on faith in order to achieve the purpose for which they were instituted.”—Hardon, John A., S.J., *The Catholic Catechism* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1975), p. 553.

[popular] customs" ("millia inanissimarum observationum"), such as kicking something that passed between two friends who were walking along together.¹⁵ All of his examples of "inane observations" involve superstitious performances (as opposed to productions of material objects); material objects like "ligatures and remedies" ("ligaturae atque remedia") and various rings worn to assure health and safety are condemned as much as augury and incantation. Augustine denies the claim that such objects honestly try to take advantage of "the forces of nature"; since they appeal to powers other than those of nature, they are as damnable as are explicit attempts to invoke demons. Such a position begs the question of what powers were in fact contained in "the forces of nature." It was in this conceptually obscure area that the words *facticioso* and *factura* emerged in the Middle Ages as designations of certain superstitious practices and the objects they employed.

"Feitiçaria" in Christian law: witchcraft and magic

Although based on the categories of idolatry and superstition just examined, the discourse about witchcraft and the word *feitiçaria* itself were developed (or, at least, were adopted) by Christian law rather than Christian theology. Theological discourse was never able to conceptualize "vain observances" satisfactorily within its logic of material resemblance and voluntary

15. The text from *On the Christian Doctrine* (p. 54—for the Latin see *De Doctrina Christiana*, Bk. II, ch. XX) reads: "To this class [of superstitious human institutions] belong, but with a bolder touch of deception, the books of the haruspices and augurs [*aruspicum et augurum libri*]. In this class we must also place all amulets and cures [*ligaturae et remedia*] which the medical art condemns, whether these consist in incantations [*praecantationibus*], or in marks which they call *characters*, or in hanging and tying on certain articles or even dancing in a certain fashion, not with reference to the condition of the body, but to certain signs hidden or manifest; and these remedies they call by the less offensive name of *physica*, so as to appear not to be engaged in superstitious observances, but to be taking advantage of the forces of nature. Examples of these are ear-rings on the top of each ear, or the rings of ostrich bone on the fingers, or telling you when you hiccup to hold your left thumb in your right hand.

"To these we may add thousands of the most frivolous practices [*inanissimarum observationum*], that are to be observed if any part of the body should jump, or if, when friends are walking arm-in-arm, a stone, or a dog, or a boy, should come between them. . . . To this class too belong the following rules: To tread upon the threshold when you go out in front of the house; to go back to bed if any one should sneeze when you are putting on your slippers; to return home if you stumble when going to a place; when your clothes are eaten by mice, to be more frightened at the prospect of coming misfortune than to be grieved by your present loss."

verbal invocation and agreement. Nevertheless, insofar as any coherent theory of witchcraft was elaborated in the late Middle Ages, it was attempted in terms of idol-worship and demonic pact. The constant appearance of conjunctive phrases like "idolatry and witchcraft" (*idolatria y feitiçari*) in the Portuguese voyage accounts and "superstition and witchcraft" (*supersticiones y hechicerias*) in sixteenth-century Spanish treatises on witchcraft indicates the conceptual failure of the theory of idolatry to determine the discourse about "witchcraft" (much less to explain the actual phenomena being designated).

There are three distinct phases in the history of Christian witchcraft law. The first consists of the laws promulgated under the first Christian emperors in the fourth and fifth centuries which were eventually collected in the Theodosian Code. The second consists of medieval European laws: at first episcopal laws and later, after the revival of civil law in the twelfth century, canon and royal law. The final phase is characterized by the granting of jurisdiction over witchcraft cases to the Inquisition (enabled by the identification of witchcraft as in itself heresy¹⁶) and the adoption of scholastic inquisitorial ideas about witchcraft by secular courts. The relevance of this final phase for the notion of *feitiçaria* carried to West Africa is minimal.

The Theodosian Code, the first Christian code of law, was promulgated in 438. Several sections of the code record laws regulating religious and magical practices. Study of these laws helps situate the formulations of Christian theologians in the context of the struggles over religious politics in the period from Constantine to Theodosius. For instance, the theological interpretation of the gods as evil demons in effect delegitimated the public cults and traditional religious authority of non-Christianized Roman senators. Indeed, this class was the principal object of Theodosian laws penalizing superstitious magical practices. (Laws regulating heresy were put in a different section of the code, since conflicts with "pagans" and conflicts with "heretics" were distinct issues.¹⁷)

16. On this point and on medieval witchcraft law in general, see Hansen, Joseph, *Quellen und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des Hexenwahns und der Hexenfolgung im Mittelalter* (Bonn: Georgi, 1901); and Lea, H. C., *Materials toward a History of Witchcraft*, 3 vols. (New York: Yoseloff, 1957).

17. "Pagan" was another term owing its Christian meaning to Tertullian, who adapted it from its meaning of "peasant, citizen, civilian" (in Tacitus) to mean anyone who was not a member (a "soldier") of the Christian church militant. The term "heretic" was properly applied only to baptised Christians who denied some aspect

The relevant section is entitled *De Maleficis et Mathematicis et ceteris similibus* ("On Magicians and Astrologers and other like criminals").¹⁸ Most of these laws concerned practices categorized as "divination" (*ars divinanda*) and were condemned as *maleficia*. Literally meaning "evil deeds" — hence the English word "malefactor" — *maleficia* is usually translated as magic, sorcery, or "witchcraft" because the term carries the implication that evil acts involve the supernatural agency of malignant spirits. As a legal category, *maleficia* entailed the religious crime of sacrilege. Under this category we find *augures*,¹⁹ *haruspices*,²⁰ *sacerdotes*,²¹ *harioli* and *vates*,²² *mathematicii*,²³ *Chaldaei et magi*, interpreters of dreams, and various other practitioners of magical divinatory arts. (When the tolerant emperor Valentinian wished to permit haruspicy, he did so by denying that it was properly classed among the *maleficia* because it fell outside the category of religious superstition [*religionem genus*] and hence should not be considered sacrilege.)

While Theodosian religious laws were primarily concerned with regulating or forbidding the cult practices of the principal rivals of Christian political

of official Church doctrine. Although early Christian jurisprudence distinguished between *maleficium* and heresy in theory, in practice a precedent was set for associating them. It was Theodosius who first established an inquisition to prosecute crimes of heresy; the first case tried by the Inquisition concerned the Priscillianists, an ascetic Christian sect influenced by Egyptian gnosticism who won many followers in Spain and southern France in the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries. Charges of magical practices were among the slew of accusations brought forward in the process of crushing the movement. While the doctrinal deviation of heresy did not necessarily entail acts of superstitious sacrilege (*maleficia*), neither did it necessarily exclude them.

18. *The Theodosian Code and Novels, and the Sirmodian Constitutions*, tr. Clyde Pharr (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), p. 237 (Bk. IX, tit. 16). For the Latin see *Codices Gregorianus Hermogenianus Theodosianus*, ed. Gustavus Haenel (Bonn: Adolphum Marcum, 1842), p. 866.

19. Members of the college of official Roman diviners who interpreted the flight of birds through the various celestial *templi* and the signs in the manner a chicken ate grain. Augurs did not actually predict the future, but determined the approval or disapproval of the gods in regard to some proposed action.

20. Competitors of the augurs from Etruria who interpreted signs in the internal organs of animals, and in unusual occurrences such as monstrous births or storms.

21. The general term for pagan priests.

22. Both were practices involving inspired verbal prophecy.

23. "Astrologers," conceived as persons whose knowledge of the workings of the universe was based on the "science of numbers."

power, whose religious organs were the augurs and the haruspices, the category of *maleficium* covered more than just crimes of divination. Vain observances, too, might be sacrilegious, and there is one law of Constantine directed at such superstitious practices among the lower classes. This law draws a distinction between harmful magical practices and noncriminal "remedies" and fertility rites:

The science of those men who are equipped with magic arts [*magicis artibus*] and who are revealed to have worked against the safety of men or have turned virtuous minds to lust shall be punished and deservedly avenged by the most severe laws. But remedies [*remedia*] sought for human bodies shall not be involved in criminal accusation, nor the assistance that is innocently employed in rural districts in order that rains may not be feared for the ripe grape harvests or that the harvests may not be shattered by the stones of ruinous hail, since by such devices no person's safety or reputation is injured, but by their action they bring it about that the divine gifts [of nature] and the labors of men are not destroyed.

(Theodosian Code, Bk. IX, tit. 16, sec. 3)

Augustine's theology condemned "remedies" and vain observances as superstitious appeals to unnatural powers. Early Christian law, however, denied their status as criminal sacrilege due to the absence of harm to "safety or reputation."

The Theodosian Code contains several lists of the highest, most unpardonable crimes; these lists include the distinct terms *veneficium* and *maleficium*. *Veneficium* refers to the art of poisoning and more generally to sorcery exemplified by the use of herbs and magically powerful physical substances in the making of potions and philtres to achieve some specific effect on another person (death, love). In translating the Second Book of Kings (9:22), Jerome uses *veneficia* to refer to the "witchcrafts" of Jezebel. The *Vulgate's* general term for what the *King James Bible* terms "witchcraft," however, is *maleficia* (see Deuteronomy 18:10, Micah 5:12, Nahum 3:4, and, most important, Exodus 22:18).²⁴ The distinction between *veneficium*

24. Pharaoh's magicians in Exodus 7:11 and 8:18–19 are also termed *maleficos*. However, when a passage required a distinction between divination and "witchcraft," Jerome used the familiar Latin terms for the former and *maleficia* for the latter. For instance, Deuteronomy 18:10 reads "*Nec inveniatur in te, qui lustret filium suum, aut filiam, ducens per ignem, aut qui ariolos sciscitetur et observat somnia atque auguria, nec sit maleficus / nec incantator, nec qui pythones consulat, nec divinos, aut quaerat a mortuis veritatem. . . .*" The *King James* translators render this passage as "There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or

and *maleficium* was enabled by the obscurity of the line between effects caused by the little-known powers of natural substances and effects caused by immaterial spirits, and perhaps by the strength of the popular image of the *venefica* as a definite type.

The distinction between *maleficium* and *veneficium* was retained in the legal code of the short-lived Iberian kingdom of the Christian Visigoths. The *Codex Wisigothorum*, established around 654 when King Recceswinth converted from Arianism to Catholicism, created a legal system that promoted assimilation between the Gothic and the Romanized native populations of Iberia (until both code and kingdom were swept away in the Muslim conquest of 711). After the Christian reconquest, state-building kings of the eleventh century revived the Visigothic Code (translated into Spanish as the *Fuero Juzgo*).

Conforming to the Theodosian Code, the Visigothic Code's list of criminals disqualified from giving testimony included *malefici* and *venefici*.²⁵ The Spanish *Fuero Juzgo* translated these, respectively, as “*sorteros*” and “*los que dan yervas*” (“those who give [others] herbal potions”).²⁶ The section in the Visigothic Code covering crimes of magic made the same distinction in its title: *De maleficis et consulentibus eos, atque veneficis* (the *Fuero Juzgo* translated this as *Los Malfechores, e de los que los consulen, e de los que dan yerbas*). Here *maleficia* is associated with divination: *malefici* are *ariolos*, *aruspices*, *vel vaticinatores* (*adevinos*, *encantadores*, or *provizeros* in the *Fuero Juzgo*). As in the Theodosian Code, penalties are aimed as much at those who consult *malefici* as at the *malefici* themselves. The specific political concern of this law is made clear in the stipulation that the crime forbidden is the consulting of diviners regarding

the health or death of princes or other such men (*principis, vel cuiuscumque hominis*). A separate section covers the various crimes of *malefici* themselves, whose evil is always brought about through the invocation of demons (*per invocationem daemonum*). A third section entitled *De veneficis (los que dan yerbas)* refers particularly to *venenatam potionum (las yerbas)*, that is, a potion drunk by the victim. A fourth and final section concerns evil done to people or to their animals or crops by *maleficium, aut diversa ligamenta (por encantamiento ó por ligamiento* [“by enchantment and by ligature”]). Here ligatures²⁷ are more closely associated with demon-invoking *malefici* than with *venefici*. While the potion of the *venefica* is a preparation that exerts its force through being consumed, the ligature is a more permanent object, usually made to be worn (or, more generally, working by proximity), which exerts a constant force after its production.

The first use of a word deriving from *facticius* in this context that I have been able to find occurs in the *Forum Turolij* of 1176. This was the municipal code for Tervel in Aragon. (The law was the model for all subsequent royal charters of Aragonese and Castilian cities in this state-building period.) A part of the law dealing with crimes of women, such as the teaching of how to induce an abortion, has a section *De ligatricibus*, followed by a section entitled *De muliere facticiosa*.²⁸ The first section refers to women who *ligaverit* (“make ligatures directed upon”) men or animals or other things. The second section names women who are *erbolaria vel facticiosa*. *Erbolaria* clearly relates to *venefici* (i.e., *los que dan yerbas*). I am at a loss as to the specific meaning of *facticiosa*, which here appears as a synonym for *erbolaria* or else as a somewhat more general category containing

his daughter to pass through the fire, or that uses divination [*ariolos*], or an observer of clouds [but *observat somnia* in the Vulgate], or a fortune-teller [*auguria*] or a witch [*maleficus*] / or a charmer [*incantator*], or one who asks after familiar spirits [*pythones*], or a wizard [*divinos*], or one who calls to the dead [which later witchcraft discourse usually termed “necromancy”]. . . .” Similarly, Second Chronicles 33:6, recounting the “abominations” of King Manasseh, states that he made his children pass through the fire: “Also he observed times [thus *King James*, where Jerome has “*observabat somnia*”], and used enchantments [*auguria*], and used witchcraft [*maleficis artibus*], and dealt with a familiar spirit [*habebat secum magos*], and with wizards [*incantatores*]. . . .”

25. *Liber Iudicum, aut Codex Wisigothorum*, Bk. II, tit. IV, sec. 1, in *Los Codigos Españoles concordados y anotados*, (Madrid: 1848), vol. I, p. 12.

26. *Fuero Juzgo*, Bk. II, tit. IV, in *Los Codigos Españoles*, p. 117.

27. Ligatures are amulets. For a discussion of the sexual ligature known as the “aiguillette,” see Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie’s “The Aiguillette: Castration by Magic,” in *The Mind and Method of the Historian*, tr. Siân Reynolds and Ben Reynolds (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 84–96. For a discussion of traditional Portuguese amulets, see Pires, A. Thomas, *Amuletos Alemtejanos*, in his *Estudios e Notas Elvenses*, vol. V (Elvas: Torres de Carvalho, 1904). In this text I use the masculine form *venefici* for personal plural constructions, but the feminine *venefica* for the singular. I do this because the legal texts I am studying tend to use the masculine *venefico* when speaking of practitioners of *veneficium* in general, while the feminine gender tends to be used when a concrete individual was being posited (i.e., the traditional stereotype of the *venefica* as an old woman).

28. *Forum Turolij*, ed. Francisco Aznar Navarro, vol. 2, (Madrid: 1905), p. 209.

erbolaria as a subset. Since the next section of the law is titled *De medicatricibus*, context would seem to imply some manipulation of materials in order to achieve a particular effect upon the physical state of an individual.

In his glossary of medieval Latin, Du Cagne mentions several related terms that seem to have arisen in popular speech. The term *factura* appears in a synodal text of 1311: “*Aut incantationes, sacrilegia, auguria, vel maleficia, quae Facturae, sive praestigiae vulgaritèr appellantur . . .*” (“Either incantations, sacrileges, auguries, or witchcrafts, which are vulgarly called ‘*Facturae*’ or jugglery”).²⁹ According to Du Cagne, *factura* was a synonym for *maleficium* or *sortilegium* in common speech. A popular *Life of St. Bernard* speaks of “*hoc malefica arte Facturae*” (Du Cagne, p. 393). The equivalent French word of the time was *faiture*. A *faiturier* was a *sortilegus* or *veneficus* (a sorcerer or witch), and *facturerie* meant witchcraft. Similar terms developed in the Spanish of the time. The Spanish *Partidas*, which replaced the Visigothic *Fuero Juzgo* as the basic law of Castile in 1260, employs the terms *fechura* (the manufacture of magical objects), *fechizo* (the object thus made), and *fechicero* (the person who makes them). The section of the *Partidas* dealing with magic is divided into three separate laws: the first refers to various sorts of diviners (*adevinos*); the second to *fechiceros*; and the third to *truhanes* (con artists). Under the *fechicero* law we find all magical practices aimed at achieving a concrete result (as opposed to gaining knowledge, the object of divination). Thus *fehiceiria* could involve the invocation of demonic spirits as means to achieve some tangible effect, the preparation of yervas to bring about amorous infatuation or death or illness, and “the making of images of wax, or metal, or other fetishes” (*fazer ymagines de cera, nin de metal, nin otros fechizos*).³⁰

As the Spanish language developed, the “f” of *fechizo*, *fechicero*, and *fehiceiria* shifted to the “h” of the modern Spanish words *hechizo*, *hechicero*, and *hechiceiria*.

In the late twelfth century, Portugal emerged as a kingdom, and Portuguese began to emerge as a distinct language. Between 1273 and 1282 the Spanish *Fuero*

Juzgo as well as the *Partidas* were translated into Portuguese. The Portuguese words most often designating witchcraft were *feitiço*, *feiticero*, and *feitiçaria*. Especially after the witchcraft bulls of Pope John XXII in the 1320s and the resultant upsurge in inquisitorial witchcraft trials, more consistent national terminologies for witchcraft developed: *hechiceiria* in Spanish, *feitiçaria* in Portuguese, *sorcellerie* in French, *hexerie* in German, and “witchcraft” in English. *Maleficia* remained the learned Latin term. Competition over jurisdiction between ecclesiastical and secular courts was doubtless an important impetus promoting terminological regularity.

In Portugal, witchcraft law begins with the rise of the House of Avis in the social crisis of the 1380s. In 1385 the new king, John I, promulgated an antiwitchcraft edict in the capital city of Lisbon. Its aim was to purge the “grave sins which in this city of Lisbon have been practiced since very ancient times.” The nature of these “idoltrous sins and wicked customs” is enumerated in some detail:

No person may use or effect fetishes [*obre de feitiços*], nor bonds [*ligamento*], nor summoning up of devils [*chamar os diabos*], nor incantations [*descantações*], nor casting spells [*obre de veadeira*], nor making cabalistic figures [*obre de carantulas*], nor evil spells [*geitos*], nor interpreting dreams [*sonhos*], nor working enchantments [*encantamentos*], nor may he cast lots [*lance roda*] nor read fortunes [*lance sortes*], nor practice divinations [*obre d’advinhamentos*] in whatever guise that may be forbidden . . .³¹

In 1403 John established a more succinct national antiwitchcraft law entitled *Dos Feiticeiros*. This law was primarily concerned with establishing the illegality of using magical means to hunt for treasure. Adopted into the fifteenth-century code of Afonso V, this rather perfunctory statute was the principal national law regarding *feiticeiros* during the period of the first Portuguese contacts with West Africa. (Municipal laws, however, such as John I’s 1385 law or the law in the 1543 *Constituições* of the Archbishop of Evora [quoted in Herculano, p. 166], might go into considerable detail regarding the precise practices being outlawed.) Moreover, during this period, Portugal lacked an

29. Du Cagne, Charles du Fresne, *Glossarium Mediae et infimae latinitatis*, vol. III (Paris: Librairie des sciences et des arts, 1938), p. 393.

30. *Código de las Siete Partidas*, in *Los Códigos Españoles*, p. 427 (Part. VII, tit. xxiii).

31. Translated in A. H. de Oliveira Marques, *Daily Life in Portugal in the Late Middle Ages*, tr. S. S. Wyatt (Madison, Milwaukee, and London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1971), p. 227. The Portuguese text is quoted in Herculano de Carvalho e Aravjo, Alexandre, “*Crenças Populares Portuguesas*,” in *Opusculos*, vol. IX, third edition (Lisbon: Bastos, 1908), p. 158.

Inquisition. Indeed, the famous Inquisition of Portugal's principal Iberian rival, established by Ferdinand and Isabel in 1478, was itself more concerned with Jews and "New Christians" than with witches. Certainly in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Portugal, witchcraft was not a burning issue, and this may be one reason for the eventual characterization of African religion as *feitçaria* by Portuguese imperialists who, having failed to conquer Guinea, sought to exploit it through trade. (That is, one would not have traded with "witches" conceived in the strong sense of the word proper to the witch craze.)

To summarize this admittedly lengthy preamble to the story of the origin of the fetish: The basic components of the idea of the fetish were not present in the medieval notion of the *feitço*. The notion of the *feitço*, as conceived within church doctrine on witchcraft, did not raise the essential problem of the fetish: the problem of the social and personal value of material objects. It failed to do this because the logic of idolatry displaced the status of the material object to that of an image, a passive medium effecting relations between spiritual agents according to a principle of resemblance; and it displaced the power of the bodily fetish-maker to create novel spiritual states of affairs onto the agency of the phonocentric free-will, whose spiritually significant actions were the forming of verbal, contractual relations (whose spiritually significant effect was upon the status of the immaterial soul). The concept of the material image attributed no significance to the fetish-object's unique origin, that is, to the historical process of its production. Based on a logic of resemblance, it was the likeness of the end product as image that mattered. In addition, the concept of voluntary invocation and linguistic contract blocked any attribution of free spiritual power and moral value to the material body itself. This is evident from the attribution of all new knowledge revealed in magical divination to the utterance of demonic spirits—whereas the powers of the physical productions of the *venefica*, the *ligatrice*, and the *feitço*-maker were conceived as effects determined by the correctness of procedure in combining material ingredients (this was conceived "mechanistically" even when verbal formulas—spells—were involved). That is, the principle of novelty (i.e., of divine revelation and spiritual change) was attributed to immaterial verbal interactions and was excluded from physical productions. This conformed to the model of the

Eucharist (and other legitimate productions of sacramental objects by the church), in which there is no moment of indeterminacy to allow what Whitehead would call the "ingression of novelty" (Deleuze would call it "the repetition of difference"). The model for novel revelations of divine power was in essence linguistic—verbal prophecy and scripture—however much the medieval church accommodated the different religious perceptions of subordinate groups by accepting the reality of physical miracles by God, Christ, and saints. In contrast to this paradigm, the model for the fetish-idea involves the realization of novel divine power in material objects and bodily fixations within the contingency of worldly experience.

Beyond this, there was no problem in Christian medieval culture regarding the ability of material objects to embody social value and human-oriented powers (which is the basis of the problem of the fetish). Material objects might bear such exceptional powers (1) as true sacramental objects produced by the divine power of the church, (2) from their use as vehicles by demonic spirits, (3) from astrological influences, and (4) from "natural magic" inherent in certain materials. This last means is often explained in terms of the alleged acceptance of "magic" by the medieval mentality. The fine Portuguese historian Oliveira Marques writes, "It must be emphasized that the age truly believed in the power of magic" (*Daily Life*, p. 227). An example he gives is the *linguero* kept by many wealthy Portuguese among their dining utensils:

. . . lingueros [were] a sort of rod on which were suspended serpent tongues or a large number of rare stones (such as agate and serpentine), to which were attributed magical virtues. People believed that when these and other such talismans came near contaminated [i.e., poisoned] food, they would change color, become spotted, or even begin to bleed. The 'Inventory and Accounts of King Dinis' enumerates certain stones, some with very strange names, which must have been used for this very purpose. It also mentions such items as a 'scorpion's tooth' and a 'bone suspended in the head of a silver stick.'

(*Daily Life*, p. 30)

The general acceptance of such objects might seem to imply that, within the cultural horizon proper to the term *feitço*, there was no sense that a material object as such excluded those "magical" influences that a later Enlightenment mentality would label as superstitious. However, it is unclear in what sense, if any, objects such as *lingueros* were considered "magical" by their users. Torquemada himself, the

ascetic zealot who was the first head of the Spanish Inquisition, who would surely not have dabbled in the black arts of “magic,” allayed his obsessive fear of being poisoned by using the “horn of a unicorn” at each meal to detect envenomed food.³² Rather than attribute a general belief in “magic” to medieval Europe, it is perhaps more accurate to speak of a historical logic or “episteme” based on principles of resemblance and analogic correspondence through which the medieval Christian intellect conceived the material world.³³ Within such an intellectual framework, objects such as *lingueiros* and *feitiços* might well have been conceived as nonmagical, if by “magic” one means the violation of the “laws of nature” governing the action and powers of material entities. The conceptual obscurity in the late medieval mind regarding this issue is the same as that already encountered in early Christian theory regarding the religious status of “vain observances.”

Between this fifteenth-century mentality and that of an eighteenth-century that induced the Portuguese Inquisition, under the influence of Pombal, to rule that “malignant spirits cannot, through pacts with sorcerers and magicians, change the laws of Nature established by God for the preservation of the world” (Lea, *Inquisition*, vol. III, p. 188), a fundamental change occurred in the conception of the natural powers of the material object. One place where the emergence of this new conception of material objects—identified by Enlightenment ideology as the attitude of scientific objectivity—can be studied is in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century accounts by merchant adventurers describing their experiences on the coast of “Guinea.” In these texts, the truth of material objects came to be viewed in terms of technological and commodifiable use-value, whose “reality” was proved by their silent “translatability” across alien cultures. All other meanings and values attributed to material objects were understood to be the culture-specific delusions of peoples lacking “reason.” In the eighteenth century, this materialist attitude was combined with the earlier mechanistic and atheistic materialist ideology of the Epicureans (revived by Gassendi and others) to form the materialist view characteristic of the Enlightenment. The formation of the novel idea of the fetish on the West

African coast, and its later elaboration into the general theory of fetishism, were expressions of a new historical problematic outside the horizon of Christian thought.

Feitiço in Portuguese Guinea

For the Portuguese who first reached the Senegal River and encountered black African societies in 1436, there were two universal commonplaces about sub-Saharan Africa: that “Guinea” was a land of complete social orderlessness, and that it was the source of the world’s gold. Beginning with Herodotus, European literature had recorded tales of giant gold-digging ants in the forests south of the desert and of strange rituals involving silent trade with unseen peoples. Land of the mysterious origin of that most desired substance that embodied all wealth, its social chaos was said to be so great that it did not bear describing. As the tenth-century Arabic geographer Ibn Hawqal stated:

I have not described the countries of the blacks in the West, nor those of Beja and other peoples of those latitudes because the characteristics of organized states, such as religious, cultural and legal institutions and stabilized governmental institutions, are utterly lacking among them.³⁴

Such lawlessness meant to Christian thinkers that the religion of such people was “idolatry.” Indeed, a popular fourteenth-century Spanish survey of the peoples of the world (known as the *Book of Knowledge*) describes several sub-Saharan kingdoms, all peopled by “idolators.”³⁵ Illustrations of the alleged flags of these states were even included: each showed some variation on a human-shaped statue, the popular image of what an “idol” looked like.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the religious terminology of the fifteenth-century Portuguese who first sailed to black Africa was the distinction between *idolo* and *feitiço*. “*Idolo*” suggested a freestanding statue representing a spiritual entity (a “false god”), while *feitiço* referred to an object worn about the body which itself embodied an actual power resulting from the correct ritual combination of materials. The notion of the *feitiço* stressed its use as an instrument to achieve a concrete, material effect, while its status as an object of

32. Lea, Henry Charles, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, vol. I (London: Macmillan, 1906), p. 17.

33. Such was done by Foucault in his chapter on “The Prose of the World,” in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Random House, 1970), pp. 17–45.

34. Quoted in Trimmingham, John Spencer, *A History of Islam in West Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 1–2.

35. *Book of Knowledge*, tr. Clements Markham (London: Hakluyt Society, 1912), pp. 33, 35. (The author was a Franciscan friar from Castile.)

worship was central to the idea of the *ídolo*. In the early Portuguese voyage accounts, *idolatria* and *feiticearia* often appear as distinct but paired terms characterizing the superstitious practices of black African societies. While the religion of heathen peoples was automatically termed “idolatry” by medieval Christians, the greater descriptive accuracy of *feitico* over *ídolo* for characterizing the sacramental objects of African religion led in time to the classification of African religion as *feiticearia* rather than *idolatria*. The use of a term meaning “witchcraft” to characterize the religion, and thus the principle of social order, of an entire people was unprecedented.

The first black societies actually encountered were ruled by Islamicized groups,³⁶ and the first religious objects described were little leather packets worn about the neck (containing a bit of script from the *Koran*), familiar to Europeans as *nominas*. (The same practice occurred in medieval Europe with Bible text.) It was especially in regard to non-Islamicized peoples, such as were first encountered in the 1450s, that we find the term *feitico* employed. In his 1500 account of the 1486 discovery of Benin, the chronicler Ruy de Pina reports:

Moreover, he [the commander, Joham Affom da Aveiro] sent [to the king of Benin] holy and most Catholic advisers with praiseworthy admonitions for the faith to administer a stern rebuke about the heresies and great idolatries and fetishes [*grandes ydolatrias e feiticearias*], which the Negroes practise in that land.³⁷

Those Portuguese—usually traders from the colonies on the Cape Verde Islands—who frequented the Upper Guinea coast on a regular basis in the sixteenth century, came to perceive the significance of *feiticos* for the ordering of African society. Pacheco Pereira, writing in 1505, declared that the “Boulooes” of Sierra Leone were “all idolaters and sorcerers and are ruled by witchcraft [*sam idolatres e feiticeiros, e por feiticos se Regem*], placing their faith in oracles and demons.”³⁸

36. For the relation of the Islamic empires of the sub-Saharan savannah to the peoples along the coast of Upper Guinea see Levitzion, Nehemiah, *Ancient Ghana and Mali* (New York: Africana, 1980). Also: Rodney, Walter, *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast, 1545 to 1800* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1980).

37. Translated in Blake, p. 79. For the Portuguese see Ruy de Pina, *Chronica d'El Rei Dom João II* in Brasio, Padre Antonio, ed., *Monumenta Missionaria Africana: Africa Occidental*, vol. I (1471–1531) (Lisbon: Agencia Geral do Ultramar, 1952), p. 52.

38. Pacheco Pereira, Duarte, *Esmeraldo de situ orbis*, tr. George H. T. Kimble (London: Hakluyt Society, 1937), p. 97. For the Portuguese, see Pacheco Pereira, Duarte, *Esmeraldo de situ orbis*,

Indeed, increasing familiarity and interaction led observers to view some groups as lacking in “idols” entirely. In a report included in a letter of 1585 sent by the Jesuit priests of Coimbra to the Jesuit General in Rome, Antonio Velho Tinoco declared of the blacks of the coast of Upper Guinea:

All the people of the land along the seacoast are black. They are a harmless people, willing to communicate and trade with the Portuguese, and of a simple disposition, although they tend to be attached to magical practices [*inclinada a feiticos*]. . . . They have no organized religion, and do not worship the Sun or the Moon or any other Idols [*nem outros idolos alguns*].³⁹

While the passage quoted from Ruy de Pina associated *feiticeiros* and their *feiticos* with demonic invocation, here the more tolerant view on “vain observances” is followed, stressing the “harmless” nature of these peoples despite their inclination to *feiticos*.

When highly organized non-Islamicized black societies were encountered, in Benin and the Congo, the objects and practices labeled by the Portuguese *feiticos* were treated as the heathen equivalents of the little sacramental objects common among pious Christians. Crosses for idols, and crucifixes and images of saints for *feiticos*, was the proposal of the crusading Portuguese. One such social conversion was believed to have happened in the Congo in the sixteenth century:

The King [of the Congo] caused fire to be set upon the Idols, and utterly consumed them. When he had thus done, he assembled all his people together, and in stead of their Idols which before they had in reverence, hee gave them Crucifixes, and Images of Saints, which the Portugals had brought with them, and enjoined every Lord, that every one in the Citie of his owne Government and Regiment, should build a Church and set up Crosses, as he had already shewed unto them by his own example. And then he told them, and the rest of his people, that he had dispatched an Embassadour into Portugall to fetch them Priests, that should teach them Religion, and administer the most holy and wholesome Sacraments to every one of them, and bring with them divers Images of Christ, of the

critical edition with notes by Augusto Epiphania da Silva Dias (Lisbon: Sociedad de Geographia de Lisboa, 1905), p. 95.

39. Antonio Velho Tinoco, “An Account of the People who Live between Cabo Dos Mastos and Magrabomba on the Guinea Coast” in Donelha, Andre, *Descrição da Serra Leoa e dos Rios de Guiné do Cabo Verde*, ed. and tr. P. E. H. Hair (Lisbon: Junta de Investigações Científicas do Ultramar, 1977), p. 345.

Virgin Mother, and of the Saints to distribute among them.⁴⁰

Some pages later the author sadly recounts how, once the Portuguese hopes of finding mines of precious metals in the Congo were disappointed, no priests were forthcoming and “the Christian religion waxed so cold in Congo, that it wanted very little to be extinguished” (Pigafetta, p. 492).

This perception of substitutability and hence of cross-cultural equivalence endured in the usage of *feitiço* on the coast of West Africa. One vivid example of how this equivalence across antagonistic social codes came to take on concrete significance, after complex cross-cultural social spaces developed outside Portuguese imperial control, is found in a 1625 anecdote of the Cape Verdean Andre Donelha. In the important trading city of Casan, located on an island of the Gambia River, Donelha encountered a young African who in Portuguese eyes was a slave belonging to an acquaintance of Donelha:

I met a black Mandinga youth, by name Gaspar Vaz, who was a slave on this island of a neighbor of mine in São Pedro, a tailor, called Francisco Vaz. The black was a

40. Pigafetta, Filippo, “A report on the Kingdom of Congo, a Region of Affrica” (1588) translated in Purchas, Samuel, ed., *Hakluytus Posthumus or Purchas His Pilgrimes*, vol. VI (Glasgow: James MacLehose and Sons, 1906—originally published London: 1625), p. 481. Pigafetta wrote this account in Italian based on the recollected experiences of a Portuguese sailor. The exact wording of the original oral Portuguese “text” is thus inaccessible. The 1624 version of this incident, translated from a Portuguese document into French as *Histoire de Royaume du Congo* (tr. François Bontinck, Louvain and Paris: Nauwelaers, 1972), has it that “le roi fit proclamer l’abandon de toutes les pratiques fétichistes et la destruction des maisons où l’on s’y adonnait. . . .” (“The king ordered the abandonment of all fetishes and the destruction of the houses devoted to them. . . .”) But that later “il s’adonna de nouveau aux coutumes paiennes et aux pratiques superstitieuses et fétichistes” (“he devoted himself again to pagan customs and to superstitious and fetishist practices”) (pp. 106, 113). Prominent among the divinely powerful objects of the Kongo peoples were humanoid statues fitting the traditional European image of an “idol” (although their hollow stomachs wherein ritually combined ingredients were placed did not conform to the European notion of the idol). The image of the “Congo idol” became a commonplace in popular literature and discourse, to the extent that Melville describes the bent-kneed cult statue of the South Sea Islander Queequeg as “his Congo idol” (*Moby Dick* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979], p. 24). In any event, the principal loci for the development of the complex idea of the “Fetisso” out of the Portuguese term *feitiço* were the Gold and Slave coasts, where Akan- and Ewe-speaking populations were the dominant presence.

good tailor and button-maker. As soon as he knew that I was in the port he came to see me and paid a call on me with great enthusiasm. He embraced me, saying that he could not believe it was me he saw, and that God had brought me there so that he could do me some service. For this I gave him thanks, saying that I was very pleased to see him too, so that I could give him news of his master and mistress and acquaintances, but that I was distressed to see him dressed in a Mandinga smock, with amulets of his fetishes (gods) around his neck [*com nominas dos seus feitiços ao pescoço*], to which he replied: ‘Sir, I wear this dress because I am nephew of Sandeguil, lord of this town, whom the *tangomaos* call duke, since he is the person who commands after the king. On the death of Sandeguil, my uncle, I will be inheritor of all his goods, and for this reason I dress in the clothes that your Honour sees, but I do not believe the Law of Mohammed, rather I abhor it. I believe in the Law of Christ Jesus, and so that your Honour may know that what I say is true’—he took off his smock, beneath which he wore a doublet and shirt in our fashion, and from around his neck drew out a rosary of Our Lady—‘every day I commend myself to God and the Virgin Our Lady by means of this rosary. And if I do not die, but come to inherit the estate of my uncle, I will see to it that some slaves are sent to Santiago, and when I have found a ship to take me I will go to live in that island and die among Christians.’ It was no small advantage to me to meet him in the Gambia, because he was of service to me in everything, and what I bought was at the price current among the people themselves, very different from the price they charged the *tangomaos*. And he served me as interpreter and linguist. . . .

(Donelha, p. 149)

In this passage there is a shift in the usage of *feitiço* to denote the active divine powers evoked through material amulets; the English translator’s gloss on *feitiços* of “gods” is clearly not quite right. As the subsequent discourse about “Fetissos” makes explicit, the understanding of Europeans familiar with West Africa was that Fetissos were not false gods in the traditional sense, but rather were quasi-personal divine powers associated more closely with the materiality of the sacramental object than would be an independent immaterial demonic spirit. Of greater moment, in any event, was the need to use *feitiços* and rosaries as marks of allegiance and social identity. Clearly Gaspar Vaz was a young man who used his multiple identity as slave in the Christian order and noble in the Mandinga order to his advantage in the Islamic-ruled city of Casan. Whether Gaspar Vaz habitually went around with pagan amulets on the outside and Christian

rosaries underneath his clothes, or whether, as is equally likely, he trapped himself out thus that day in order more easily to effect his acceptance by Andre Donelha as the latter's middleman in Casan, it is clear that such tokens were of practical importance in establishing social relations and performing commercial transactions in the complex social formation of the "Guinea" coast.

The complexity of this world is vividly evoked in a note on the above passage by P. E. H. Hair explaining the term *tangomaos*:

[*Tangomaos* were] Portuguese speaking adventurers and traders who made their home on the Guinea mainland, in defiance of the orders of the crown, and who married there and established mulatto families. Some were religious dissidents, especially Jews, some criminals escaping the law, some economic entrepreneurs from non-privileged parts of the Portuguese empire challenging the metropolitan centralism of the crown. They were particularly disliked by orthodox 'loyal' Portuguese because they cooperated with non-Portuguese white traders.

(Donelha, p. 239)

Transactions in this complex intercultural world, crossed by many different African and European languages but with no language of its own, were increasingly mediated by groups such as the *Tangomaos*—whose very existence depended on their location between alien cultures. The pidgin "Fetisso" developed out of this practical situation. By the time the first great wave of Dutch ships arrived on the Guinea coast in the late 1590s, a complex usage of "Fetisso," combining descriptive and pragmatic functions, had come into being. Lacking texts by the "middlemen" themselves, the formative process of the discourse about "Fetissos" must be reconstructed through readings of subsequent European texts.

"Fetisso": origin of the idea of the fetish

In 1593 Bernard Erecsz returned to the Netherlands from captivity on the island of São Tomé, where he had learned of the lucrative trade in gold and ivory on the Guinea coast. In 1580 Portugal had been annexed by Spain. The Dutch had been in revolt against the Spanish Habsburg empire since 1555. (Calvinism had been adopted as the official church of the Dutch Republic at the Synod of Antwerp in 1566.) The merchants sent to trade on the Guinea coast by the

Dutch in the late 1590s and early 1600s were self-conscious agents of secular economic enterprise and national policy.⁴¹ Their writings express a mentality far different from those of the Portuguese crusaders (although not so different from earlier texts by merchants, such as the fifteenth-century account of the Venetian Cadamosto). Efficiently organized under the Dutch West Indies Company after 1621, the Protestant Dutch completely ousted the Portuguese from the Gold and Slave Coasts by 1642.

In the texts of these Calvinist Dutch, and in later English and French texts, we find the explicit assertion of identity between African fetishes and Catholic sacramental objects. In his 1602 text, Marees speaks of the Fetissos of the Akan peoples: "They also hang divers Wispes of straw about their Girdles, which they tie full of Beanes, and other Venice Beades, esteeming them to be their Fetissos, or Saints [*hare Fetissos, of Sainctos*] . . ." (Marees, p. 217 [Dutch, p. 39]). These beads are also referred to by Marees as "*Paternosters*." A century later another Dutch merchant, Willem Bosman, wrote: "If it was possible to convert the Negroes to the Christian Religion, the Roman-Catholics would succeed better than we should, because they already agree in several particulars, especially in their ridiculous Ceremonies. . . ." ⁴² Following Bosman, the Englishman Astley wrote in the 1740s:

. . . it is certain that the *Whidah* Negroes [*Whidah* was the principle slave port for Dahomey] have a faint idea of a true God, ascribing to him the Attributes of Almighty Power and Omnipresence. They believe he created the Universe, and therefore prefer him before their *Fetishes*; but they do not pray to him, or offer him any Sacrifices, for which they give the following Reasons: God, say they, is too high exalted above us, and too great to

41. Marees writes, "Troubles and warres in the Netherlands, constrained us to seek Traffique here also, and to undertake this voyage, by that meanes to put the Portugalls from it, which in the end we did . . ."—"A description and historicall declaration of the golden Kingdome of Guinea . . ." in Purchas, Samuel, *Hakluytus Posthumus, or Purchas His Pilgrimes*, vol. VI (Glasgow: MacLehose, 1905), pp. 280–81. For the Dutch, see Marees, Pieter de, *Beschryvinghe ende Historische Verhael van het Gout Koninckrijk van Gunea* ('s-Gravenhage: Nijhoff, 1912). In the years immediately after its publication in Dutch in 1602, a French translation appeared and a Dutch version was included in De Bry's collection. The English translation in Purchase did not appear till 1625. It was Marees's text that introduced the term "Fetisso" into the languages of northern Europe.

42. Bosman, Willem, *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea* (London: Cass, 1967), p. 154.

condescend to think of Mankind; wherefore he commits the Government of the World to our *Fetishes*, to whom, as the second, third, and fourth Persons distant in Degree from God, and our appointed lawful Governors, we are obliged to apply ourselves. And in firm Belief of this Opinion they quietly continue.

As this is the very same Apology which the *Romish* Church and Priests make for their Images, it is plain, as Loyer has already observed, that they consider their *Fetishes*, only as material Objects qualified with certain Virtues and Powers, by the supreme Deity, for the Benefit of his Creatures [i.e., as opposed to considering the fetish objects as themselves gods].⁴³

Neither fully personal gods, nor fully impersonal charms or amulets, Fetissos were, simultaneously, quasi-personal powers and material objects that were capable of being influenced both through acts of worship, such as making food offerings, and through manipulations of material substances. It was the distinction between “fetishes” and “gods,” and a belief in the former’s historical priority, that led Charles de Brosses in 1757 to coin the term *fétichisme* by way of contrast to the term “polytheism.” In the seventeenth-century voyage accounts, this notion of the fetish tends to be set within a theoretical frame not quite suited to it, that of Protestant Christianity’s iconoclastic repudiation of any material, earthly agency — whether a small religious object or the Pope in Rome — that claimed to serve as an intermediary between the individual believer and his God.

This Protestant denial of any true religious function for any material object was a view well within the horizon of traditional Christian thought. This view, however, was just one of several factors contributing to the first and central theme of the fetish idea: its status as a value-bearing material object. In these voyage texts, one finds that the conception of the material object is influenced both by Protestant Christian ideas and by descriptive conventions peculiar to this form of literary production and to its immediate audience of merchants and sailors. In particular, as I hope to show elsewhere in a more detailed examination of the text of Willem Bosman, the textual practice of these navigators *cum* merchants made three sorts of material objects paradigmatic for the conception of the true nature of material objects (and of nature itself). These were

(1) the Europeans’ own relatively novel technological objects (above all, ships and navigational apparatus, surveying instruments, and firearms), (2) native objects of various animate and inanimate sorts classifiable as potential commodities, and (3) entities of no economic value but significant due to the potential danger they represented to the European trader attempting to penetrate unknown territory to obtain goods and profits. As paradigmatic examples of the powers and operation of the material world, their most prominent aspects were conceived to be the impersonality of their mode of being and operating, and their perceived transcultural significance. (That is, a gun or a tiger does what it does regardless of the cultural preconceptions of its victim; just so, a bolt of cloth or a meat-yielding hog have a practical value independent of cultural interpretations and superstitious fancies.) Although I do not have space in the present essay to support my proposition, it was the resultant reinterpretation of nature emphasizing the fundamental impersonality of material happenings that was the basis of the new “enlightened” definition of superstition as the personification of impersonal natural forces, accompanied by the attribution of end-oriented intentionality to chance events and to objects randomly associated in contingent experience. This in itself was not a new theory of superstition, as readers of Lucretius know; what is novel is the ideological function of this theory when conjoined to ideologemes arising from identification with new quantitative technologies like navigation and ballistics, within a new commercial consciousness fostered by novel forms of economic organization (such as the Dutch West Indies Company).

Indeed, for seventeenth-century European merchants, the economically valuable material object often became the very basis and medium for social relationships; this occurred in limited liability trading partnerships, in which individuals were bound together through joint ownership of some asset for the duration of a given venture.⁴⁴ In associated developments in political and legal argument, material objects came to be identified as proper to economic *as opposed to* religious activity. So Grotius argued in 1609 when he denied the Pope’s right to grant Portuguese trade monopolies: “Trade has only to do with material gains, and has no concern at all with spiritual matters, outside of which, as all admit, Papal power ceases” (quoted in Riemersma, p. 27).

43. Astley, Thomas, *A New General Collection of Voyages and Travels*, vol. III (London: Astley, 1746), p. 25. The reference to Loyer is to P. Godefroy Loyer, *Relation du voyage du royaume d’Issyng* (Paris, 1714).

44. See Riemersma, Jelle C., *Religious Factors in Early Dutch Capitalism, 1550–1650* (The Hague: Mouton, 1967). pp. 55–57.

This not only articulated the attitude of merchants such as Marees and Bosman, but it resonated with the specific problems they encountered in trying to trade with non-Christian African societies.

The key notion that was elaborated to explain perceived African confusion regarding the religious and economic value of material objects was that of the trifle. Early European voyagers were above all interested in trading for gold. Prior to the discovery of the Mina coast, gold was obtained in the form of rings, bracelets, and other personal ornaments. In a typical passage, the fifteenth-century Venetian trader Cadamosto recounts how “from the Negroes in canoes [at the River Jeba] we obtained some gold rings in exchange for some trifles [*di alcune cosette*], buying and selling without speaking to them.”⁴⁵ The successful trading of “trifles” of little or no value for gold thematized the issue of differential value systems among different cultures. In the first part of this essay I mentioned Cadamosto’s puzzled remark concerning 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” (Cadamosto, p. 68). Enciso’s 1518 text (as copied by Barlow) says of the Mina trade: “To this castle [São Jorge da Mina] the negros bryng the golde that thei gather . . . and selleth it for trucke of cloth of colour and rynges of latyn, shells, and other tryfles. . . .”⁴⁶ While it was precisely such “false” estimation of the value of things that provided the desired huge profit rates of early European traders, it also evoked a contempt for a people who valued “trifles” and “trash.” This became intensified in the texts of eighteenth-century slave traders.

Just as blacks seemed to overestimate the economic value of trifles, so they were perceived to attribute religious value to trifling objects. Indeed at one point Marees refers contemptuously to the Fetissero’s “trinkets” (*cramerye*—in Dutch a *Kramer* is a pedlar and his small wares are *Kramerje*) (Marees, p. 293 [Dutch, p. 72]). Fetissos are referred to by Marees as “trifles” (*beuzeling*), “apish,” “foolish,” and “childish toys” (*Apenspel, guychelspel, and Kinderspel*). Fetish

45. Cadamosto, Alvise da, *The Voyages of Cadamosto*, tr. G. R. Crone (London: Hakluyt Society, 1937), p. 76; for the Italian see Ca da Mosto, Alvise da, “Delle Navigazioni di Messer Alvise Da Ca Da Mosto, Gentiluomo Veneziano,” in Ramusio, Di Giovambattista, *Viaggio e Navigazioni*, vol. I, (Venice: 1837), p. 198.

46. Barlow, Roger, *A Brief Summe of Geographie*, ed. E. G. P. Taylor (London: Hakluyt Society, 1929).

worship is termed idolatry (*Afgoderie*) and superstitious (*superstiteus*). Subsequent writers followed the same line. William Smith (the very model of an unoriginal writer on Guinea) declared in 1744 that

the most numerous Sect [in Guinea] are the *Pagans*, who trouble themselves about no Religion at all; yet every one of them have [sic] some Trifle or other, to which they pay a particular Respect, or Kind of Adoration, believing it can defend them from all Danger’s: Some have a Lion’s Tail; some a Bird’s Feather, some a Pebble, a Bit of Rag, a Dog’s Leg; or, in short, any thing they fancy: And this they call their Fittish, which Word not only signifies the Thing worshipped, but sometimes a *Spell, Charm or Inchantment*.⁴⁷

Smith’s assertion that any trifling object might become a fetish if chosen by “fancy” introduces the second theme of the fetish, that of its radical historicity. Before moving to this theme, however, there is a final component to the theme of the material object and its valuation which must be considered.

In accounts imbued with a thoroughgoing mercantile ideology—such as that of Bosman—the alleged false religious values of African fetish worshipers were understood to cause the Africans’ false economic valuation of material objects. Superstitious delusion (and its exploitation by wily, self-interested fetish priests) was seen to block natural reason and rational market activity. And this superstitious mentality was in turn explained through anecdotes illustrating the Africans’ alleged propensity to personify European technological objects.

In his fifteenth-century voyage account, the Venetian merchant Cadamosto mentioned that the blacks marvelled at the Europeans’ guns and said they must be “an invention of the devil’s.”

They were also struck with admiration by the construction of our ship, and by her equipment—masts, sails, rigging, and anchors. They were of the opinion that the portholes in the bows of the ship were really eyes by which the ships saw whither they were going over the sea. They said we must be great wizards [*grandi incantatori*], almost the equal of the devil, for men that journey by land have difficulty in knowing the way from place to place, while we journeyed by sea, and, as they were given to understand, remained out of sight of land for many days, yet knew which direction to take, a thing only possible through the power of the devil. This appeared so to them

47. Smith, William, *A New Voyage to Guinea* (London: Nourse, 1744), p. 26.

because they do not understand the art of navigation, the compass, or the chart.

(*Cadamosto*, p. 51; *Ramusio*, p. 190)

Here is the first appearance in European voyage accounts of a figure of thought and type of argument that has ever since been employed to explain the primitiveness of the primitive and his difference from the civilized man: the African's ignorance of certain technology (later ideologized as the lack of a scientific mentality) leads to a false perception of causality. What to Europeans is a purely technical matter to be understood instrumentally is superstitiously apprehended by the primitive as involving supernatural agency.⁴⁸ In the discourse about fetishes, this impression of the primitive's propensity to personify technological objects—or to regard them as vehicles of a supernatural causality—becomes conjoined to the mercantile perception that the non-European gives false values to material objects. The superstitious misunderstanding of causality is understood to explain the false estimation of the value of material objects. From this developed a general discourse about the superstitiousness of non-Europeans within a characteristically modern rhetoric of realism, which recognized as “real” only technological and commercial values. This is what people like John Atkins (author of a 1737 account entitled *Voyage to Guinea, Brazil, and the West Indies*) had in mind when they made such statements as “infant Reason cannot reach above a material God.”⁴⁹ For merchants and secular intellectuals of the eighteenth century, reason was above all the capacity to apprehend the material world of nature as determined by impersonal operations (determined by mechanistic laws of causality). In this discourse, superstition is defined as the attribution of personal intent to the events of material nature.

We may trace the second theme of the fetish idea from the most commonplace judgment regarding black African societies before and after the Portuguese voyages of discovery: that they were societies of complete chaos lacking any principle of social order,

48. Another such anecdote is related by William Smith concerning the flight of villagers when he was engaged in surveying: “the foolish natives [his company slaves informed him] were all terrified at my surveying Instruments, being sure that I came there with a Design to bewitch them!” (p. 15). Nineteenth-century accounts are full of such anecdotes.

49. Atkins, John, *A Voyage to Guinea, Brazil, and the West-Indies* (London: 1737), p. 84.

“without a God, lawe, religion, or commonwealth,” as the English captain Lok wrote in his account of a voyage of 1554.⁵⁰ Usually no reason was given for this state of affairs in early accounts beyond the Africans' ignorance of the true Faith.⁵¹ Nevertheless, as I have already discussed, when Europeans became more familiar with African societies, they increasingly viewed fetish-worship as the principle underlying the paradox of these societies, which seemed to exist and endure without any law or true rule of social order.

As in William Smith's typical identification of the fetish as an overvalued trifle, it came to be argued that it was not reason (which produces “the rule of law”) that determined African fetish-worship and social order, but rather “fancy” or “caprice.” “Their fetishes are diverse,” writes Loyer in 1702, “according to the diverse fantasy of each” (“*Ces fétiches sont diverses, selon la diverse fantaisie d'un chacun*”).⁵² Thus African society came to be understood as being organized by an *irrational* and *arbitrary* psychological principle of social order. Christian discourse viewed this as the product of man's following the “law of nature” in the absence of revealed knowledge of God; secular discourse viewed it as the product of fancy or imagination in the absence of natural reason. The baffling diversity of what Africans (or, more properly, interpreters and middlemen) termed “fetish” was thus simply a function of the infinite diversity of the human imagination unrestrained by reason.

The specific explanation of the disordered order of fetishes was articulated in accounts of the alleged manner of their origin, what we may term the “first

50. Lok, John, “The Second Voyage to Guinea set out by Sir George Barne, Sir John Yorke, Thomas Lok, Anthonie Hickman and Edward Catleyn, in the yeare 1554,” in *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Navie*, ed. Richard Hakluyt, vol. VI (Glasgow: MacLehose, 1904), p. 154.

51. An exception is the Arab writer Al-Dimashqui, who wrote in the early fourteenth century and was clearly under the influence of Aristotle: “Their [black Africans'] brains have little moisture and therefore their intelligence is dim, their thoughts not sustained, and their minds dull so that opposites, such as reliability and treachery, good faith and deceit are not found in them. No divinely revealed laws [*nawamis* from the Greek *nomos*] have come to them, nor has any prophet been sent among them, for they are incapable of unifying opposites, whereas the concept of lawfulness is precisely commanding and forbidding, desiring and abstaining” — translated by J. F. P. Hopkins in *Corpus of early Arabic sources for West African History*, eds. N. Levtzion and J. F. P. Hopkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 148.

52. Loyer, P. 213. In a later passage (p. 217) he writes: “*Chacun fait lui-même ses fétiches, et les choisit à sa volonté.*”

encounter" theory of fetish formation. Le Maire claims that non-Islamicized blacks of Sierra Leone "worship the first Thing they meet in a Morning."⁵³ The French merchant Barbot writes that "they make deities of any thing that is new to them, or extraordinary in itself, a large tall tree, the bones of a whale, high rocks, etc. so that it may be said of them, their gods are any thing that is prodigious. . . ."⁵⁴ More specifically, this explanation, whose key category is "novelty," was elaborated in terms of the chance conjuncture of a momentary desire or purpose and some random object brought to the desirer's attention. The classic statement of this first encounter theory is that of Bosman:

He [Bosman's principal African informant] obliged me with the following Answer, 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 itself 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.

(Bosman, p. 367a)

African fetish worship (and hence African society) was thus revealed to be based on the principles of chance encounter and the arbitrary fancy of imagination conjoined with desire.

The preceding discussion has already introduced the third basic theme of the fetish, that of its relation to a particular social order. Some explanation of the significance of fetishes for social relations was especially necessary for Europeans striving to form trade relations with African societies. By the time of Marees's 1602 text, it was clear to Europeans that in African society the "Fetisso" performed the functions of various European political, legal, and juridical institutions. In

53. See the English translation attributed to "Monsieur Duquesne," *A New Voyage to the East Indies in the years 1690 and 1691* (London: 1696), p. 78. Like many of the concepts and figures contributing to the idea of the fetish, the notion of primitives who worship the first thing they see in the morning was a commonplace of accounts of exotic lands long before the Portuguese voyages of discovery.

54. Barbot, John, "A description of the coasts of north and south Guinea," in *A Collection of Voyages and Travels*, ed. Awnsam Churchill, vol. V (London: 1752), p. 310.

one passage, Marees discusses the function of a particular fetish ceremony involving a drink:

This Drinke among them is as much an Oath, and is called Enchionkenou; which they make of the same green herbs whereof they make their Fetissos; and as they say, it hath such a force, that if a man drinketh it falsely, their Fetisso causeth him presently to die; but if he drink it innocently, then their Fetisso suffereth him to live.

(Marees, p. 316)

To Marees the force of fetish oaths was clearly the reason for the stability of African social order. Indeed his first mention of "Fetissos" concerns their use in trials involving a husband's accusation of adultery against his wife:

. . . if he cannot learne that his wife hath committed such a fact, by information of other men, but presumeth it of himselfe, or suspecteth that his wife hath laine with any other man, he chargeth her with it, and making her eat certaine Salt, useth other Ceremonies of their Idolatrous Fetissos [*andere beswerighe van haere Afgoderie of Fetissos*], wherewith the woman knowing her selfe to be cleere, and not to have committed adultery with an other man, willingly taketh her oath. But knowing her selfe to be faulty, she dare not take her oathe fearing, that if she should forswear her selfe, her Fetisso would make her die. . . .

(Marees, p. 257; Dutch, p. 20)

Marees describes the use of Fetissos as charms worn to protect against disease and misfortune, as objects of pious offering, as oracles, as idols, as good luck tokens in fishing and in war, as well as oath-vehicles. But the function of Fetissos in oath-taking was of particular importance to European merchants searching for the means to establish permanent and trustworthy trade relations. Many early voyage accounts relate instances of Africans who required the Europeans to take an oath upon some material object before they would agree to transact trade.⁵⁵ Europeans often expressed frustration at the unreliability of such pseudocontracts. Marees writes:

In their Promises or Oathes which they make unto us, they are unconstant and full of untruth, but such promises as they make among themselves, they keepe and observe

55. An example may be found in William Towerson's account of his 1555 voyage: "About nine of the cloke there came boates to us forth . . . and brought with them certaine teeth [i.e., ivory], and after they had caused me the sweare by the water of the Sea that I would not hurt them, they came aboard our ship . . ."—"The first

them well, and will not breake them: when they make any Oathes or Promises, specially, when they will shew it to our Netherlanders. First, they wipe their faces upon the sole of your foot, and then doe the like upon their shoulders and brests, and upon all their bodies, speaking thrice each to other, saying, lau, lau, lau, everie time clapping hands together, and stamping with their feet upon the ground, which done they kiss their Fetisso, which they have upon their legges and armes: some for the more assurance of their Promises and Oathes, will drinke certaine drinke, as I have said before: but he that should repose much trust therein, should soonest find himself deceived, because they are not to be credited further than you see them.

(Marees, p. 319)

It is clear, however, that European merchants and the heads of trade forts on the coast frequently routinized the taking of fetish-oaths in cross-cultural transactions. "Captain Shurley," writes Thomas Phillips, "us'd to make his negros aboard take the fatish, that they would not swim ashore and run away, and then would let them out of his irons. His potion was a cup of English beer, with a little aloes in it to embitter it, which operated upon their faith as much as if it had been made by the best fatishes in Guinea."⁵⁶ Another slave trader, Snelgrave, recounts at one point in his narrative how, uncertain of his reception by a certain local king, he sent his surgeon ashore, who in the evening sent him a letter informing him that all was well: "For . . . the Lord of the Place had taken his Fetiche or Oath, in presence of a *French* and *Dutch* Gentleman: On his Assurance I landed the next Day, and went up to the Town. . . ."⁵⁷ There are several anecdotes regarding the regular use of the Bible as the vehicle for fetish-oaths (see, for instance, Bosman, p. 134).

In each of these three themes of the fetish idea, we see that explanatory concepts, which might be (and which by Enlightenment writers were) treated as abstract principles, in fact emerged out of concrete problems faced by merchants on the African

coast. They were shaped and articulated with each other as much out of the practical experiences and presuppositions of these merchants as by these men's objective observations of the alien practices of African societies. The final theme that emerged as part of the fetish idea concerned the distinctive relation of the fetish object to the embodied self of its worshiper.

The fetish-oaths described by Marees and others were characterized as depending for their power (thereby maintaining the fabric of social order) on the superstitious credulity and personal fear of the people. That a fetish was believed to have the power of life and death over an individual was a commonplace of European fetish discourse. This sanctioning power through magical belief and violent emotion was understood to take the place of the rational institutional sanctions that empowered the legal systems of European states (at least those free of "Romish" superstitions). Indeed the paradox of African society as it was understood in these texts was that social order was dependent on psychological facts rather than political principles.

In addition, what was most distinctive about fetishes was that they were worn about the believer's body or were consumed internally. It was not the spiritual state of the believer's soul, but rather the physical state of his or her body that mediated the relation of the fetish-worshiper to divine power. Thus fetishes were external objects whose religious power consisted of their status almost as personal organs affecting the health and concrete life of the individual. For instance, Marees gives a long list of fetishes worn by children:

The children being a moneth or two old, then they hang a Net about the bodie thereof, like a little shirt, which is made of the barke of a tree, which they hang full of their Fetissos, as golden Crosses, strings with Coral about their hands, feet, and neckes, and their haire is filled full of shels, wherof they make great account, for they say, that as long as the young childe hath that Net about him, the Devill cannot take nor beare the child away, and leaving it off, the Devill would carrie it away, for they say, the childe being so little, it would not bee strong enough to resist the Devill, but having the Net upon the bodie, it is armed, and then the Devill hath no power over it; the Corals which they hang about the child, which they call a Fetisso, they esteem much, for that hanging such a Fetisso about the childes necke, they say, it is good against vomiting; the second Fetisso, which they hang about his necke, they say, it is good against falling the third, they say, is good against bleeding; the fourth is very good to procure sleepe, which they hang about the necke thereof,

voyage made by Master William Towerson Marchant of London, to the coast of Guinea, with two ships, in the yeare 1555," in Hakluyt, Richard, *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Navie*, vol. VI (Glasgow: MacLehose, 1904), p. 191.

56. Quoted in Wolfson, Freda, *Pageant of Ghana* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 76.

57. Snelgrave, William, *A New Account of Guinea, and the Slave Trade* (London: 1754), p. 22.

in the night-time, that it may sleepe well; the fift, is good against wild beasts, and the unwholesomenes of the Aire, with divers other such like Fetissos, each having a name a-part, to shew what vertue it hath, and what they are good for. . . .

(*Marees*, p. 260; *Dutch*, p. 24)

The fetish's special relation to the believer's body was thus evident both through its being worn like an ornament and through its power to protect physical health or to inflict illness or even death. Thus what was marginal to the Christian theory of idolatrous superstition—vain observances and *veneficia*—was central in the conception of the fetish.

The novel idea of the Fetisso that emerged out of the cross-cultural interaction on the West African coast was utterly alien to the ideas of the Christian theory of idolatry. Where Christian theory identified two distinct entities, the material idol and the demonic spirit invoked through it, the discourse of the Fetisso spoke of the deluded personification of material objects whose true efficacy lay in physical and psychological rather than spiritual causality. The Christian idol was produced as an image, whereas the Fetisso was a radically novel production associating things and purposes momentarily conjoined in a random event. The social principle of the idol was the pact verbally enacted between a human soul and a demonic spirit, whereas the social power of the Fetisso lay in binding oaths enacted through physical acts and consumption of material substances more proper to *veneficia* than idolatry. Similarly, the power of Fetissos to affect personal health and fortune followed the metonymic logic of amulets rather than the metaphoric logic of idols. Christian theory located the principle of freedom and novel interaction with divine power in the nonmaterial substance of the human soul; the novel apprehension of divine power in the Fetisso occurred in the contingent events of the material world.

For the European merchant, the Fetisso posed a

double problem, a double perversion. First, the status of commercially valuable objects as Fetissos complicated his ability to acquire them as commodities and seemed to distort their relative exchange value. This often led to transactions with an exceptionally high rate of profit, but it also caused difficulties since the locals often regarded the desired objects in a personal, social, or religious register rather than an economic one. Second, to effect economic transactions, merchants had to accept the preliminary swearing of oaths upon Fetissos—a perversion of the natural processes of economic negotiation and legal contact. Desiring a clean economic interaction, seventeenth-century merchants unhappily found themselves entering into social relations and quasi-religious ceremonies that should have been irrelevant to the conduct of trade were it not for the perverse superstitions of their trade partners. The general theory of fetishism that emerged in the eighteenth century was determined by the problematic specific to this novel historical situation.

In the eighteenth century, the basic conception of the Fetisso was elaborated into the general theory of primitive fetishism by Enlightenment thinkers such as de Brosses. The themes and problematic specific to the notion were shaped by the novel cross-cultural situation of the African coast in the preceding centuries. The central idea of the fetish concerned the error of worshiping material objects, an idea Tertullian and Augustine would have been thoroughly comfortable with. But the complex of themes focused around this central idea express a problem unrelated to Christian preoccupations: the problem of how any personal or social value could be attributed to material objects whose only "natural" values were instrumental and commercial. In a subsequent essay I hope to trace the characteristic Enlightenment ideologization of this problematic as it first appeared in articulate form in Willem Bosman's *Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea* (1704) and was subsequently taken up by theory-building intellectuals of the period of the *Encyclopédie*.