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REVIEW ARTICLE

'On the backs of Blacks': the fetish and how socially inferior Europeans put down Africans to prove their equality with their own oppressors

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William Pietz's series of articles in the journal *Res* during the mid-1980s, republished now and with additional chapters as *The Problem of the Fetish*, traced the concept of the 'fetish' to the encounter between African and European traders. From the viewpoint of European traders and especially the Dutch Protestants among them, Africans made their gods and amulets, or so-called 'fetishes,' capriciously. The African creators of fetishes supposedly displaced value from the one true God and *mistakenly* projected it onto relatively worthless, human-made things. In fact, relics, amulets, icons, and other empowered objects, including divinely empowered paintings, have also long been common features of European religion.[1] However, a persistent theme in Pietz's story is Europeans' use of Africa as a metaphor for what are ostensibly the most deplorable practices of a speaker's *European* rivals and adversaries.

Having initially used the term 'fetishism' to outlaw the activities of their own sorcerers, it was the Portuguese who first brought the term to West Africa. Its meaning in West Africa changed over time. The later-arriving Dutch Protestant merchants encrusted the term 'fetish' with their own radical opposition to almost all material embodiments of the divine and with the premise that fetishism was the root cause of political despotism. It never dawned on them that their own extensive participation in the slave trade was the height of despotism. The publication of one such Dutch Protestant merchant, Willem Bosman, became the authoritative reference for the European polemicists who sought to classify the continent within their global taxonomies and who found Africa good to think with, such as Hume, Voltaire, Kant, Charles de Brosses, and Hegel. A linchpin of their reasoning, the term 'fetish' reflected Europeans' fantastical construction of a tradition foreign to them and their projection of that fantastical otherness onto European others (such as Roman Catholics and Jews) from whom they wished to distance themselves. Thus, the fetish was the focus of an inter-class and interdenominational European debate in which Africa became a proxy and a hostage. From the seventeenth century onward, the non-royal advocates of liberalism and the Enlightenment sought to prove their equality with royals and their priestly enablers by asserting the superiority of European nobles and bourgeois property-owners to Africans and by flexing the enormous wealth they had recently accumulated through our enslavement. For the Dutch Protestant merchants in particular, the Roman Catholic Church – with its paintings, statues, and rituals empowered to heal and grant wishes, as well as its steep hierarchies – was equally vulnerable to the charge of fetishism and despotism. Racially and religiously ambiguous Europeans – ranging from Roman Catholics and Jews to gentile Germans and French at moments of national vulnerability – also had an especially self-redemptive stake in making Africans look categorically different and uniquely inferior, rescuing such socially inferior Europeans from last place in the competition for worth. It was those Europeans who most enthusiastically pointed the finger of accusation at African 'fetishists.'

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Pietz sets out to extract a theory of the 'fetish': a fetish is a material object subject to interpretation by populations loyal to conflicting 'value codes,' or normative ways of assessing the proper worth, purpose, and agency of such an object. Under the intercultural and inter-code conditions of people's encounter with them, such material objects are shocking, inspiring the critique of existing value codes and the creation of new ones. Pietz argues that 'fetishes' such as Akan gold weights (an odd example, about which Pietz seems to know little) are objects produced at an intercultural crossroads, ultimately identifying 'the fetish [not so much as a concrete thing], as [much as it is] an idea and a problem' that 'originated in the *cross-cultural spaces* of the coast of West Africa during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.'[2]

Perhaps *because* it was the site of such intense cross-cultural exchange and struggle, this region – between today's Ghana and today's Nigeria – is also the African cradle of the world's most prolific family of African-inspired religions, which includes the worship of gods known as *orisa* and *vodun* in West Africa and cognates of those words in Brazil, Argentina, Cuba, Trinidad, Haiti, the US, and everywhere else settled by Cubans after the 1959 Revolution. Since the 1970s, these religions have also sunk roots in central and southern Europe, including Berlin[3] – thanks to Brazilian or Cuban leaders like Babá Murah Soares, with his popular Candomblé temple in the Kreuzberg neighbourhood of Berlin.[4]

Pietz traces the Latin etymological roots of the term 'fetish' and, more important, the history of European church and secular law employing the terms 'idol,' 'fetish' and their cognates since the fifth century. Before the European encounter with West African value codes in the fifteenth century, Pietz argues, cognates of the term 'fetish' referred to *idolatry*, the use of anthropomorphic figures that embody or represent the power of false gods. Pietz contrasts 'idols' with 'fetissos' or 'fetishes,' asserting that 'fetishes' proper are material objects spontaneously or capriciously discovered and possessed of their own power, not a power that represents or derives from some exogenous spirit. Thus, Pietz insists that the wrong attributed by European merchant adventurers to 'fetissos' and by the champions of the Enlightenment to 'fetishes' was entirely different from 'idolatry.' The 'fetisso'/'fetish' was a non-anthropomorphic object referring to no entity other than itself and was supposed to have a power over a person, who typically wore the object. According to Pietz, this conception of the 'fetish' arose in European thinking only after European merchants encountered West African value codes and had occasion to define their own codes in contrast to those of their African trade partners.

To my mind, the dichotomy that Pietz draws between the 'idol' and the 'fetish' is no clearer in contemporary West African Ọyọ-Yoruba religion than it is in the sixteenth-to-seventeenth-century coastal cases cited by Pietz. Nor is it clear in Baudin's 1885 or Farrow's 1926 in situ accounts of Yoruba religion, which also employ the term 'fetish.' I am aware of no emic conceptual distinction within these coastal traditions that corresponds to the terms of Pietz's 'idol'/'fetish' contrast. All of these traditions include both anthropomorphic and non-anthropomorphic sacred things, either of which might be credited with their own distinctive power or with a power linking it to a more encompassing spirit entity. Moreover, neither my own field research nor the existing ethnographic documentation supports the claim that capriciously found objects are the typical sacred objects of the 'Guinea-Coast' traditions or of the Western-Hemisphere religions that they inspired, such as West African Yoruba religion, Haitian Vodou, Brazilian Candomblé and Umbanda, and Cuban Ocha, Palo, and Abakuá. Normally, the Afro-Atlantic sacred objects that I know of require rule-bound forms of consecration to make them sacred, as well as continual ritual action to keep them sacred and effective. Indeed, Pietz's own examples (e.g. 47, 51–52, 72, 73, 77) frequently contradict his claim that either the European merchant adventurers or their readership in Europe sharply distinguished 'idols' from 'fetishes.'

The idea-bearing form of West African and West African-inspired gods arose from the same coastal West African mercantile encounter as the Enlightenment 'fetish' problem. But the object-ideas of the Afro-Atlantic religions have taken shape chiefly based on the interests of West African merchants and merchant-monarchs, who created empowering, non-causal social relationships

using objects that frustrated European merchants and provided Enlightenment critics of the the *ancien régime* with metaphorical "proof" of their European rivals' mental and moral deficiencies. Perhaps the most obvious sign of the conjoint genesis of the European 'fetish' problem and Yoruba-Atlantic religion is the omnipresence of beads in both. The European merchant adventurers on the Guinea Coast are as obsessed with their triviality (e.g. 47–48, 70), as Afro-Atlantic priests are with their divinity-inducing 'flash.'[5]

In Pietz's telling, the 'fetish' served as a vehicle for European merchant adventurers and the Christian priests who accompanied them to articulate their own secular ideas about the proper conduct of economic investment and trade. The idea of the 'fetish' made Africans the prime exemplars of certain failings widely found in Europe and awaiting eradication there: (1) ignorance of science and the proper value of things; (2) social disorder, lack of principles, and caprice; (3) the use of physical objects and consumed substances as guarantors of truthful testimony and obedience to contracts; and (4) the belief that fetish objects and substances have a direct effect on the body, independent of any immaterial spirit or the will of the oath-takers. Pietz claims that the European merchants – particularly the Northern European Calvinists among them – believed that physical objects have an objective and fixed value based upon their practical usefulness as tools and that their commercial exchange demands no further relationship between trade partners. This norm of object-centred social relationships assumed that physical objects lack personality and agency. Such an argument not only extricated the European merchants from the complex social relationships stipulated by the so-called 'fetishes' of their African trade partners but also condemned the authority of the Roman Catholic pope, whose authority rested on his monopolistic authority to sacralize physical objects.

Pietz indicates that he is analyzing only the discourses of the European merchant adventurers and not the reality of the African sacred objects themselves; yet he does occasionally profess to know which of the European terms describes African sacramental objects with the greatest 'accuracy' (46). What is worse is that his analysis often seems to adopt the perspective of the European merchant adventurers, crediting them with the 'discovery' (46, 52, 55) of African populations and locales and describing Africans as 'heathen peoples' (46). He quotes one tenth-century Arab traveller (46) reporting that African societies are disorderly and lawless without explaining what this quote proves about the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European merchants' similar declaration and without citing Ibn Battuta's chronicles for more extensive and widely cited observations to the contrary. Pietz also makes little of his own citations of Nehemiah Levtzion and Walter Rodney with respect to the forms of African social order that those historians document (195n.47). Pietz quotes the Europeans' condemnation of the African taste for 'trifles,' 'trinkets,' and 'childish toys' without questioning the murderous passion with which these and other European traders pursued an equally useless commodity, gold (53).

Pietz's main point, though, is that the accounts of 'Guinea' that provided the Enlightenment with its chief paradigm of unenlightenment were by no means objective or disinterested. They reflected the intercultural conditions of the genesis of the 'fetish' concept and, above all, the economic and cultural interests of Dutch Calvinist merchants amid their rivalry with Portuguese Catholic merchants on the West African coast (49–50), with the Spanish Habsburg Empire in the Netherlands (50), with the papacy (50–51), and with European states that would constrain profit-oriented trade and consumption.

In *The Problem of the Fetish*, Pietz persuasively documented the origins of one of the central tropes of the Enlightenment, of Marxism, and of psychoanalysis at the historically specific intercultural crossroads of Europe's early-modern encounter with the Gulf of Guinea. He also identified the class- and culture-specific interests of, first, the Portuguese Catholic merchants and, then, the Dutch Calvinist merchants that shaped the concept of the 'fetish' at that crossroads.

However, in my view, the 'fetish' discourse of the European merchant adventures on the coast chiefly expressed not a principled conviction that there was a better way to do business but their annoyance that the social order articulated by African gods prevented the European merchants

from getting their way in competitive transactions in someone else's homeland. The Europeans could not travel wherever they wanted (81) and could not buy whatever they wanted (73–75, 82) or trade with whomever they wanted (82). Moreover, Africans reportedly kept their 'fetish'-sworn oaths to each other but not to the Europeans (82). Like children, the European merchants called their African counterparts every bad name they could think of – stupid, arbitrary, irrational, capricious, and ignorant – when those African trade partners socially engineered their own domination of the terms of trade in the markets of the coast. Despite the greater technological efficacy of European weapons, the African 'fetishes' conferred market advantages upon African merchants and monarchs that for centuries held Europeans in check. And, for all of their faith in the rationality of their own market mechanisms, European mercantilists have never hesitated to hamstring their competitors, or to destroy their own productive resources and the entire natural environment in the pursuit of short-term profit. Nor has the great 'rationality' of Calvinist-inspired capitalism prevented the devastating effects of boom-and-bust economic cycles and continual downward pressure on the wages of productive workers.

Notes

1. Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1994); David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).
2. William Pietz, *The Problem of the Fetish* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023), 1–2. Subsequent citations are to this edition, in parentheses, in the text.
3. Joana Bahia, '"De Miguel Couto a Berlin": A Presença do Candomblé em Terras Alemãs', in *Migração e globalização: Um olhar interdisciplinar*, ed. Glória Maria Santiago Pereira and José de Ribamar Sousa Pereira (Curitiba, Brazil: Editora CRV, 2012), 223–41.
4. J. Lorand Matory, *The Fetish Revisited: Marx, Freud, and the Gods Black People Make* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2018).
5. Robert Farris Thompson, *The Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1983).