

CHAPTER THREE

African Origins

Let me return to the fifteenth century on the coast of Atlantic Africa. At that point, quite different social worlds came into abrupt collision: on the European side, a late feudal and developing capitalist system of exchange, soon with Enlightenment reason; on the African side, the most baroque elaborated systems of trade on the continent, with a bewildering multitude of currencies (see especially Guyer 1993, 2004). African traders were animated by cultural projects of self-enlargement in a cosmos in which earthly success always depended on unseen powers and ancestral spirits. The contrast between African and European traders (organized by the Dutch West India Company by the mid-seventeenth century) only increased over time. By Bosman's time, Protestant Dutch traders lived in a natural world evacuated of all spirits.

But how could trade be secured in a space of such fundamental difference? Any formal colonial framework lay centuries away. And Europeans were prevented by African authorities from traveling very far inland. Along the coast, Europeans died

of yellow fever and malaria at frightening rates; after a year on the coast, about half were dead. Those who survived did so largely because they took African wives who fed and nursed them through illnesses (Brooks 2003). From the very beginning, then, the contact zone depended upon sexual relationships.

There was already an institutionalized relationship between African “landlords,” influential men descended from the first settlers of the land, and African “strangers,” or the more lately arrived (Dorjahn and Fyfe 1962). That relationship was easily transposed to Europeans on the coast. “One of the most important privileges accorded resident strangers, European as well as African, was that of consorting with local women—usually women who were related to or dependents of influential persons in the communities who sought to derive additional advantages from affiliations with strangers” (Brooks 2003, 51). It was not long before a racially mixed social strata had developed, though unevenly along the coast (Jones 2013; Jean-Baptiste 2014).

It was precisely in this context in the sixteenth century, Pietz argues, that the modern European notion of the fetish first developed. It appeared in a pidgin term, *fetisso*, derived from the medieval Portuguese word *feitiço* (“magic” or “witchcraft”). Fetissos or fetishes were African religious objects on which European traders were forced to take oaths with their African counterparts to create the equivalent of commercial contracts. It was the fetish that acted as a guarantor; it punished anyone who broke an oath with death and destruction.

Basically a middleman’s word, it [*fetisso*] brought a wide array of African objects and practices under a category that, for all its misrepresentation of cultural facts, enabled the formation of more-or-less noncoercive commercial relations between members of bewilderingly different cultures. Out of this practical discourse

about “Fetissos” and “fatish-oaths,” Protestant merchants visiting the coast elaborated a general explanation of African social order as being based on the principles underlying the worship of Fetissos. (Pietz 1987, 23)

That a fetish was believed to have the power of life and death over an individual was a commonplace of European fetish discourse. This sanctioning power through magical belief and violent emotion was understood to take the place of the rational institutional sanctions that empowered the legal systems of European states (at least those free of “Romish” superstitions). Indeed, the paradox of African society as it was understood in these texts was that social order was dependent on psychological facts rather than political principles. (Pietz 1987, 44)

How did particular fetishes originate? According to European traders, through the chance imprinting by random objects on Atlantic African social actors’ projects (Pietz 1987, 43). Bosman reported the following conversation with his main (probably creole) informant about the number of African gods:

He obliged me with the following Answer, that the Number of their Gods was endless and innumerable. For (said he) any of us being resolved to undertake any thing of importance, we first of all search out a God to prosper our designed Undertaking; and going out of Doors with this design, take the first Creature that presents itself to our Eyes, whether Dog, Cat, or the most contemptible Animal in the World, for our God; or perhaps instead of that any inanimate that falls in our way, whether a Stone, a piece of Wood or any Thing else of the same Nature. (Bosman 1703, quoted in Pietz 1987, 43)

Clearly, such descriptions related more to European obsessions than to the cultural projects of African actors.

What, then, from an African point of view, were the objects that Europeans called fetishes? The most developed answer in

relation to Pietz's work has been offered by Wyatt MacGaffey (1977, 1988, 1990, 1994) in relation to the *minkisi* (singular, *nkisi*) of the Kongo (see also Blier 1995; Blier formulates her analysis solely in terms of local African concepts, in this case across what used to be called the Slave Coast). The word *nkisi* could be used to refer to a spirit, an amulet, a statue, a medical treatment, or a living priest.

In relation to the objects Europeans called fetishes, *minkisi* were spirits of the dead who had been made to take up residence in a "container" like a bag or a calabash or a carved statue. These latter did not "symbolize" spirits. Rather, they were spirits' containers—when properly composed by a priest with the requisite knowledge. If profaned, spirits could leave, in which case objects became "empty," mere objects.

Properly composed, *minkisi* acted in the world of the living: they healed diseases, brought the rain or banished it, punished thieves, killed witches, and confirmed agreements. In this way, according to MacGaffey (1988, 203), "the dead, revitalized through the human properties attributed to the objective foci of ritual, replaced the living in taking responsibility for affliction, accusation and punishment."

In contrast to these African ideas, the European concept of the fetish, to sum up Pietz's analysis, was of an object of "untranscended materiality." That is, it was an object that did not refer to anything outside itself but was assumed (falsely, from the European perspective) to behave like a person. Fetishes had personalities.

Particular fetishes originated in radically singular, random events that brought together otherwise heterogeneous elements. The power of the fetish thereafter rested upon its enduring capacity to fix and to repeat these coincidences. Such "fixations" involved the bodies of living men and women—with the fetish



Figure 4. A Kongo *nkisi*, unknown carver, early twentieth century, courtesy of the Minneapolis Institute of Art, The Christina N. and Swan J. Turnblad Memorial Fund. Shelton (1995, 220) speculated that Kongo *minkisi* may have represented Christian influence: representations of Christ nailed to the cross “provided powerful images, with sado-masochistic overtones which clearly articulated suffering and bodily denial as a path to eternal life and the attainment of supernatural authority.”

being a kind of “external controlling organ” of their bodies, affecting and effecting their life, health, and fortune.

For centuries, these elements of the European notion of the fetish were encased in a fundamentally critical point of view. “The discourse of the fetish has always been a critical discourse about the false objective values of a culture from which the speaker is personally distanced” (Pietz 1985, 14). But this critical aspect—what made fetishes inferior and misleading forms of reasoning—was abrogated when Western teleologies (like the inevitable expansion of reason) no longer commanded respect. In the present, fetishes are simply the mysterious and ineffable ways that individuals experience the specifics of erotic arousal or the attractions of commodities.

Ironically, however, much of their Atlantic African origin remains: to the extent that fetishes can be cognized, they continue to be traced to chance fixations, usually during childhood. Consider the following richly contextualized case study in 1980 by Gosselin and Wilson—in which the subject has clearly, if only indirectly, been influenced by the deep history I have recounted. Chance associations continue to fix fetishes:

Mr. W. is now forty-five years old. He was born of reasonably well-to-do parents, but his father died when Mr. W. was three years old and his mother went to live with her brother at a seaside resort . . . He became passionately interested in natural history, an interest that has persisted all his life, and states that his first memory of rubber, the fetish material that now dominates his sexual life, was the smell and feel of a hooded jacket and overalls made of rubber-backed cotton that he wore during some of his walks in the country in search of wildlife. “In such a situation,” he says, “one is alone, undistracted by any stimulus coming in and highly sensitized to everything. Under these circumstances it seems to me inevitable that I should have begun to turn on to something,

especially something which proclaimed itself, by smell and noise and the heating effect upon my body, like that rubber did. The odd point about it is that I don't remember it at the time having anything to do with sex." It was in fact not until the age of fourteen that Mr. W. had what he describes as "the sort of experience that you psychologist fellows dream about." He had, he says, returned from a country walk, dressed in his water proof outfit. He called out to see if his mother was at home. At first, she didn't answer him, but after a while she came downstairs and greeted him. After a while, the uncle appeared as well: "And although nothing was said, I somehow was convinced that they had been having sex together." [Mr. W. was happily married but kept his fetish a secret. After fifteen years of marriage, his wife died.] He made no serious attempt to acquire another partner, because he was "pretty much able to look after himself" and the appearance of his house bore this out. His fetish collection grew speedily after his wife's death, and until recently—for he is at present working on a job overseas—he kept in his house a complete "rubber room" lined throughout with curtains of the same material and containing two large cupboards full of rubber garments, gas masks, photographic and other equipment. He has in the past visited specialist prostitutes to play out some aspect of his fantasies, but now does not do so, feeling that he has all he needs for sexual satisfaction without leaving home. (Gosselin and Wilson 1980, 49–51)

Following Max Weber's work on religion, we might say that Mr. W. had become a virtuoso of the fetish.

Over the twentieth century, what was fetishized—the result of what appeared as the most personal and individual of tastes—was yet a part of wider social transformations (Gosselin and Wilson 1980, 47). Nightcaps, with their smell of hair and associations with the night, seem to have disappeared. Body parts like feet, hands, hair, breasts, and butt remained, but as touching became perhaps less tabooed, did the frequency of such fetishes

decrease? No longer do we hear, for example, of men who cut and steal girls' hair on the streets. Sexy underwear and rubber, vinyl, and leather outerwear make their first appearances.

Various kinds of uniforms constituted fetishes in the early twentieth-century European underworlds described by Magnus Hirschfeld. Soldiers were the principal object of attraction, and the minutiae of military insignia were finely appreciated.

Within every group there are always very strong differentiations. For example, among the "wooers of soldiers," we find ones who tend toward men's organizations, and among them also those who "fly" almost exclusively to noncommissioned officers, while others almost always prefer orderlies. Then, there are ones who occupy themselves only with officers. Besides this, the different types of troops play a role. For many, only the infantry exists, for others the cavalry, for a third the marines. I know a homosexual for whom only the "First Ulan Guards" were of erotic significance; it seemed the rest of the German army did not exist for him. (Hirschfeld [1920] 2000, 336)

And the fetishization of the military took place against a wider field:

Many male prostitutes take a lot of trouble to keep certain fetishistic peculiarities of taste in mind. For this reason, many wore high boots with spurs or sports outfits, sweaters, scarves hung loosely around their neck, jockey or peaked cap; even small lockets or small leather straps in a buttonhole really prove to be effective fetishes. In Berlin, Paris, and London it is no different; you can find walking the streets sailors, who have never been on a ship, jockeys who have never mounted a horse, chauffeurs who have never driven a car, and soldiers who have never held a weapon. (Hirschfeld [1920] 2000, 823)

And, finally, Hirschfeld reports the presence of antifetishes, fetishes that turned off sexual arousal.

C, a former Catholic priest, in his early forties, reports the following. He recently met a young tradesman who in every respect, in his appearance and nature, had corresponded to the type he made into the object of his attraction. They formed a deep mutual friendship. C used to meet his friend after work and accompany him home, which gave him more pleasure than he ever experienced. One evening both went to the circus. Afterward the younger man accompanied C home. Here, for the first time, C hugged him and said all kinds of flattering things about his handsome appearance. The tradesman replied rather naively, "Well you should see me next Sunday in my new suit and my yellow shoes!" At the very instant C heard the words "yellow shoes," all his excitement disappeared. He was unable to touch the young man. He could not at all understand the change in his nature. He could hardly shake his hand when it soon became time to say goodbye. The cooling off accompanied by a sentiment of strong antipathy can be explained by C's feeling an aversion to yellow shoes that he himself did not comprehend. He could hardly even speak to people who wore such shoes. He had also even attacked a pair of yellow shoes. While he was on vacation and staying at a hotel, in the early hours of the morning he crept out of his room and in the corridor found a pair of yellow shoes that had been left out. He tore them to shreds with a pocket knife. (Hirschfeld [1920] 2000, 355)

We can recognize a certain continuity between Hirschfeld's cases and the present. For example, Chicago-based Samuel Steward (he would later move to Oakland), born in 1909, obsessively kept a sex diary of all his encounters, and by the 1970s, he would estimate that of the 807 men with whom he had had sex, a significant proportion was servicemen: "sailors—a coupla hundred; sergeants—about 30; marines—2 dozen" (Spring 2010, 85).

But an obsession with the military clearly declined over time, in the United States at least. As I shall explain later, when urban communities of gay men devoted to masculinity first developed

in the 1950s, they took their style from motorcycle gangs, with leather jackets and chaps—not so much from the military. And by the 1960s, the time of gay liberation, the United States was, of course, involved in a highly unpopular war in Vietnam. The counterculture began to emphasize a certain male androgyny.

In sum, each fetish appears to have a social history of its own—a topic about which we so far know relatively little.