

The problem of the fetish, IIIa

Bosman's Guinea and the enlightenment theory of fetishism

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One of the ways of extending the range of anthropology is traveling, or at least reading travelogues.

Kant, Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View

In my second essay in *Res* (Pietz 1987), I traced the origin of the term "Fetisso."¹ I argued that it came to express a novel idea whose fundamental problematic lay outside the theoretical horizon of Christian theology despite its linguistic derivation from Christian juristic discourse as the Spanish and Portuguese word for "witchcraft." In that essay, the formation of the fetish idea in sixteenth-century Afro-European discourse was explored in terms of a shift in core concepts: the key Christian ideas about witchcraft were "manufactured resemblance" and "voluntary verbal pact," whereas the central concepts of the Fetisso were "personification of material objects" and "fixed belief in an object's supernatural power arising in the chance or arbitrary conjunctions." Indeed, I argued that what was most marginal and conceptually obscure for the Christian theory of witchcraft—"vain observances" and "*veneficia*"—became central in the notion of the Fetisso.

In the present essay I look more closely at the complex idea of the fetish found in the travelogues written by northern European merchants and clerics visiting black Africa, texts that were read and appropriated by radical intellectuals of what might be called the anti-Leibnizian moiety among champions of the Enlightenment (a category broad enough to include figures as theoretically diverse as Hume, Voltaire, de Brosses, and Kant). In the first two sections, I reconsider the original idea of the Fetisso, not in order to contrast it with feudal Christian thought as in my previous essay, but in order to grasp its practical and ideological

1. Due to its length, this essay appears in two parts: the first half appears here; the rest will be published in *Res* 17, spring 1989. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Francesco Pellizzi, the editor of *Res*, both for his extensive suggestions regarding revisions of this essay and for his understanding when I preferred my original formulations. Any infelicitous diction or unnecessary obscurity in this text is my responsibility entirely.

significance for the commerce-minded Europeans who authored the travel accounts. In particular I focus on the 1703 text of the Dutch merchant Willem Bosman and on accounts of the serpent worship at the slave port of Ouidah, for these were, respectively, the great authority on black Africa and the paradigmatic example of a fetish cult for eighteenth-century Europe.² For merchants like Bosman, as for the clerics who accompanied them, such as the French priest Loyer who first asserted the nontheistic status of African fetishes, the worship of fetishes represented the central institution of African culture and society and the one most responsible for its perceived perversity. It was Bosman's explicit thesis that African fetish worship was founded on the twin pillars of "superstition" and "interest." African society, conceived according to the mercantile ideology of traders such as Bosman, was a world turned morally upside down by officially enforced superstitious delusion that suppressed men's reasoning faculties. The "fetish worship" examined in the first half of this essay thus pertains not to the real West Africa of the eighteenth century but rather to Enlightenment Europe's image of "Guinea."³

2. Various spellings: "Whydah," "Whidah," "Whidaw," "Ouidah," "Juida," "Juda," and, by Bosman, "Fida." This was the principal port for slaves from Dahomey. In Bosman's day it was an independent Ewe-ruled state; not many years after his departure it was conquered by Dahomey (see note 36 below).

3. We might take the word "Guinea" as itself an emblem of a novel problem constitutive of the new discourse and theory characteristic of the Enlightenment. "Guinea" was the word used to designate black Africa—a non-European, nonmonotheist land not covered by the histories and cultural codes of old Europe or classical antiquity. But "guinea" was also the word for the gold coin, which, being the first machine-manufactured coin and therefore the first coin immune to debasement by clipping and shaving around the edges, helped bring about Europe's unprecedented monetary stability after 1726. (This is the date given by Pierre Vilar in his chapter on "The 18th Century Conjuncture" in *A History of Gold and Money, 1450–1920*, tr. Judith White, [Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1976],

Bosman's Guinea was a world of public corruption and popular delusion created by the libertine and priest-ridden religion of fetish worship. For Enlightenment intellectuals, fetish-worshipping Guinea became the definitively extreme example of a society made immoral, a government made unjust, and a people kept irrational by the economically self-interested promulgation of religious delusion. The African fetish worshiper became the very image of the truth of "unenlightenment," as a reading of Voltaire's *Candide* in the third section of this essay (Res 17, spring 1989) will argue. In this and a final section of the essay I trace the appropriation of the "travelers'" discourse about fetish worship by French intellectuals of the age of the *Encyclopedie*. It was in this period, the late 1750s and early 1760s, that the Burgundian *philosophe* Charles de Brosses first proposed a general theory of fetishism and coined the term "*fétichisme*."

My particular concern in what follows is to trace both the continuity in descriptive and explanatory concepts of African fetish worship and the discontinuity in regard to ideological purpose found between two sets of texts: the firsthand accounts of Guinea and the philosophical writings of Enlightenment intellectuals. Continuous is the conception of fetish religion as the worship of haphazardly chosen material objects believed to be endowed with purpose, intention, and a direct power over the material life of both human beings and the natural world. This conception implied a type of materialistic cult incommensurable with traditional Christian categories: the alternative of monotheism (with its three varieties of Christianity,

pp. 253–262. For the story of the guinea, see John Porteus, *Coins in History* [New York: Putnam, 1969], pp. 212–214, 219, 233.) The connection between the two meanings of the word is, of course, not arbitrary; the coin was first struck in 1668 by the English Royal African Company from gold it imported from West Africa. It is almost as if between these two psychogeographical poles of the distant strange land and the new mysteriously monetarized Europe, all natural objects with commodity value appeared in a new, exotic light, almost a new field of consciousness. For "Guinea" was also an adjective added to familiar nouns to name new things and species that now appeared in Europe as commodities imported from far-off lands: not just "Guinea gold" but "Guinea fowl," "Guinea hens," "Guinea corn," "Guinea pepper," "Guinea wood," and so on. Indeed, the adjective "Guinea" came to stand for any far-off land, not just black Africa. For instance, "guinea pigs" are from South America. And of course a "New Guinea" was discovered in the South Seas already in 1545. Finally, the word "Guinea" connoted the greatest and most profitable of contemporary abominations: the African slave trade. A "Guinea ship" was a slave ship, and a "Guinea trader" a slave-dealer.

Judaism, and Islam) or polytheism (an amorphous range of cult activity all classifiable as idolatry: the worship of false gods). Making this implication explicit in his original treatment of *fétichisme*, de Brosses' new theoretical terminology redefined the problem of historical religion from one of identifying the varieties of theistic belief to that of deriving types of belief from people's "manner of thinking" about causal powers in material nature. This shift displaced the problem from theological discourse to a psychological-aesthetic discourse consistent with the emerging project of the human sciences.

Also continuous between travel accounts of Guinea and theoretical Enlightenment writings was the idea that African fetish worship was an institutionalized religious delusion that functioned effectively in maintaining the (allegedly perverse) social fabric of black nations. The efficacy of fetish beliefs to sanction all forms of social obligation (from marriage and sexual fidelity to political loyalty and commercial contractual agreements) was understood to derive from its core religious delusion: that the fetish would supernaturally cause the physical death of those who broke faith. Fetishism thus represented a principle of social order based on an irrational fear of supernaturally caused death rather than a rational understanding of the impersonally just rule of law. It therefore revealed the true political principle (always supplemented by arbitrary despotic violence) that governed all *unenlightened* societies, since ignorance about the workings of physical causality—the very definition of a mentality lacking "enlightenment"—provided the ground of religious delusion necessary for this system of social obligation to work. As a fundamental principle of both individual mentality and social organization, fetish worship was the paradigmatic illustration of what was *not* enlightenment.

What is discontinuous in the text of fetish worship between the travelogues and Enlightenment philosophy is the implicit judgment regarding the moral value of "interest" as a motive. Bosman and other authors employed by the various national Indies companies presented a picture of African fetish worship as the perversion of that very rational self-interest which, in their view, should be the natural organizing principle of good social order. Intellectuals of the French Enlightenment reversed this interpretation, viewing exploitive fetish priests and greedy merchants as equal embodiments of the essentially antisocial motive of "interest." In this ideological reversal, the key



Figure 1. "Many Pigs Killed at Fida on account of having Devoured a Serpent of the idolators," from the 1705 French translation of W. Bosman's *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea*.

explanatory concepts in the discourse about fetishes were displaced from their original historically specific, mercantile context to the abstract ground of psychological and aesthetic theory.

The theoretical term "fetishism" was invented and received widespread acceptance during the third quarter of the eighteenth century. By the end of the century, it was established as the name of a widespread but distinctive historical reality and as a crucial term in learned debates about the history and nature of religion. Moreover, a certain rhetoric about fetish

worship had become a commonplace for Enlightenment polemicists, especially those who valued empirical observation over rational deduction. The final claim of this essay is that, by redefining the crucial problem of the history and nature of religion in an essentially empiricist and materialist manner, the idea of fetishism played a minor but significant role in establishing certain general preconceptions about human consciousness and the material world which were fundamental to the disciplinary human sciences that arose in the nineteenth century.

The discourse about Fetissos on the Guinea Coast

In the second half of the fifteenth century, the Portuguese crown established a presence on the Atlantic coast of Africa from Senegal to Angola. Unable to conquer the mainland, despite their superior weaponry, the Portuguese abandoned their ambitions for outright territorial empire by the end of the century.⁴ During the sixteenth century, under the quasi-feudal “contract system” of the Portuguese empire, trade monopolies (at least in theory) were granted to three groups: Cape Verdian colonists were given the trade of Senegambia and “Upper Guinea”; the planters of São Thomé, the trade of Congo and Benin; and, most important, a more direct imperial control was exercised over the Gold Coast trade organized around the mainland fort of São Jorge da Mina.⁵ These ostensible monopolies were frequently subverted by individual entrepreneurs and non-Portuguese interlopers, who stimulated the formation of an Afro-European cultural space outside the effective jurisdiction of the Portuguese empire. As recent historians have noted, “Until the end of the sixteenth century, the Portuguese dominated West African maritime trade in spite of sporadic rivalry from other European powers. During this period, a body of Afro-European commercial custom came into existence, with patterns of exchange and cross-cultural behavior that were to be remarkably stable until the second half of the nineteenth century” (Curtin et al. 1978: 224).

It was in the formation of this “body of Afro-European commercial custom” that the Portuguese word “*feitiço*”—meaning “an object or a practice pertaining to witchcraft”—came to designate a number of objects and practices that the Portuguese encountered among various African peoples. The constellation of old and new referents and meanings expressed in the word’s usage formed a distinctive semantic field or, perhaps more accurately, a novel intensity or locus for reflection within the semantic field of sixteenth-century Afro-European interaction. As other

4. This was in large part due to a mortality rate from yellow fever and malaria of about 50 percent for a European’s first year on the coast, a rate that continued until the discovery of quinine in the mid-nineteenth century.

5. Literally, “St. George of the Gold Mine,” St. George being the patron saint of Portugal. Founded in 1482 by the Portuguese crown after the agents of the Lisbon merchant Fernao Gomes, a sort of royal subcontractor, had discovered a source of significant gold trade among the Akan peoples, this most important European fort was later known as Elmina.

European nationals came to the coast, and as cross-cultural traffic in this social formation came increasingly to be mediated by entrepreneurial African middlemen and mulatto populations, the pidgin “Fetisso” took on increasing pragmatic and explanatory importance and theoretical suggestiveness.⁶ In addition to the noun “Fetisso,” African priests were called “Fetisseros” or “Fetisheers,” and a very important verbal phrase—“to make Fetiche” or “to take the Fetiche”—emerged. The word “Fetiche” itself was sometimes used as a verb. The formation and elaboration of this terminology constitutes the origin of the idea of the fetish.

The northern Europeans who ousted the Portuguese during the first half of the seventeenth century encountered the developed discourse of the Fetisso in spaces of routinized cross-cultural transaction: among the Afro-Portuguese population of Senegal, in the Islamic-ruled trading towns up the Gambia River, in the Mende chiefdoms of Sierra Leone, among African populations living within the shadow of European trade forts on the Gold Coast, and around the trade enclaves of the Slave Coast. These Protestant merchants were especially struck by the apparent confusion of Christian, Islamic, “pagan,” and even Jewish religious forms found among such populations. Visiting the coast in the seventeenth century, the Frenchman Le Blanc remarks that some African populations “have become subjects of the Portuguese, where they live in a manner so strange that it is hard to tell the idolater from the Christian . . .” (Le Blanc 1648: 33). Of the blacks of “Rio-Fresca” in Upper Guinea, Nicolas Villault remarks: “Their religion is extremely mixed: one finds there Catholics (outside of the Portuguese, who live there in great numbers), *Circumcizers* who come close to Judaism, *Mahometans*, and *Idolaters*. The latter have little sacks of leather hung from the neck, which they call FETICHES” (Villault 1669: 55–56).⁷

Bewilderment at this complex religious mix was deepened by a perceived African confusion of religious with nonreligious matters. Indeed, a careful reading of

6. Almost without exception, Europeans failed to learn African languages. Early ship-trade was effected by silent trade or outright pillage. From the beginning (in the 1440s), among the slaves taken by the Portuguese, some were sent back to Lisbon and trained as translators.

7. The medieval categorization of world religions according to the four “Faiths” can still be found in voyage accounts and collections throughout the eighteenth century, although this theoretical framework was implicitly undermined in the practical discourse about fetishes and their centrality in African religion and society, as I discuss below.

accounts of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries shows Europeans discovering in Guinea a strange conflation of six distinct kinds of value-objects: religious sacramental objects (such as their own crosses and rosaries); aesthetic or erotic objects (i.e., objects the Europeans understood to be chosen for their “beauty,” especially feminine ornamentation); commodifiable objects of economic value (especially gold pendants); quasi-medical, talismanic objects (i.e., charms for health, luck, and safety); objects used as oath-vehicles (similar to European use of the Bible in courtrooms); and technological objects of the Europeans themselves (whose causal efficacy the superstitious Africans allegedly personified). Although a great range of ritual practices and species of living beings were identified as “Fetissos” in Afro-European discourse, the paradigmatic image tended to be that of some inanimate material object: a wooden figure, a leather amulet, a gold necklace, a stone, a bone, a feather—by implication any material object at all, however useless or trivial. As Smith (1744: 26–27) explains, a fetish can be “any Thing they fancy”:

The most numerous sect [in Africa] are the *Pagans*, who trouble themselves about no Religion at all; yet every one of them have 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*. To take *Fittish*, is, to take an Oath; which Ceremony is variously perform’d in several Parts of Guinea.

Such baseless consecration of mundane material objects as this text describes seemed to imply a condition of mental confusion so extreme and yet so habitual that it could be taken (and was so taken by Smith and other authors) to characterize the essence of the African mentality. Moreover, this confusion of religious values with material objects was compounded by the African confusion of the sacred with other dimensions of value (aesthetic, erotic, economic, medical, sociopolitical, and technological), which were also found attributed to these capriciously chosen and childishly personified inanimate material objects. The novel idea forged in the discourse about Fetissos was formed from this very confusion: a confusion attributed to the African mentality by various middlemen addressing European merchants and by the Europeans themselves in the

course of describing and explaining their immediate pragmatic reality on the basis of the objective phantasm of African culture produced by the discourse about Fetissos. Out of the very difficulty in grasping the much-used word as a unitary concept, the term came to express a novel idea in European theoretical reflection and to thematize a novel general problem: that of the nature and origin of the social value of material objects.⁸

Consider the first type of African religious object noted by fifteenth-century European voyagers: the small charms commonly worn about the neck in Senegal and Gambia. Also referred to as “*nominas*” or “*gregories*,” these were small red leather packets containing a scrap of paper on which a line from the *Koran* had been written. Such were the “*nominas dos seus feitiços*” worn by Gaspar Vaz mentioned in my preceding essay (Pietz 1987: 38). Also regularly called “paternosters” or “Saints,” these charms were explicitly recognized as the African equivalents of Christian rosaries, small crosses, and other personal sacramental objects by means of which an individual believer sought divine intercession through the mediating powers of the saints.

Moreover, to these leather amulets were often added colored glass beads or other objects that to European eyes were mere ornament, “trifles” or “trash” of no conceivable value, religious or other.⁹ The following

8. The general problem of the nontranscendent origin and status of value was first posed in European theory around the time (end of the seventeenth century and beginning of the eighteenth) that the key texts on fetish worship appeared: Loyer’s account in 1702, Bosman’s in 1703. Around this time Petty and the mercantile economists first posed the theoretical problem of nonintrinsic economic value; Shaftesbury proposed the specificity and autonomy of aesthetic value; and Bayle and other “critics” set up moral values as an independent standard by which to judge the worth of different religions.

Here and throughout this work, I am approaching the history of theories of fetishism from the standpoint of what I understand to be dialectical materialism—an approach, as discussed by Adorno in *Negative Dialectics*, which affords no standpoint whatsoever (in the sense of a stable system of theoretical categories applicable to history from some ahistorical Archimedean point of abstract thought). The dialectical-materialist approach to the history of theory assumes that theory begins in the consciousness of contradiction, which leads historical actors to reflect (i.e., to seek to generalize from the particular) within a concrete historical situation and in terms of the discourse and categories formed in the pragmatic interactions that form the essence of any concrete historical context. Theory develops in the effort to explain and resolve such experienced contradictions by transforming the essential terms of the discourse proper to a type of historical interaction into the noncontradictory concepts of a formal system.

9. I have already discussed the frequent reference to fetishes as “trifles” and “toys” in Res 13: 41. The utter worthlessness of fetishes

passage by Nicolas Villault concerning the Sierra Leoneans expresses the characteristic bewilderment surrounding such objects:

Their religion is diverse, and with the great frequenting of this place by the Portuguese, and the great number of them who live here, many have been converted, while the rest remain Mahometans and idolaters. They revere certain extravagant figures, which they call Fetiches and which they adore as gods, to which they make a prayer evenings and mornings; and if they have a nice morsel, be it meat or fish or palm wine, they throw some of it to the ground, or let some of it drop, in honor of their god.

One day setting out for land [from his ship] in the canoe of a Moor, upon going aboard, I heard him mutter, and, as I distinctly heard the words "Abraham, Isaac and Jacob," I asked him what he was saying. He responded that he was thanking his Fetiche for preserving him at sea, and that all the Moors did the same thing. They all carry these Fetiches in a little sack hung round the neck, or under their shoulders, giving them something to eat evenings and mornings, and ornamenting them with *Rasade*, or little beads of glass of all colors, which they believe most beautiful.

(Villault 1669: 82–83)

The interpretive movement in the above passage—from religious confusion to a contemptuous clarity regarding the primitives' aesthetic taste for mere ornamentation empty of any real value—is one of the characteristic rhetorical slides within the discursive nexus of the "Fetisso." Also characteristic is the interpretation of fetish offerings of food and drink as performed in the deluded belief that the (personified) fetishes literally "eat."

Indeed, Europeans became convinced that the African mind failed to distinguish between personal religious objects and aesthetic ornaments. By the eighteenth century this perception had reached the level of theoretical statement:

was often expressed through descriptions of their filthiness: speaking of the Gold Coasters, Villault (1669: 261) claims "their Fetiches, for which they have superstitions which surpass all belief, although the better part of these Fetiches are inanimate things, and most often so filthy and vile that one would not wish to touch them. They all have some which they carry on them, certain ones are small ends of horns filled with ordure, other ones are little figures, animal heads, and a hundred other infamies which their priests sell them, saying they found them under the fetish tree." Notice in this passage the true status of fetishes as valueless "inanimate things," and also the ubiquitous figure of the greedy, hypocritical fetish priests who are responsible for much of the false valuation of valueless objects (the other cause being, of course, the superstitious mentality itself).

The Word *Fetish* is used in a double signification among the *Negroes*: It is applied to dress and ornament, and to something revered as a Deity (a Lake, a Stone, a Tree, etc.) both so far agree, as to be regarded as a Charm.

(Atkins 1737: 79; see also Villault 1667: 224–225)

This perceived religious-aesthetic confusion is illustrated especially well in discussions of what was probably the most important referent of Fetisso: the small gold ornaments of the Akan. Marees speaks of the husband of a Gold Coast woman "folding her haire with many golden Fetissos, and Crosses, putting about her necke a Ring of gold . . ." (Marees 1905: 336). Bosman remarks on the elaborate hairstyles of Akan women "between which they wear Gold *Fetiches*" (Bosman 1967: 119). Astley (1743–1747: II, 411), following Philips, writes of the people of the Gold Coast: "They have little Pieces of Gold, exquisitely made, in divers Figures, which for Ornament the Blacks wear tied to their Hair, and about their Necks, Wrists, and small of the Leg; and these they call *Fatishes*."

These ornamental gold figures were, of course, of intense interest to Europeans since gold was the primary commodity sought (at least until the slave trade took clear precedence at the beginning of the eighteenth century). Cast into elaborate and varied animal, vegetable, and mythic forms with a mixture of gold and other substances, such charm-ornaments in fact represented both a desired and an undesired commodity in European eyes. Fetissos were one of three forms of gold available to European merchants, the others being gold dust and lumps of ore.¹⁰ But the adulteration of the gold in Fetissos with baser substances was a cause of much consternation, to the point that "Fetich Gold" became associated with "false gold" used in commercial fraud. Bosman (1967: 82) asserts that "the *Negroes* are very subtle Artists in the sophisticating of Gold: They can so neatly falsifie and counterfeit the Gold Dust and the Mountain Gold (i.e., nuggets), that several unexperie'd Traders are frequently cheated. . . ." The falsity of "sophisticated" gold in economic transactions inevitably echoed the religious falsity embodied by the gold fetish figures:

10. Atkins (1737: 183–184) explains that gold is available either "in *Fetish*, in *Lump*, or in *Dust*. . . . The *Fetish-Gold* is that which the *Negroes* cast into various Shapes, and wear as Ornaments at their Ears, Arms, and Legs, but chiefly at their Head, entangled very dextrously in the Wool; it is so called, from some Superstition (we do not well understand) in the Form, or in their Application and Use, commonly mixed with some baser Metal, to be judged by the Touch-Stone, and skill of the Buyer you employ."

I have already informed you of the Signification of the word *Fetiche*, that it is chiefly used in a Religious sense, or at least is derived from thence . . . all things made in Honour of their False Gods, never so mean, are called *Fetiche*: and hence also the Artificial Gold. . . .

(*Bosman 1967: 154*)

This "Artificial Gold" (gold mixed with silver and copper) cast into Fetissos was, in Bosman's day, cut up into small pieces called "Kakeraas." These functioned as currency in domestic market activities, supplementing the elaborate system employing gold dust, weights, and balances that had developed earlier as internal markets grew out of trade with the Islamic cities of the Sahel to the north. Such gold was relatively bad, devalued gold: Bosman (1967: 77) praises the gold of Accany because "their Gold was never mix't with *Fetiches*, like that of Dinkira, and therefore much more valuable." Similarly, "from the Acrians we also have it very good and pure, without *Fetiches* or *Kakeraas*" (Bosman 1967: 78). The notion of debased or outright "sophisticated" fetish gold became a sort of synechdoche expressing all the distrust and suspicion of fraud, all the intense anxiety about judging the commercial value of material commodities, which attends trade across cultures.

Embodying the ultimate economic desire of the European merchants, such ornamental fetishes also became a focus of the more personal desires experienced by European men on the coast. Misperceptions of the status of women in polygamous African societies, in which women of royal households performed important public and police functions, as well as the frequent sexual relations between Europeans and Africans (in leaving at least one child on the coast, Bosman was not exceptional), added a powerful erotic dimension to the notion of the fetish as somehow the essence and explanatory principle of African society. In the text of the English slaver John Atkins, we find this semantic dimension of the erotically ornamental and feminine expressed in the verb "to fetish":

The Women [at Cape Coast Castle, the principal English trade fort on the Gold Coast] *fetish* with a coarse Paint of Earth on their Faces, Shoulders and Breasts, each the Colour they like best.

(*Atkins 1737: 88*)

In another place, he writes of the women of the Grain Coast:

The Women are fondest of what they call *Fetishing*, setting themselves out to attract the good Graces of the Men. They

carry a Streak round their Foreheads, of white, red, or yellow Wash, which being thin, falls in lines before it dries. Others make Circles with it, round the Arms and Bodies, and in this frightful Figure, please. The Men, on the other side, have their Ornaments consist [sic] in Bracelets; or Manillas, about their Wrists and Ancles, of Brass, Copper, Pewter, or Ivory; the same again on their Fingers and Toes: a Necklace of Monkey's Teeth, Ivory Sticks in their Ears. . . .

(*Atkins 1737: 61*)

Ignorant of the complex symbolism involved in the West African use of the color triad, as well as in rings and other ornaments associated with body openings, Europeans assumed a pure aesthetic activity in African "fetishing" practices.

The text of fetish discourse regularly used the aesthetic-psychological notions of arbitrary, capricious fancy and foolish vanity to explain these African forms of ornamentation. Loyer (1714: 171) observed that the elaborate hairstyles of Africans varied endlessly "according to their fantasy and imagination."¹¹ Capricious fancy is the psychological ground of religious fetishes as well, according to Loyer (1714: 213): "Fetishes are diverse, according to the diverse fantasy of each" (previously cited, along with the French text, in Pietz 1987: 43). "[T]hey make deities of any thing that is new to them, or extraordinary in itself: (Barbot 1732: 310). Thus the subjective ground for the crucial role of chance association in fetish formation tended to be located in nonrational, aesthetic-erotic psychology, reinforced by the absence of a rational understanding of the nature of physical causality. This was evident, European writers argued, in the way blacks chose as a fetish the very first object that happened to catch their eye after setting out upon a certain course of action. Speaking of the "inferior *Fetishes*" of the Ouidans (as opposed to the public, royal fetishes), Astley (1743–1747: III, 27), following Atkins, says that

this small *Fetish* is the first Thing they see after they are determined upon any *Affair*, or *Business*, and sometimes determines them to that *Affair*. . . . This agrees with a

11. They are always at their mirror, he says, "and all this to give pleasure and to inspire love, especially from the whites, to whom they abandon themselves willingly . . ." (Loyer 1714: 175). Similarly, Bosman (1967: 121) writes: "These Female *Negroes*, I can assure you, are so well-skilled in their *Fashions*, that they know how to dress themselves up sufficiently tempting to allure several *Europeans*; but their greatest Power is over those who make no difference betwixt White and Black, especially when the former colour is not to be found. . . ."

Relation which *Bosman* had from a sensible Negro of his Acquaintance [quoted in Pietz 1987: 43], who told him, that if one of them is resolved to undertake any Thing of Importance, he goes out immediately to look for a *Fetish* in order to prosper his Design. . . .

This alleged aleatory procedure for the external determination of a subject's will by the contingent association of a singular material object with an individual purpose constituted the fundamental intellectual perversion of "fetish worship." The slavishness of the situation of the fetish worshiper lay in the infantile submission of his inner autonomous will to the random determinations of the mechanism of natural events.¹² Such characterization of the essential slavishness of the black African prior to actual enslavement by Europeans was a solution to the fundamental ideological problem of Guinea merchants ("ideological" in the modern sense of "how you have to think in order to feel morally good about yourself, given what you actually do").

The interpretation of fetishes as ornaments, and hence as conforming to the (empty) values of a primitive aesthetic sensibility and premoral erotic desire, also provided a crucial conceptual ground for the general notion of the libertine capriciousness of fetish worship. Villault (1669: 225–226) writes that African women "are much given to lust," and Astley (1743–1747: III, 27), following Des Marchais, speaks of the Ouidans' "Libertinism with regard to Women." Even the brief entry in Gueudeville's *Royal Geography*

12. For an example of this common interpretive explanation, see the passage from Hegel quoted in Pietz 1985: 7. Frequent descriptions of the use of the fetish in divination only reinforced this opinion, for it located the determining ground of intellectual understanding and purposive decision in an amoral aleatory process proper to the material mechanisms of natural events rather than in the rational logic of human thought. Such an oracle-fetish is pictured in the illustration of Fetisso from Barbot that accompanies this article. Barbot (1732: 312) describes it in the following manner:

That *Black's* idol was in the shape of a large *Bologna* sausage, made of a composition of bugles, glass beads, herbs, clay, burnt feathers, tallow, and threads of the consecrated tree, all pounded and moulded together, having at one end an antick, rough and misshapen human countenance, and was set up in a painted deep calabash, or gourd, among abundance of small stones and bits of wood, with kernels of small nuts, and bones and legs of chickens, and other birds, as it is represented in the cut. All which trash, I was told, served the *Black* to know the will of the idol, when he made any request of it, or asked a question, by observing the disposition of those several things, after overturning the gourd or calabash.

This "odd idol" thus illustrates the two central concepts of the idea of the Fetisso: capricious unification of heterogeneous ingredients and anthropomorphizing personification.

(1713: 21) on "*Les peuples de Guinée*" mentions that "*Les femmes y sont très-lubriques.*" This theme is especially prominent in discussions of the serpent fetish of Ouidah, as I will discuss in the next section of this essay.

Europeans experienced the fetishes of the African women simultaneously as a temptation to promiscuity and to superstition. Atkins notes with contempt that the mulatto woman taken as wife by the English Director-General at Cape Coast was "always barefoot and fetished with Chains and Gobbets of Gold, at her Ankles, her Wrists, and her Hair" (p. 94). When the Director General and some of their children fell ill, Atkins was disgusted that they ignored his own medical advice in favor of native superstition,

[giving] the preference of *Fetishing* to any Physical Directions of mine, wearing them on his Wrists and Neck. He was a Gentleman of good Sense, yet could not help yielding to the silly Customs created by our Fears and shews the Sway it bears in the Choice or Alteration of our Religion.

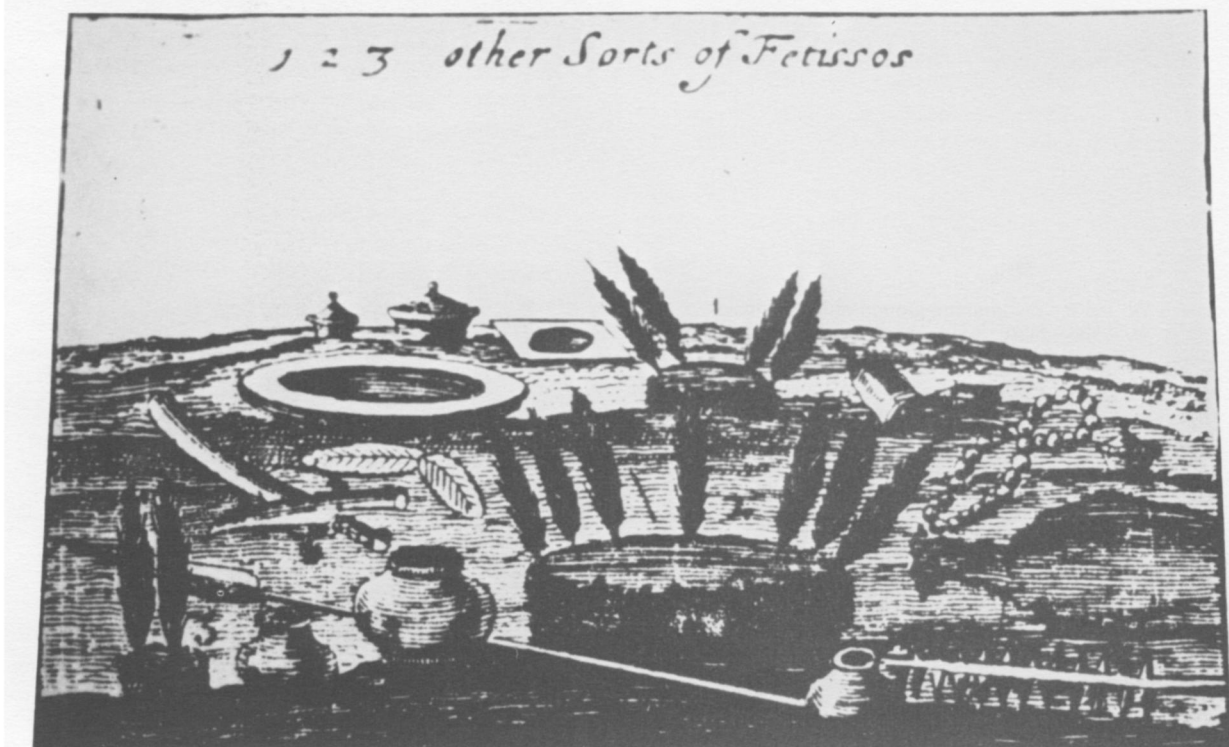
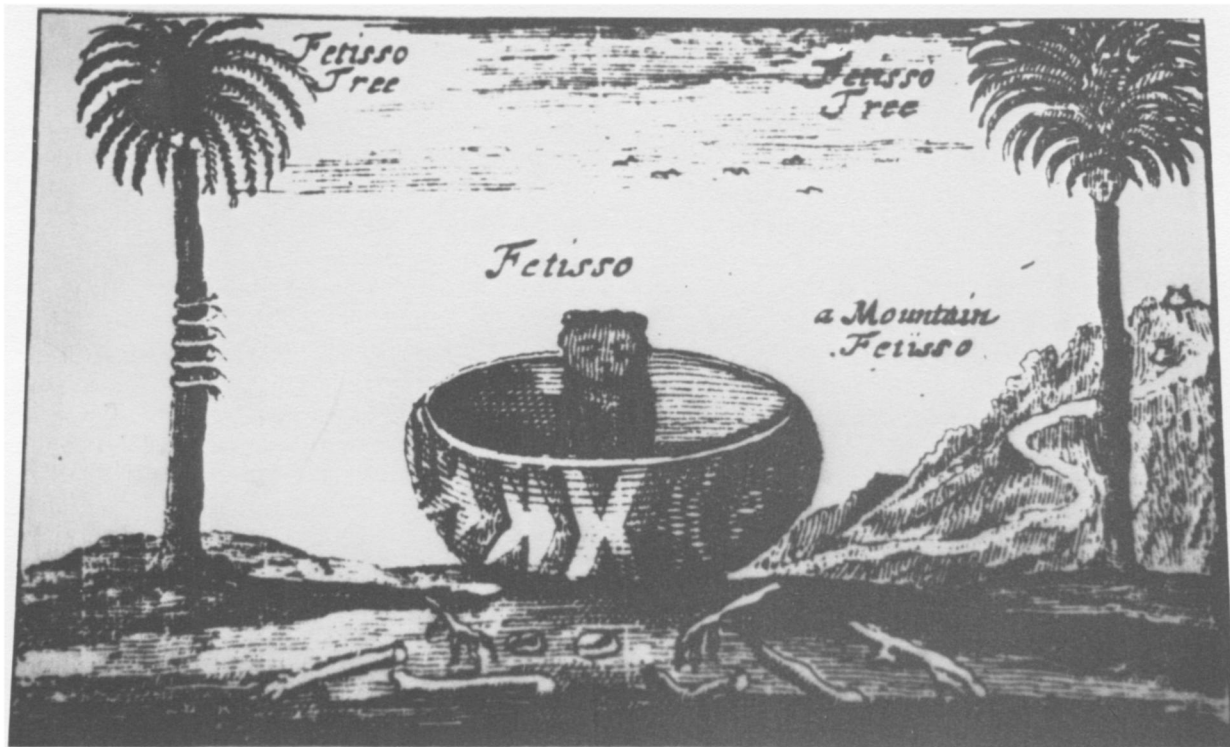
(p. 94)

As Marees (see Pietz 1987: 44–45) and others remarked, the small fetish ornaments worn by Gold Coasters threaded on wreaths of tree bark (the Akan *suman*) were also believed by the Africans to exert a protective power against disease and bad fortune.¹³ Atkins inquired about this aspect of fetish belief from one of his principal "informants":

Captain *Tom*, an honest Fellow among them [the blacks] (our Gold-taker) who, understanding a little *English* by being employed in our Service, was a great Acquaintance of mine, and would, in the best manner he was able, always satisfy my Curiosity about the *Fetish*: He believes it able to protect from Dangers, or recover from Sickness; so that, in Travail, or any Ailment, they never are without the *Fetish* about them, whom they constantly *Dashee* for Health and Safety. *Tom* wore his about the Leg, and at Sea, as constantly as he had a Dram, a Glass of Wine, or any Victuals, he dipped his Finger and gave the *Fetish* a

13. Barbot (1720: 25) characterizes these protective fetishes as "baubles":

The palm-tree are the most peculiar sort they make choice of to consecrate into deities; especially that sort of them which they call *Assianam* [*asumani* is the plural of the Akan *suman*]. I suppose not only because the most beautiful, but by reason they are more numerous than any other; and accordingly there are very many consecrated in these parts, and scarce any *Black* will pass by them without taking off some strings of the bark, which they twist between their fingers and then tie them to their waists, necklaces [sic], arms or legs, with a knot at one end, and reckon those baubles a protection against several misfortunes.



Figures 2, 3. Illustrations of Fetissos from J. Barbot's *A Description of the Coasts of North and South Guinea*, in Churchill's *A Collection of Voyages and Travels*, London, 1732, vol. V, p. 312. The images illustrate Akan fetishes. (See note 12 for a description.)

Taste. It's the general Belief that it both speaks and sees; wherefore on any Action that ought to be done, the *Fetish* is hid within their *Tomee*, or wrapped in a Rag to prevent Tales.

(Atkins 1737: 100–101)

African belief in the power exercised by such objects over physical health and even over life and death was an important ground for interpretations of African fetish worship as based on a false, irrational understanding of the nature of causality.¹⁴ This was reinforced by the frequent anecdotes of European writers about how the superstitious Africans anthropomorphized their technological apparatus (surveyors' tools, navigational instruments, guns, and so on) as magical beings, or how they perceived the act of writing down observations on paper as a spell-casting "fetish."¹⁵

The protective function of fetishes was not limited to personal health or general good fortune, Europeans discovered. Loyer mentions the guardian function of certain fetishes. The king had fetishes to guard his

14. Fetish priests, however, were considered enlightened concerning the causality, but hypocritical: "In Sickness (in which they agree with all the rest of the World) they [blacks] first have recourse to Remedies: However, not thinking them sufficient alone to preserve Life and restore Health, they apply their false and superstitious Religious Worship, as more effectual to those Ends; And what contributes to the promotion of this Custom, is, that he who here acts the part of a Doctor, is also a *Fetich* or Priest; who consequently does not find it very difficult to persuade the Patient's Relations, that he cannot be recovered without some Offerings made to the False God in order to appease him . . ." (Bosman 1967: 221–222).

African women, on the other hand, are conventionally figures of superstition moved by irrational passions, as in the pathetic episode recounted by Bowditch concerning the medical value of fetishes (1966: 103, 115–116):

The death of Quamina Bwa, our Ashantee guide, in the early part of the last week, creat[ed] an idle, but popular superstition that he had been killed by the fetish for bringing white men to take the country; I was applied to in the King's name, to ameliorate this impression, by contributing an ounce of gold towards the custom to be made by the King for his repose. . . . Mr. Tedlie had brought Quamina Bwa (our guide) into a very advanced state of convalescence; but he so eagerly betook himself from low diet to palm oil soups, and stews of blood, that he soon relapsed, and a gathering formed on his liver, aggravated not a little by the various fetish draughts he swallowed. . . . Quamina Bwa was fetiched until the last moment, and died amidst the howls of a legion of old hags, plastering the walls, door posts, and every thing about him, with chopped egg and different messes. I forget how many sheep he had sacrificed to the fetish by the advice of these harpies.

15. See passages previously quoted on this theme from Cadamosto (Pietz 1987: 41–42) and Smith (Pietz 1987: 42n). Astley (1743–1774: I, 617), following Roberts, mentions a group of blacks who "admired much the Hour-Glass and Fore-staff; and when he [Captain Roberts] told them their Use, they said, they believed all white Men were

hidden hoard of gold (Loyer 1714: 167), and another fetish that he set out to guard the fields at sowing time (Loyer 1714: 168). Marees (1905: 293) mentions Fetissos used for protection in war. European writers were especially impressed by the "mumbo jumbo" fetish, "a mysterious idol of the Negroes, invented by the Men to keep their Wives in awe" (Astley 1743–1747: II, 301–302). (Holbach gave the "Mumbo-Jumbo Idol" its own entry in the *Encyclopedie* [see note 38 below].) For similar reasons, African wives were made to abstain superstitiously from eating certain fetish food "to guarantee faithfulness to their husbands, for they are obliged to continence [unlike unmarried women, who, Loyer explains, are free to indulge in the greatest promiscuity], and believe that if they eat it, the fetish would kill them" (Loyer 1714: 175). The excessive sexual passion of African women was understood to require such measures. At weddings, Loyer (1714: 176) observes, "they all eat of the fetish, as a sign of eternal friendship, and of the fidelity of the new bride to her present husband, to which fidelity [he adds] the groom is not reciprocally pledged, having permission to take many wives" (Loyer 1714: 176).¹⁶ At trials, fetishes were drunk in oaths taken to ensure truth-telling, as in the case of a woman accused by her husband of adultery.¹⁷

Indeed, Europeans noticed that fetishes, with their credulously attributed lethal power, were used in all kinds of ceremonies and formal procedures involving obligatory oaths:

Obligatory Swearing they also call, making of *Fetich*'s; If any Obligation is to be confirmed, their Phrase is, *let us as a farther Confirmation make Fetich*'s. When they drink the Oath-Draught, 'tis usually accompanied with an

Fittazaers, (i.e., Conjurors)." An example of this pertaining to writing is the remark of Richard Lander (1967: x–xi):

The natives of the regions traversed by Captain Clapperton and myself ever regarded our writing apparatus with mingled sensations of alarm and jealousy; and fancied, when they observed us using them, that we were making *fetiches* (charms) and enchantments prejudicial to their lives and interests. [On this latter point, the attributed native opinion was more accurate than the European colonialist might wish to acknowledge.]

16. Here, as in several other passages, Loyer, who elsewhere criticizes Villault, follows him closely: Villault writes that at a marriage bride and groom are assembled by the fetish-priest "*qui leur donne des Fetiches; & en presence de tous la fille jure à son mary future une amité & fidelité inviolable par ses Fétiches, le mary promet de l'aimer n'estant pas obligé au servent de fidelité.*"

17. See the passage quoted from Marees in Pietz 1987: 43. Loyer remarks: "The Negroes are very faithful observers of their word, when they have sworn by their fetish . . ." (Loyer 1714: 216).

Imprecation, that the *Fetiche* may kill them if they do not perform the Contents of their Obligation. Every Person entering into any Obligation is obliged to drink this Swearing Liquor. When any Nation is hired to the Assistance of another, all the Chief ones are obliged to drink this Liquor, with an Imprecation, that their *Fetiche* may punish them with Death, if they do not assist them with utmost Vigour to Extirpate their Enemy.

(Bosman 1967: 148)

Fetishes were thus the ground of social order both in the private sphere of the family and in the public sphere of state and civil society. This, together with the gold fetish as potential commodity, was where Europeans found themselves forced to enter into the reality of fetishes in a practical way, since commercial contracts and diplomatic treaties were inevitably put into the language of the fetish (as the vehicle for the creation of new interpersonal obligations). Thus Smith (1744: 81) describes how the first item in the peace terms sent by the British to the King of Sherbro was “that his majesty would swear by his Fittish, that he would not for the future visit Sherbro Island [where the British trade fort was located] with more than twenty-four Attendants, and to them Unarmed. . . .”¹⁸

For Europeans, African fetish worship implied the direct intervention of superstition in political and commercial affairs. Difficulties and blockages that Europeans experienced as being imposed for no rational reason were explained by their interpreters as involving fetish beliefs.¹⁹ Africans’ perceived lack of truthfulness,

18. Typical formal diplomatic interactions in the period of British preeminence contained such formulations as the following quoted by Thomas Edward Bowditch in his *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee* from a letter of the Asante king to the British governor of the Gold Coast: “the King thanks his God and his fetish that he had the Governor send the white men’s faces for him to see” (1966: 262). The letter ends with the words “and so again he thanks God and his fetish” (p. 79). In a letter from Bowditch to the British governor he informs him: “The King intends your linguist De Graff, to take fetish with his five linguists, to be just to both the powers to be pledged to the treaty, and is convinced of his probity” (p. 120). On page 257, Bowditch reports that “all the King’s linguists take fetish to be true to each other, and to report faithfully.” Another letter explains that “the King of Ashantee desires me to request you will write to all the Governors of English forts, on the African coast, to order the caboceers of each town, to send a proper person to Cape Coast, and that you will add one messenger yourself; that they may all proceed to Coomassie to take the King’s fetish in his presence, that none may plead ignorance of the treaty concluded between his Majesty and the British nation” (p. 150).

19. Correspondence and reports of British agents during their period of predominance on the coast are full of more particular accounts of areas or types of interaction forbidden because they were “fetish.” A typical minor incident is that reported by Richard and John Lander: “The king will not allow us to go to Jenna by the

honesty, reliability, and so on came to be understood by referring to the moral corruption caused by fetish superstition.²⁰ Desirable commodities were either adulterated or unobtainable because of their status as “fetishes.” African society was seen to be structured and perverted by the core religious institution of fetish worship: an order of obligation based on the immediate fear of supernaturally caused death, rather than recognition of that rational rule of law and contract whose natural and universal transcultural order was becoming self-evident to the globe-trotting merchants in the age of Grotius.²¹

African “fetish worship” and mercantile ideology

The complex discourse of the Fetisso mapped out a semantic field that brought together religious, aesthetic, erotic, commercial, and sociopolitical meanings. This semantic constellation was unified around the

nearest beaten path, on the plea that as sacred fetish land would lie in our way, we should die the moment we should tread upon it” (1832: 43—similar obstructions are recounted on pages 114 and 155). On page 132, the Landers vent their annoyance at the petty problems created by irrational fetish beliefs: “in the centre of our yard grows a tree, round which several staves are driven into the ground. This tree is a fetish-tree, and these staves also fetish, and therefore we received a strong injunction not to tie our horses to either of them. Calabashes, common articles of earthenware, and even feathers, eggshells, and the bones of animals—indeed, any kind of inanimate substance, is made fetish by the credulous, stupid natives. . . .” Henry Meredith characterized the religion of the Gold Coast as “a mass of barbarous superstitions” (1967: 33) and expressed the same exasperation as the Landers: “*Fetish* is a word of great license, and applied in a great variety of ways: it frequently means anything forbidden. One man refuses to eat a white fowl, another a black one; saying, ‘it is *fetish!*’ There are places into which they do not wish a white man to enter; enquire, Why? They are *fetish!* To kill an alligator, or a leopard, is *fetish* in some places. If a person be poisoned, or unwell, in a way they cannot account for; it is *fetish!* In lieu of an oath to prove the truth of any assertion, they take *fetish!*” (p. 35n).

20. Marees (1905: 319) was only the first of many Europeans to claim that the efficacy of fetish oaths or, for that matter, “common sense” recognition of basic moral obligations, did not extend to outsiders: “In their Promises or Oaths which they make unto us, they are unconstant and full of untruth, but such promises as they make among themselves, they keepe and observe them well, and will not break them. . . .” Explains Astley (1743–1747: IV, 669) “Their Stupidity [in believing in fetishes] is attended with one good Effect, since the Fear of the *Fetish* keeps them from injuring such as are in the same Belief with themselves; although it has little or no Influence in respect to Strangers or Whites, whom they rob, cheat, or murder, as best answers their Conveniences.” This is a close paraphrase of Atkins (1737: 87).

21. Bosman (1967: 39) complains of the way some blacks attacked another group who were coming to the Dutch fort with

explanatory concept of the fundamental error in causal understanding evident in the medical and otherwise materially efficacious powers attributed to fetishes. Fetish worship was, therefore, a form of superstition that falsely attributed various sorts of values and powers to inanimate material objects, above all powers over material life: both natural abundance and individual human lives. Belief in such power provided the basis for an effective, although deluded and abused, system of social obligation: fear of supernatural death from the fetish for violating fetish-oaths substituted for the apparently absent rational modes of social obligation: the subjective moral faculty and an objective legal order.²² For Europeans seeking to trade commodities and to establish reliable social relations to facilitate this commerce, the idea of the Fetisso emerged as a pragmatically totalized and totalizing explanation of the strangeness of African societies and the special problems they themselves encountered in trying to conduct rational market activities with these benighted peoples.²³

commodities to trade: such an attack was “contrary to the Common Faith of Nations, when then they [the other group] came under our Protection to Market with their Goods. . . . Was not the Law of Nations herein violated in the highest Degree?”

22. “That excessive fear of death is what inflames their zeal in religious affairs,” explains Barbot (1732: 309).

23. Although he ignores the mercantile setting and function of the terminology, the pragmatic origin of the language of the fetish was recognized by Joseph Dupuis:

The application of the word *Fetische*, so commonly in use with Europeans and Negroes in this part of Africa, requires elucidation; yet it would, perhaps, be impossible to select from any known language a term of corresponding signification. Sufficient may be said, however, to explain its general import. *Fetische* is evidently a corrupt relic of the Portuguese, introduced to the country, probably, by the original explorers of that nation, and adopted by the Africans to accommodate to the understanding of their visitors, such things connected with religion, laws, or superstition, as could not be explained by the ordinary use of a few commonplace expressions, and that could not be interpreted by ocular demonstrations. Religion, as we know, was a leading feature in the Portuguese and Spanish armaments of those days. Any exclusive power, or faculty in human nature, is deemed an inspiration of the *Fetische*, such as slight of hand, necromancy, invocations of departed spirits, and witchcraft. The religious laws of particular sects or casts, (for they are probably as various in Africa as elsewhere) are described to Europeans, at the present day, under the denomination *Fetische*. The talismanic charms and sentences from the Koran, worn about the body, have the same appellation in common; and generally whatever is held as sacred, including trees, stones, rivers, or houses, whether ancient or of recent dedication to any invisible spirit or matter, are comprehended within that signification. Thus if a man should

All the facets of this complex discourse of the Fetisso appear in the text that was the authoritative account of black Africa for eighteenth-century Europe. I refer to *A New and Accurate Account of the Coast of Guinea* by the Dutch merchant Willem Bosman; as the title of this essay implies, the Guinea known to the Enlightenment was above all Bosman’s Guinea. Willem Bosman sailed to the Guinea coast at the age of sixteen in 1688; by 1698 he had become Chief Merchant for the Dutch West Indies Company, second in authority only to the Director-General on the Guinea coast. When his brutal superior was ousted by the company in 1701, Bosman was swept out with him and, at twenty-nine, found himself back in Holland, his career at an end. The book he wrote in 1702, which has been called “one of the most popular travelogues ever written” (Dantzig 1974: 105), was addressed specifically to the board of directors of the Dutch West Indies Company. Doubtless he wrote it to remind them of his own value and unfair treatment, but also at least in part as an argument in favor of the gold trade and against the slave trade as the focus of company policy.

But Bosman’s account found an audience that extended far beyond the directors of the Dutch West Indies Company. Upon its publication in Dutch in 1703, the book—because of its greater scope and detail, superior factual reliability, and skeptical empiricist spirit—at once displaced earlier authorities on the Gold and Slave coasts of Guinea. French and English translations appeared in 1705, and a German translation was published in 1706. There was a second expanded Dutch edition in 1709, and three subsequent editions appeared in 1711, 1718, and 1737. A second edition of the English translation appeared in 1721, and an Italian translation came out in 1752–1754.

Another index of the success of Bosman’s account is the frequency of its plagiarism in subsequent eighteenth-century accounts.²⁴ And while Labat’s famous 1730 account of Guinea claimed to rely mostly on des Marchais, many of the facts, interpretations, and

swear by the religious observances of his ancestors, an interpreter would say he called upon his *fetische* to witness the truth: and the same invocation may be applied to other cases, where the oath is upon trivial affairs. An invocation of the wandering spirits or *Genii*, which also bear the name *Fetische*, is considered inviolable.

(1966: 107n)

24. While the most notorious of these was William Smith’s *A New Voyage to Guinea*, Snelgrave, Atkins, and most eighteenth-century voyage authors borrowed from Bosman. See Feinberg 1979: 45–50.

anecdotes about the Gold and Slave coasts were drawn from Bosman, although because of nationalism and colonial rivalry in the area this often went unacknowledged. In 1743–1747 there appeared the great English collection of voyage accounts by Thomas Astley, who attempted a critical edition of all the accounts in the earlier collections of Hakluyt, Purchas, and Harris. In his preface, Astley justifies the need for such a critical edition because authors so frequently copied or stole from each other, he writes, “not excepting *Bosman* himself” (Astley 1746: I, viii). Bosman is clearly the byword for an original and trustworthy author. In Astley’s volumes on Guinea, Bosman is by far the leading authority. Astley’s collection was translated, with additional material, into a famous French collection by Abbé Prevost (in 1746–1768) and into a German version by Schwabe (in 1747–1774).

Beyond its high status among readers specifically interested in Guinea, Bosman’s book gained the attention of the leading intellectuals of the day. We find copies of the French edition in the libraries of Newton and Locke and a copy of the English version in Gibbon’s library. It is not listed among Adam Smith’s books, but Smith had a thorough knowledge of the text and refers to it a number of times in his *Lectures on Jurisprudence* of the 1760s (Harrison 1978: 107; Harrison and Laslett 1965: 90; Keynes 1980: 75; Smith 1978).

But it was Bosman’s discussion of fetish worship in the tenth and nineteenth letters of his book that especially aroused the interest of eighteenth-century thinkers. Already in 1705 we find Pierre Bayle correcting Jacques Bernard’s misinterpretation of Bosman’s account of the nature of fetish religion and using Bosman’s evidence to prove that heathen (and more generally all priestly) religion was grounded in mercenary motives and, far from promoting ethical behavior, systematically eradicated it (Bayle 1966: 970–972).²⁵ Indeed it was Bosman’s explicit thesis that African fetish religion in particular, and African social order in general, were founded entirely upon the principle of interest.²⁶

25. See Bayle 1966: 970–972. This is discussed by Manuel (1959) in by far the best work on eighteenth-century thinking about nonmonotheist religion, one to which I am much indebted.

26. “I have already informed you that the greatest Crimes committed at *Fida* are generally compensated by Money; and what followeth will convince you that their Religion seems only founded upon the same Principle, *Interest*” (Bosman 1967: 367a). Of Gold Coast society, Bosman (1967: 132) states: “The Richest Man is the

Bosman’s Guinea is simultaneously a triumph of scrupulous observation and the new empiricist scepticism,²⁷ and a bizarre phantasm wherein the new forces and categories of the mercantile world economy then reshaping African and European societies alike were read into a foreign social order and locale. This phantasm itself originated in the intercultural spaces of the Guinea coast, and many of Bosman’s reports and interpretations are derived from black informants who dwelt in this space in alienation from their own societies.

For instance, Bosman recounts the following creation story as widespread among “Africans”:

The Negroes tell us that in the beginning God created Black as well as White Men to people the World together; thereby not only hinting but endeavouring to prove that their race was as soon in the world as ours; and to bestow a yet greater Honour on themselves, they tell us that God having created these two sorts of Men, offered two sorts of Gifts, viz. Gold, and the Knowledge of Arts of Reading and Writing, giving the Blacks the first Election, who chose Gold, and left the knowledge of Letters to the White. God granted their Request, but being incensed at their Avarice, resolved that the Whites should for ever be their Masters, and they obliged to wait on them as Slaves.

(Bosman 1967: 146–147, as amended by Dantzig 1977: 247–248)

most honored, without the least regard to Nobility. . . .” In his much-read collection, Astley (1746: III, 25) begins his chapter on the religion of “Whidah” with this statement: “The Religion of *Whidah*, according to *Bosman*, is founded only on a Principle of Interest, and Superstition, above all he had ever heard of. . . .”

27. Bosman is writing in one of the first modern European countries and during the first years when it is possible to dismiss out of hand the explanations of events in terms of supernatural, demonic causality. Bosman can mention to a knowing readership the name of Balthasar Bekker, whose scholarly *The World Bewitched [De Betoverde Weereld]* was the late seventeenth-century lightning rod for charges of heresy made by pious believers in miracles and demonic causality against those, like Bekker, who asserted the inviolability of the physical laws of nature. (Bekker himself, writing prior to Bosman, used the example of African belief in *fetissos*, to debunk superstitious beliefs in the operation of supernatural causality in physical nature [1695: 69–74—Bekker’s discussion of *fetissos* is noted by Manuel 1959: 193].) Bosman can express contempt for the popular author Simon de Vries because he “always brings the Devil in for a share of the Play” (p. 227) and for “our *European* ridiculous Opinionists; who are persuaded no Conjuror can do any Feats without the help of the Devil” (p. 157). Only because it was safe and acceptable to rule out absolutely the devil as a causal agent could a Bosman explicitly characterize African superstition as being based on ignorance of the fact (the knowledge of which was rationality itself) that natural events happened according to impersonal laws and chance conjunctures, not according to the intentional purposes of unseen spiritual agents.

Here we have a curious intercultural myth enabled by an axis of opposition between gold (as the material object of selfish, natural desire, pre-ethical and pre-social, hence immoral) and writing (an order of knowledge, hence social and moral). If we ask the dialectical question, In what sense is gold itself already writing and in what sense is writing itself already gold? (thereby reversing the terms and seeking the historical context from which the semiotic structure has been displaced), we are led to the ideas of the monetary values inscribed (written) on gold coins and of paper money (i.e., writing that “is” gold) and book-keeping. That is, we are led to the new monetary system of commodity prices and cost calculations that had now become the self-conscious code and system of motives and actions for Europeans who came to the West African coast. The myth itself explains and justifies the most horrific problem created by this new logic—the enslavement of blacks by whites, of humans by merchant capital—as punishment for African avarice, an interpretive reversal worthy of Freud’s dreamwork theory.

Indeed, Bosman’s anecdotes function much as daydreams do in waking life, as wish-fulfillments revealing the desires and problems that underlie the interpretation of experience. Bosman’s anecdotes about the serpent worship at the great slave port of Ouidah are especially of interest, since it was this snake cult that, beginning with Bayle in 1705, became the paradigmatic example of fetishism for the eighteenth century; and it is in these anecdotes that we can most easily examine the discursive structures that textualized and ideologized the earlier fetish discourse into the discourse that became part of the general language of the Enlightenment.

One often retold anecdote concerns the senseless massacre of a large number of hogs.²⁸ We find this anecdote repeated in Labat (1730: II, 175–176), in Astley (1764: III, 30–31), in Prevost (1747–1768: XIV, 376), in the popular journal *The British Magazine* (see “A Description . . .” 1761: 295), and in a 1765 article by Baron d’Holbach on the serpent fetish in the *Encyclopédie* itself (pp. 108–109), and we find the incident mentioned in the 1757 text of de Brosses in which the word “fetishism” was first coined and proposed as the general theoretical term for the

28. While I had not read Robert Darnton’s *The Great Cat Massacre* (New York: Basic Books, 1984) when I originally wrote this essay, I am encouraged in my effort here by his insightful investigation of another animal-massacre story of the Enlightenment.

primordial religion of mankind (1760: 35). The anecdote runs as follows:

In the Year 1697, my brother Factor Mr. *Nicholas Poll* (who then managed the Slave Trade for our Company at *Fida*) had the Diversion of a very pleasant Scene. A Hog being bitten by a Snake, in Revenge, or out of Love to God’s Flesh, seiz’d and devour’d him in sight of the *Negroes*, who were not near enough to prevent him. Upon this the Priests all complain’d to the King; but the Hog could not defend himself, and had no Advocate; and the Priests, unreasonable enough in their Request, begg’d of the King to Publish a Royal Order, that all the Hogs in his Kingdom should be forthwith kill’d, and the Swiny Race extirpated, without so much as deliberating whether it was reasonable to destroy the Innocent with the Guilty. The King’s Command was Publish’d all over the Country. And in Pursuance thereof, it was not a little diverting, to see Thousands of *Blacks* arm’d with Swords and Clubs to execute the Order; whilst on the other side no small Number of those who were owners of the Hogs were in like manner arm’d in their Defence, urging their Innocence, but all in vain. The Slaughter went on, and nothing was heard but the dismal sound of Kill, Kill, which cost many an honest Hog his Life, that had lived with an unspotted Character to his dying Day. And doubtless the whole Race had been utterly extirpated, if the King (who is not naturally bloody-minded) perhaps mov’d to it by some Lovers of Bacon, had not recall’d his Order by a Counter one, importing, that there was already enough of innocent Blood shed, and that their God ought to be appeased with so rich a Sacrifice. You may judge whether this was not very welcome News to the Remainder of the Hogs, when they saw themselves freed from such a cruel Persecution. Whereof they took particular Care for the future, not to incur the same Penalty.

(*Bosman 1967: 381–382*)

In this anecdote Bosman achieves the desired rhetorical effect by making ironic use of the literary genre of the fable. The black fetish worshipers are characterized as believing literally in the sort of fabulous world in which animals talk and can act as purposeful moral agents, while the European author’s heavy-handed irony (“the Diversion of a very pleasant Scene” and so forth) signals his realistic grasp of the natural world. The reader is addressed in the mode of fable as a child who can comprehend the true state of affairs by joining in the author’s ironic contempt; and the reader is offered the chance to choose between reason and delusion in such locutions as the alternative explanations “in Revenge, or out of Love to God’s Flesh” and in the concluding apostrophe “You may judge whether this was not very welcome News” to the

hogs. Far from conveying the edifying moral of a fable, Bosman's mock fable presents a world turned morally upside down.

Beyond this, the anecdote is textualized by certain discursive structures that occur throughout Bosman's book in his characterizations of the people and society of Guinea. These constitute the particular ideologization of the fetish discourse that Bosman encountered on the coast. One approach to ideology is to conceive it as the semiotic structuring of some real historical problem so that it appears to be a formal problem in which whatever counts as rational knowledge, on the one hand, and moral power, on the other, seems to have been separated, perverted, and set in opposition to each other.²⁹ Reason, sundered from the purpose of legitimate moral power, appears perverted by immoral motives, while public power, sundered from the guidance of rational knowledge, appears directed by violent, irrational purposes.

Bosman's anecdotes about the snake cult present us with a character system that has a familiar Enlightenment configuration. The immoral perversion of reason appears in the figures of the rational, economically self-interested priests of the cult who hypocritically manipulate the fears and superstitious credulity of the people.³⁰ The superstitious, terror-driven populace, who represent African society at large, embody the principle of irrationality combined with a state of complete political powerlessness (i.e., the lack of both knowledge and power).³¹ Another figure is the

king, who represents the corruption of the public power (complementary to the people's absolute subjection), but who "is not naturally bloody-minded" and is therefore capable of hearing the voice of reason and becoming, at least momentarily, an enlightened rather than an Oriental despot. For the most part, however, the king appears as a passive beneficiary of the basic relation of exploitive delusion seen to exist between priest and common believer. Barbot (1732: 308), after discussing a phony oracle fetish palmed off on the gullible blacks by the priests, declares:

This instance of the simplicity of those deluded people, shews the subtilty and craftiness of their priests, who can so far blind them that they may not discover their palpable frauds, and keep them in an absolute submission to themselves upon all occasions, so to gratify their insatiable avarice or vanity, and lord it over them as well in civil as in religious affairs.

An important character type associated with the snake cult that does not appear in Bosman's hog slaughter anecdote but that does appear in the others is the African woman. As I have already mentioned, African women were a great scandal and fascination to the Europeans, and they were invariably presented—not only by voyage account authors but by learned Enlightenment writers, such as Holbach, de Brosses, Kant, and Castilhon—as at once absolutely powerless slaves to their husbands (in the domain of African family life) and as overpowerful intruders in the domain of political authority.³² In Ouidah, the king's wives

29. For a method of interpreting the ideology of texts in terms of semiotic structures and character systems, see Jameson (1981). My basic understanding of ideology is that it involves the formation of a discourse that imposes a simple semiotic (Greimasian) structure on a complex historical situation representing a problem that resists solution in reality. The ideological structure makes the problem appear as existing in essence on the level of ideas and consciousness rather than reality and action. This structure of ideas completes itself as ideology in the form of a dramatic scenario, whose typical characters embody conceptual components of the ideologized problem. Such ideological personas are then perceived as existing in reality.

30. Bosman (1967: 152) writes of the Gold Coast "Fetichers": "The Priests, who are generally sly and crafty, encouraged by the stupid Credulity of the People, have all the opportunity in the World to impose the grossest absurdities and fleece their Purses; as they indeed do effectually." Of those of the Oudian serpent cult, Astley (1743–1747: III, 36) summarizes: "Their surest Revenue rises from the Credulity of the People, whom they impose on and fleece as they please; by a Variety of Cheats, extorting Offerings and Presents for the great Serpent, which they know how to convert to their own Use. Families are often ruined by these Extortioners."

31. Astley (1743–1747: III, 32) speaks of "the blind Superstition

of the People," following Labat's "l'aveuglement de ce pauvre peuple" (1730: 179).

32. For instance, see Baron d'Holbach's entry in the *Encyclopédie* (vol. X: 860–861) regarding the panoptic "mumbo-jumbo" idol that the Mandingos "use to keep their women in submission" by persuading them the idol "watches their actions ceaselessly." In 1764, Kant writes: "In the land of the black, what better can one expect than what is found prevailing, namely the feminine sex in deepest slavery?" (1960: 113)

Yet for all their absolute subjection within the family, African women were imagined to have a correspondingly great power over the public, political sphere. See, for example, Jean-Louis Castilhon's libertine novel of 1769 entitled *Zingha, Reine d'Angola, Historie Africaine*. Castilhon's work was a source for de Sade at the end of the century. De Sade cites the work (identifying Castilhon as "a missionary") in *Philosophy in the Bedroom* (1965: 244, 256). It is conceivable that de Sade actually read the French translation of Bosman; at the beginning of the nineteenth letter Bosman gives the following description of one type of capital punishment:

. . . two Blacks, both executed for Murther in the same manner, viz. they were cut open alive, their Intraills taken out of the Bodies

were his principal executive force, and the women of the snake cult held high public status.

Bosman tells two anecdotes in which women play the role of the force of violent irrationality that perverts the public institutions and political power of society (a role played by the hog slaughterers in the previous anecdote). In the first, an African friend of Bosman is falsely accused of a crime; the king sends his women to raze the man's house and bring him to be executed; the man, who is friendly with Europeans and possesses such tokens of scientific rationality as a keg of gunpowder, stands with a blazing torch by the keg and threatens to blow up the women along with the house and himself. The women are daunted and return to the king, but the man beats them back to the palace and explains the situation to the king (who again is capable of hearing reason), who rescinds his judgment, and the man is saved. In the other anecdote, the wife of the same man, who is a priestess of the snake cult, has an attack of what de Brosse, retelling the anecdote in his book, terms "*vapeurs hysteriques*" (De Brosse 1760: 42)—and which Bosman and others characterize as a ruse, a phony bout of religious enthusiasm, which women used to become masters of their husbands, and which the priests, who "cured" the women of their religious frenzy, used to extort yet more money from the populace. Bosman relates that one day the man became fed up with his wife's fits and, instead of taking her to the cult temple to be cured, led her down to the shore in sight of a European ship, whereupon her terror that he was about to sell her into slavery cured her permanently of her deceitful hysterics and turned her into a dutiful wife. (Here, again, we see that most difficult of all wish-fulfillment reversals: the revelation of a positive moral function for the institution of European slave-taking.)

Des Marchais (i.e., Labat), the other great source for the Enlightenment knowledge of the Ouidan snake cult, even more explicitly characterized this African cult as the exotic equivalent of the libertine Catholic nunneries that populated the French literary imagination in the eighteenth century. The priests of the serpent cult were

and burned; after which their Corps were filled with Salt and fixed on a stake in the middle of the Market-place, where I saw them on my first voyage thither.

(p. 357)

In *Juliette* at one point the Pope gives a long ethnographic list of institutionalized atrocities, including the following: "In Juida the belly is cut open, the entrails removed, the cavity stuffed with salt, the body hung out on a pole in the marketplace" (1968: 792).

greedy rascals living off the offerings and payments extracted from a credulous population to an amount that "depend[ed] on the fantasy of the [chief] priest, the needs he finds himself to have, [and] his avarice, for all this turns a profit. . . ." ³³ From among the wives of the good husbands of the country, the priests chose priestesses to serve the fetish serpent: "indeed, the most beautiful young ladies were chosen to be consecrated to it" (Labat 1730: 167). Whereas greed and sexual debauchery were the main aims of the male serpent priests and their patrons, ³⁴ the purpose of the women who became cult priestesses was primarily to reverse that state of absolute slavery of wife to husband that was allegedly the norm in African society. When wives become priestesses of the serpent, Labat tells his reader, "the poor husband is obliged to honor them, to serve them, to address them on his knees, and to permit them to live according to their fancy, and to give up to them everything in the house . . ." (Labat 1730: 182). ³⁵ The cult of the snake fetish thus represented the absolute perversion of private familial as well as public political order.

In Bosman's text, as in Labat's, Atkins's, and others', women tend to embody that force of irrational passion for unregulated power and of instinctive mendaciousness and lubricity, which perverted all the institutions of legitimate authority. The exploiting priests, the irrational women, the superstitious polity, and the despotic king constitute the basic character system of Bosman's Guinea as a world that will remain morally upside down until knowledge and power are reunited.

In the anecdote of the hog massacre we can see the nature of Bosman's own underlying desire in the wish-fulfilling moment when "reason" and legitimate

33. "*Cela dépend de la fantaisie de ce Sacrificateur, des besoins où il se trouve, de son avarice, car tout cela tourne à profit . . .*" (Labat 1730: 178–179). He notes that the priests are also merchants who engage in trade with the Europeans, "but their clearest and greatest revenue consists in the industry by which they abuse the credulity and simplicity of the people" (Labat 1730: 189).

34. Atkins (1730: 114) writes: "They have *Fetish-Women*, or Priestesses, that live separated with a number of Virgins under their Care, devoted to the Snake's Service: I have heard, the rich *Cabiceers* do often buy the consent of these Women to debauch their Pupils. . . ."

35. Astley (1743–1747: III, 36) paraphrases this: "All other Women [except those who become priestesses of the serpent cult] are obliged to a slavish Service to their Husbands, but these [the priestesses] exert an absolute Sway over them and their Effects, besides which, their Husbands are obliged to speak to and serve them upon their Knees."

political power are reconciled by the emergence of a new group produced by the general social crisis of the hog slaughter: none other than the suddenly self-conscious and unified bourgeoisie (in the form of the hog owners) who rise up to defend their property, and who—in their identity as “lovers of Bacon” (rational consumers)—catch the king’s ear and avert a disaster to society as a whole (permanent loss of an important food source) through the sovereign’s exercise of his absolute law-making powers.³⁶

Throughout Bosman’s book, fetish worship appears as the key to African society considered as a theoretical problem. Bosman’s explicit thesis was that fetish religion was the perversion of the true principle of social order: interest. Institutionalized superstition—the religion of fetishes—was interpreted by Bosman as the specific social force that blocked otherwise spontaneous and natural market activities that would bring about a healthy economic and a truly moral social order.

Fetish religion was thus a priestly conspiracy; priests and merchants acted from the same motives (economically rational self-interest), but whereas merchants were honest and moral, priests were hypocritical and immoral. Priestly exploitation was made possible by the superstitious religiosity of the

36. The exemplary narrative of the cult of the Ouidan snake fetish as a parable of the fate of societies that relied on irrational superstition for their fundamental order was completed by Captain William Snelgrave (1754), who described the end of Ouidan Ewe independence from the great Dahomean power to the north. The inhabitants of “Whidaw,” as he calls it, are “proud, effeminate, and luxurious” (p. 3). Instead of defending the crucial pass against threatening Dahomean troops,

They only went every Morning and Evening to the River side to make *Fetiche* as they call it, that is, to offer Sacrifice to their principal God, which was a particular harmless Snake they adored, and prayed to on this occasion, to keep their Enemies from coming over the River. . . . [T]here is a constant tradition amongst them, that whenever any Calamity threatens their Country, by imploring the Snake’s Assistance, they are always delivered from it. However this fell out formerly, it now stood them in no stead; neither were the Snakes themselves spared after the Conquest. For they being in great Numbers, and a kind of domestick Animals, the Conquerors found many of them in this manner: they held them up by the middle, and spoke to them in this manner: *If you are Gods, speak and save yourselves*: which the poor snakes not being able to do, the *Dahomeans* cut their heads off, ripped them open, broiled them on the Coals, and ate them.

(p. 11)

In the anecdote, Snelgrave adopts the same tone of mocking scorn found in Bosman (expressed here by the realistic Dahomeans) at the superstitious personification involved in attributing speech and godlike powers to dumb animals.

population. The anecdote of the hog massacre expresses the true situation by structuring the narrative around the opposition of snakes and hogs as natural objects with social value. The misperception of the value of snakes (i.e., absence of any real social value) through superstitious overestimation obscures the true value of hogs (i.e., potential bacon: rational economic value based on universal natural need). And this leads to violent collective conduct contrary to self-interest and, in addition, disruptive of political order.³⁷

Bosman’s use of the fable genre suggests an explanation of the mentality responsible for the religious delusion that blocks recognition of rational self-interest and social order: the alleged propensity of Africans to attribute personal intention to natural entities (expressed by the fable-convention of animals that speak) makes them confuse the impersonal order of natural things with the moral order of human society. They anthropomorphize nature, believe that animals talk or at least exercise other spiritual powers (i.e., the supernatural powers of fetishes).

Just as they mistakenly attribute personality and intentional power to the impersonal realm of material nature, so Africans are understood to import the mechanistic impersonality of nature into the human order of decision, purpose, and policy formation. Specifically this is explained by the first-encounter theory of the origin of superstitious fixations—a sort of erroneous primitive empiricism—which I discussed above and in my previous essay (Pietz 1987: 42–43).

The general idea that African societies were ordered by mechanisms of chance rather than by morally principled intentions was adopted by leading minds of the eighteenth century. In his influential presentation of the characteristics of the four basic races of mankind, Linnaeus proposed that while the regulatory social principle of Europeans was law, for American Indians custom, and for Asiatics opinion, the social principle of Africans was “caprice” (quoted in Poplin 1973: 248). Personification as the attribution of purpose and intentionality to natural objects proper to the order of mechanical or contingent causality, along with

37. Having read my discussion of this text, Francesco Pellizzi remarks that this anecdote implies a distinction between particular interests (those of the king, priests, and so on) and what is in the interest of society as a whole. The opposition between individuals’ self-interests and the public interest was, indeed, an issue emerging in writing of the early eighteenth century. It eventually received a definitive theoretical articulation in Rousseau’s distinction between the “will of all” and the “general will” that appeared in his *The Social Contract* of 1762.

anthropomorphism as *implying* personification of impersonal material entities, thus becomes the characteristic mental operation of the superstitious mind cut off from that rational enlightenment provided by a scientific view of causality in the natural world (an interpretation that received its definitive theoretical expression in Hume's *The Natural History of Religion*). This is a conception essential to the rhetoric of both social science and colonialist ideology for the next two centuries. It lies at the core of the idea of fetishism and provides a key, I would suggest, to showing a common conceptual ground among such diverse theorists as Kant and Tylor: the notions of purposiveness and of animism derive from the same problematic that engaged both thinkers in their writings about the problem of fetishism.

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Figure 10. Dahomey *bocio* figure. Wood, bone, sacrificial materials. h 19½ in. Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1984.190. Purchase, the Denise and Andrew Saul Philanthropic Fund Gift, 1984.