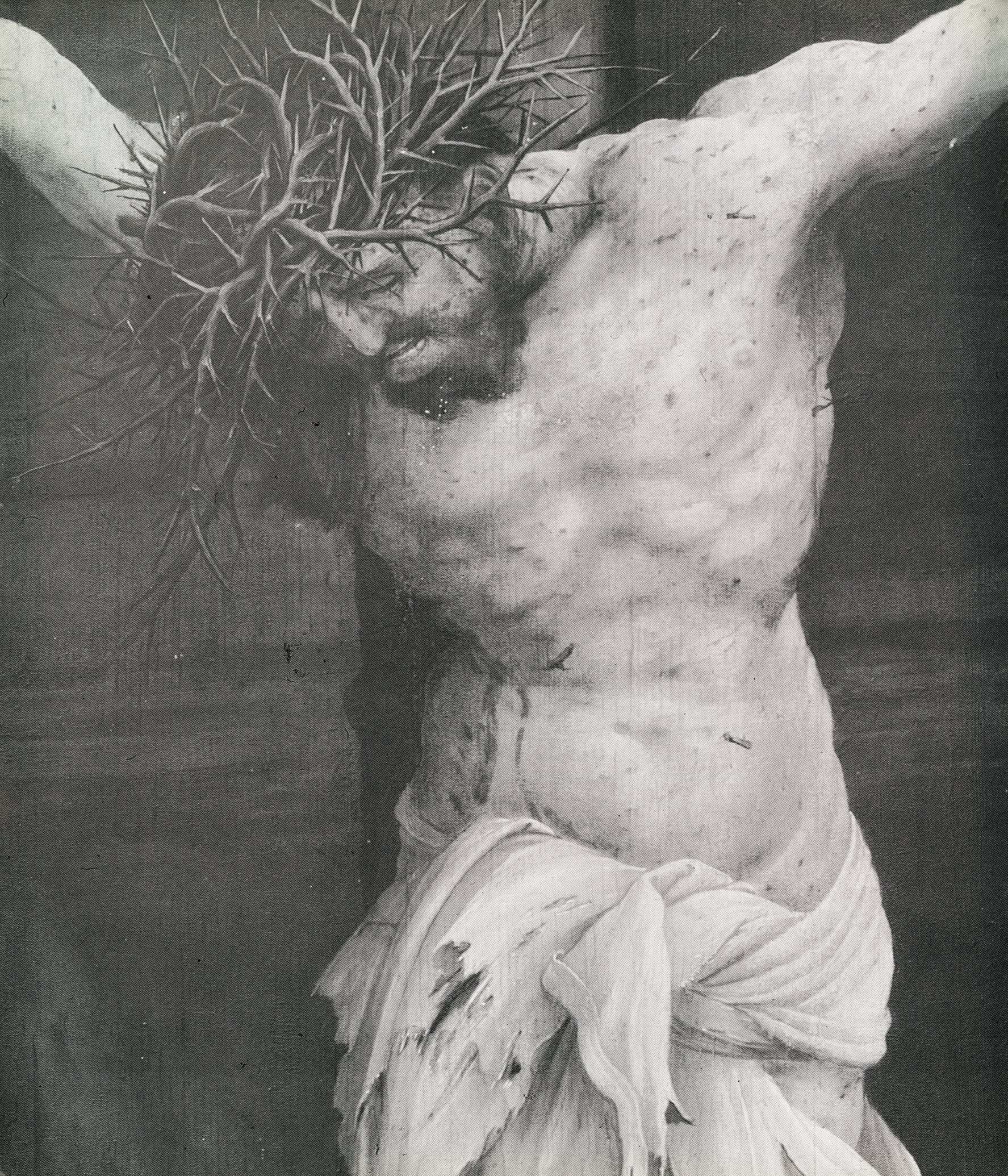


The Chameleon Body

Power, Mutilation and Sexuality

Anthony Shelton

'Let us remember that "fetish" is an entirely European term,
a measure of persistent European failure to understand Africa.'

Wyatt Macgaffey[1]

THIS ESSAY EXPLORES those European prejudices, practices and images which were woven together to provide a framework for the description of African 'fetish' beliefs. At the same time the view that religious 'fetishism' was the product of a regressive or degenerate mentality allowed Europeans to attribute to African women an excessive and exotic sexuality. Religious and sexual 'fetishism' were combined to reinforce prejudices about mind and body. In late twentieth-century Europe, less moralistic regimes have acknowledged a greater diversity of sexual pleasures, admitting forms of sexual imagery previously exiled to the colonies. European 'fetishism' has used the close links erroneously established between religion and sexuality in Africa by earlier writers to create new forms of sexuality stripped of their originally exploitative and often abusive meaning.

Books and Other 'Bundles of Mysteries'

The Western image of African 'fetishism' was constructed from a selective combination of medieval Christianity and witchcraft beliefs with fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Portuguese, Dutch and French explorers' and traders' accounts of the beliefs and practices encountered on Africa's Guinea coast. Originally, writers made no distinction between 'idols', used to refer to images, and 'fetishes', a term then reserved for charms and amulets. By the eighteenth century, the meaning of the terms had become confused until both were subsumed under the gloss 'fetishism'. African religion thus became inextricably linked to European ideas of witchcraft.[2] These travelogues provided the source for an intellectually coherent but abstract view of 'fetishism' developed by Enlightenment philosophers and social theorists, who saw it as representing the most primitive stage of religious practice. The term was further elaborated and codified during the period of the rapid European colonisation of Africa (1880–1920) by writers such as Mary Kingsley (1897) and Robert Hamill Nassau (1904) who, from the personal reminiscences of missionaries and traders, combined with their own experiences, produced compendiums that contributed to the anthropological rationalisation of the subject. Such accounts were also influential in framing the descriptive conventions under which early twentieth-century writers recounted their experiences of African religion. Six authors, all men (missionaries, traders, administrators and adventurers), form a sufficient sample from which to abstract the main characteristics of European thought on the nature of African 'fetishism'. These six authors were chosen over others because of the greater attention given to the subject under discussion. Of these, three – Joachim Monteiro, R. E. Dennett and E. J. Glave – wrote prior to 1900; one – W. Holman Bentley – published on the eve of the new century; and the works of two others – Dugald Campbell and G. Cyril Claridge – appeared in the early twentieth century.

Early authors subsumed definitions of 'fetishes' under descriptions of their form and purpose. Not until the beginning of the twentieth century were more precise and cogent definitions attempted. The Baptist missionary,

LEFT: Mathias Grünewald
Christ on the Cross (detail)
Date unknown
Staatliche Kunsthalle, Karlsruhe

William Holman Bentley, defined a 'fetish' as 'derived from the Portuguese *feitiço*, "a charm". A fetish is something which has the power of exercising an occult influence.'[3]

This was consistent with well-established usage but the relationship between magical charms and idolatrous images had been sufficiently important for him to provide more detailed information in the appendix to his *Dictionary and Grammar of the Kongo Language*, published five years earlier. Under the Kongo term *nkinda* (*nkindi*), Bentley wrote:

> ... a being strong, strengthening: also the charms worn to protect from evil, a phylactery.
>
> *Nkinda e evata*, a fetish image placed in the centre or entrance of a town to protect the town and ensure its prosperity. A fetish image when carved is a mere piece of wood until a small portion of the contents of a bundle of fetish has been placed in a hole in the head or belly of the image; this portion is called the *nkinda* (strength), and so long as it remains in the image it is a fetish. The soul of the fetish is in the *nkinda*.[4]

Cyril Claridge, a traveller and adventurer with twelve years experience in Africa, also acknowledged the European usage of 'fetishism' to refer to both charms and images, writing:

> Congo fetishism is a double-barrelled arrangement of charms (*mwangu*), and images (*teke*). An image is a charm but a charm is not always an image. It is then called *mwangu*. Images among the Ba-Congolese are not idols to be deified, but effigies to ward off aggressive spirits, or to win the favours of friendly spirits. They are more often instruments of revenge to incite the spirits to murder, to maim, or to inflict a malady. A charm may be anything dedicated by a priest for a fetish purpose.[5]

Other 'pioneers', such as Dugald Campbell, defined the term in a more restrictive sense to refer only to charms. 'Fetish,' he writes, 'comes from the Portuguese word, *feitiço*, meaning a superstitious charm or magic medicine.'[6]

Most authors agreed, even when they acknowledged African beliefs that 'fetishes' could not be used for evil, that the practice was abominable to civilised taste and reason. Later writers, however, tempered their distaste of the practices by agreeing that Africa had no monopoly over such beliefs and admitted, no matter how reluctantly, to similar 'superstitions' in their own homelands.[7]

All six authors under discussion distinguish between types of 'fetishes', usually according to the jurisdiction of their agency or by the material from which they are made. Dennett declares: 'I consider *nkissism* is to be divided into four parts, *ie* the family *nkissisi*, the general *nkiss*, the household *kiss-s-kiss*, and the *molongos* or medicines.'[8] And Glave writes: 'A peep into a fetish-man's sack discloses a curious assortment of preventive-eagle's claws and feathers, fishbones, antelope horns, leopard teeth, tails and heads of snakes, flintstones, hairs of the elephant's tail, perforated stones, different coloured chalks, eccentric shaped roots, various herbs, etc.'[9]

As for Bentley:

> The fetish itself may be very various. The power may be contained in a rag, stone, water, pipeclay, or rubbish of all kinds; the more singular and uncanny the better. It may be red camwood powder mixed with pepper, ochrous earth, a snake's head or fang, the beak of a fowl or any bird, a bird's claw, a twisted root, a stone of strange shape, a nut, a piece of elephant's skin, the foot of a crocodile or monitor (*Varana*) lizard, a bead, or a piece of copal. The commonest form of fetish is a bundle of mysteries ... the bulk of which is made up of the peppery red powder.[10]

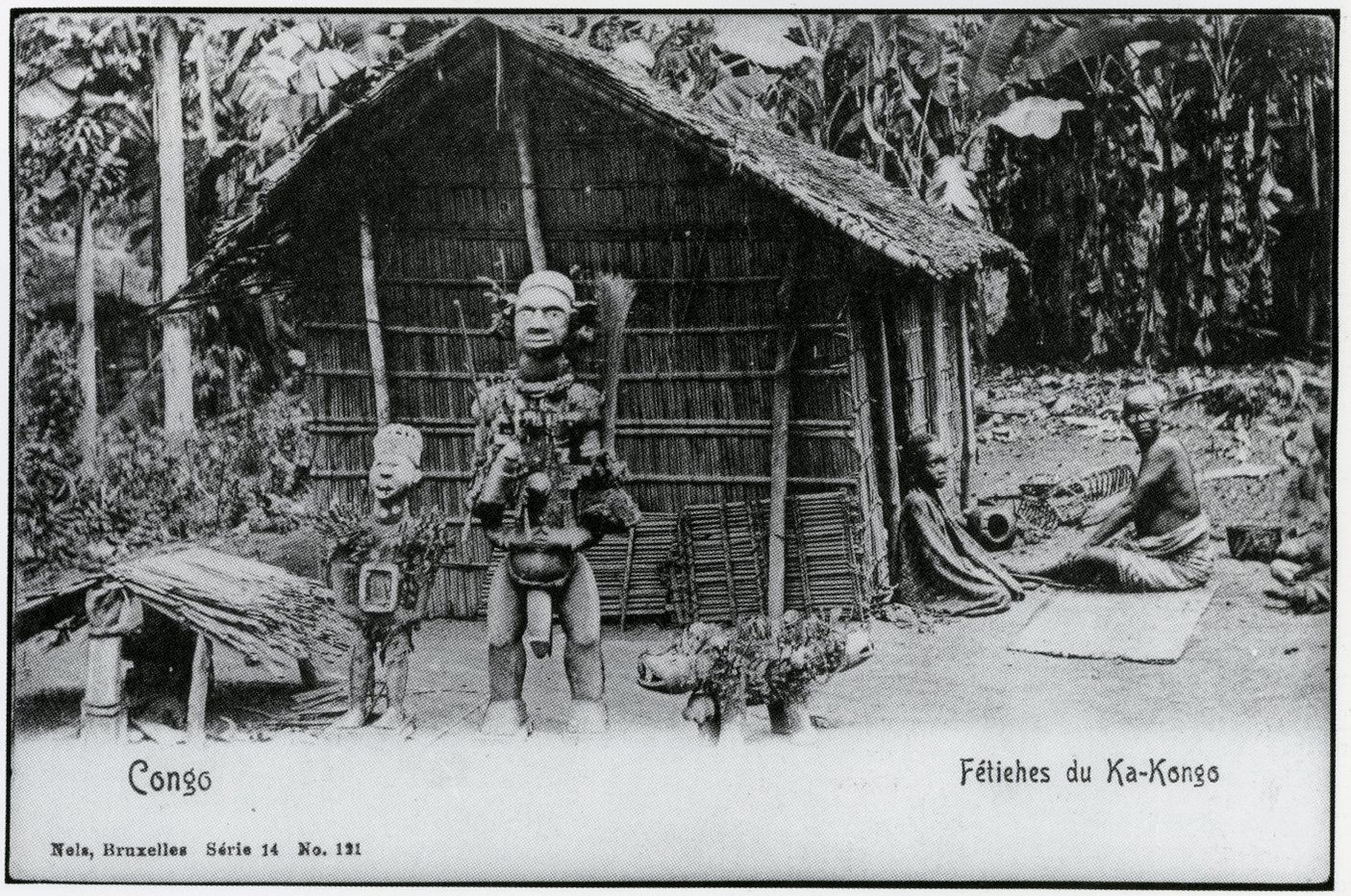
Power object outside a dwelling
Kongo people, Central Africa
Nineteenth century

All except Campbell explain the purpose of 'fetishism' by either describing the effects of 'fetishes' or discussing the role of their guardians. According to Monteiro: 'These "fetish men" are consulted in all cases of sickness or death, as also to work charms in favour of, and against every imaginable thing, for luck, health, rain, good crops, fecundity; against all illness, storms, fire, surf, and misfortunes and calamities of every kind.'[11]

Dennett writes:

'Fetish' guardian
Teke people, Central Africa
Early twentieth century

Postcard showing power objects outside a dwelling
Kongo people, Central Africa
Nineteenth century



The evil spirit, Nkiss, pervades all things, and is eternal, invisible, to all save the *nganga*, uncreated, but appears to be especially resident in different large feteiches, each one inflicting, or being the means of avoiding, different evils. They are supposed to punish you with death if you eat forbidden food, if you bewitch anyone, rob, or do anything contrary to their will, prevent rain from falling in its proper season, on the commission of certain indecencies, and for faults of omission cause one to fall sick.[12]

Campbell, on the other hand, affirms: 'The bulk of fetish preparations are preventive and prophylactic, therefore to neglect to provide these, and to consult the oracles in regard to every detail pertaining to Death, Life and Birth, which is frequently a fresh incarnation, is to expose oneself, or one's child, to the displeasure of the departed spirits.'[13] And, according to Claridge: 'There is a fetish for almost every conceivable object within the compass of a negro's mind – for hunting, fishing, trapping, gardening, marketing, travelling, trading, playing, living, or dying; which can make the elements friends or foes, or turn a peaceful citizen into a bird, beast or creeping thing, or stimulate the birth-rate of a clan, or overthrow it with an epidemic, kill, or create as the need arises.'[14]

Monteiro, Dennett, Glave and Bentley mention the authority of the 'fetish' guardian ('witchdoctor', 'priest', 'fetish-man'), but, thereafter, references become fewer. Even Nassau's comprehensive treatment of the subject dedicates only nine lines to discussing the 'fetish doctor'.[15] Lessening European interest in their role seems to correspond with what was thought to be their diminishing ability to oppose missionaries, white settlers and traders, after practitioners went underground.

For these early authors, African belief and adherence to 'fetishism' implied ignorance, leading to an irrational fear of the world around them, and pointed to a basic mental inferiority which was used to justify their tutelage by European powers. Dennett prefaces his description of *Nkis*'s [sic] with the thought that

God as we know Him, is quite unknown to poor Fjort, hence his ignorance of all that is good. Though we cannot call him (the Fjort) bad, yet he appears so to us from the absence of what we have learned to consider good qualities in a man, such as love, gratitude, honesty and uprightness, etc. Instead of his actions being prompted by love, duty, etc, all his movements are actuated by selfishness and suspicion, and the avoidance of the evil he is hourly expecting.[16]

The other aforementioned authors were no less ready to draw ill-reasoned moral and intellectual lessons from what, to the European mind, were erroneous and superstitious religious beliefs. Thus Monteiro:

To sum up the negro character, it is deficient in the passions, and in their corresponding virtues, and the life of the negro in his primitive condition, apparently so peaceful and innocent, is not that of an unsophisticated state of existence, but is due to what may be described as an organically rudimentary form of mind, and consequently capable of but little development to a higher type.... His whole belief is in evil spirits, and in charms or 'fetishes'.[17]

Glave observes: 'The native of Central Africa has an inborn dread of evil spirits; he believes that a power unseen by mortal eyes is always present, seeking opportunities to injure mankind; his superstitious mind attributes to this mysterious and malignant influence all reverses and disasters which he may suffer through life.'[18] And Bentley similarly prefaces his chapter on 'fetishism' with the comment: 'Never have we met with anything like a seeking after God on the part of the raw native; indeed, it is a marked characteristic and weakness of the race that an African, Negro or Bantu, does not think, reflect or reason, if he can help it.'[19]

Although Monteiro's views are uncompromising, by the end of the nineteenth century, attitudes were beginning to change. Bentley, for example, argues that superstitious beliefs were not the product of innate mental deficiencies, but of rectifiable ignorance.[20] There was,

Power figure (*nkisi*)
Kongo people, Central Africa
Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin

Lithograph showing Kongo power figures in the collection of the Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin (detail), *c.*1874
From Adolf Bastian, *Die Deutsche Expedition an der Loango-Küste*

therefore, no physiological or neurological difference between the minds of Europeans and Africans, only quantitative and qualitative differences in their knowledge about the world. Such a change helped to justify continued missionary work in Central Africa, and, not surprisingly, this is most clearly expressed in missionary writings. Nevertheless, it was echoed by Campbell who, while still prepared to testify to his own belief of the pervasive sway 'fetishism' continued to exercise, no longer attributes its effects to any innate failure of the mind, noting that 'fetish rites and ceremonies permeate the whole Bantu fabric, beginning at infancy, and more often prior to birth'.[21]

By 1922 Campbell and Claridge are admitting that African beliefs have their counterpart in European superstitions and invite comparison between them. Claridge[22] recounts an Englishman's belief in the luck brought to his family by a horseshoe, but calls this '"high class" fetishism', while Campbell muses about European blind belief in the medical doctor to complain that '... we ourselves are not so very far removed in point of time from the practices of Africa'.[23] While the earliest writers (Monteiro and Dennett), make explicit comment on the amorality and intellectual inferiority of Africans, inferred at least partly through belief in 'fetishism', by the close of the century, 'fetishism' is being seen not so much as being evil, but simply misguided.

Other subjects are approached by these writers more randomly. Bentley gives well-documented examples of the believed efficacy of 'fetish' figures to cure sickness, and alludes to taboos incumbent on their keepers. Monteiro and Glave describe the shelters that housed the figures, Bentley and Campbell discuss their use against witchcraft, and Glave and Bentley the way knowledge was imparted about 'fetishism' through initiation societies. Dennett, Bentley and Campbell contain information as to how the images were activated, while Dennett alone describes the necessary rites performed before an image could be carved.

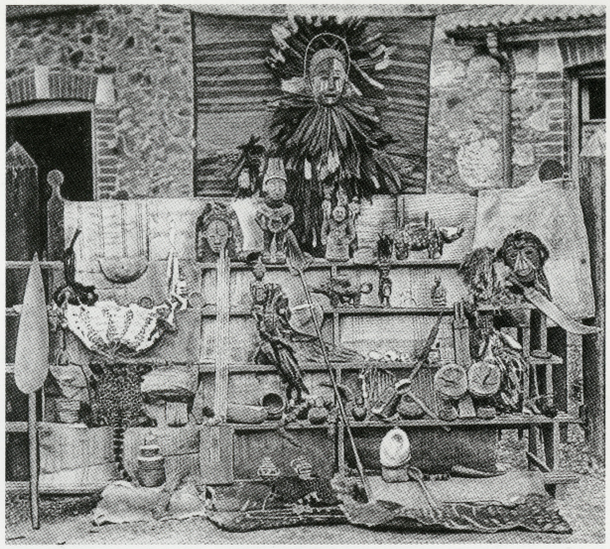
To one degree or another, all these authors identified 'fetishism', whether as a more or less singular phenomenon or in the form of diverse practices, as the shared religious experience of Africa. Religion throughout the continent was thereby reduced to the common level of spiritual vacuity, a product of fear and superstition bereft of reason and all ethical considerations. These views were contested by some German writers, but the prestige of the most eminent did little to undermine the prejudiced certainties of their British and French contemporaries. The philologist F. M. Müller doubted the accuracy and relevance of much descriptive material on which the idea was based, while another German, the explorer and inveterate collector of exotic material culture Leo Frobenius, insisted categorically that 'fetishism' reflected the fears and superstitions of a fifteenth-century Europe accustomed to seeing witchcraft and the work of the devil all around them. The term was considered so imprecise and inaccurate that it could equally be applied to many European beliefs and current superstitions such as palmistry. Unlike others who had come to similar conclusions, Frobenius pleaded that the term be abandoned and concluded his criticism with the challenge: 'Show me a people who have not passed through the same experience, and I will cry peccavi, and quietly assent whenever I again hear the negroes addressed in scorn with the words: "You fetish-worshippers, you".'[24]

The Lessons of Images

Even a brief examination of African travel books written between 1875 and 1922 demonstrates the diverse and seemingly unrelated types of objects that the term 'fetish' conjured to the European imagination. Museum classifications up until the mid-twentieth century merely confirmed the stable, if confused, meaning applied to the word since the eighteenth century. A hint of some rational and consistent use of 'fetish' was made in 1909 by Leo Frobenius who suggested that it was used indiscriminately to describe any object that had been decorated with the human figure or head: 'For my collection I have received all imaginable things of the kind, fetish clubs, fetish pickaxes, fetish pipes, fetish goblets, fetish guns, sceptres, bells, masks and, above all, snuff-boxes. If the collector be asked for the reason of this descriptive title, he will usually answer: "Voilà! C'est la figure humaine!".'[25]

Notwithstanding the variety of objects classified by the voyagers, scholars and curators of the fifteenth to twentieth centuries as 'fetish', there is one corpus of images based on the human body which, through their recurrent description and illustration command particular attention. The aforementioned R. E. Dennett, who was trading in Kongo in the latter part of the nineteenth century and who collected[26] and wrote extensively on the subject, observed:

> To describe one of these feteiches is to describe them all.



'Feteiches and Curios' (detail)
Photograph by H. J. L. Bennett of
R. E. Dennett's collection
Nineteenth century

Two power figures (*minkisi*) from the
Congo from the collection of R. E. Dennett
Royal Albert Memorial Museum
and Art Gallery, Exeter

ABOVE: *St Anthony with Christ Child*
Kongo people, Central Africa, nineteenth century
Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin

LEFT: Figure of a missionary [Cat.30], Kongo people, Central Africa, nineteenth century, Katholieke Universiteit, Leuven

Imagine, then, a figure of wood, some two or three feet high, representing a man, a woman, or some animal with a distinct peculiarity about it, either a long leg or arm, a curious foot, or other deformity. This figure appears to be one mass of nails, spear-points, knives, or bits of iron, each of which has some peculiar significance, known only to the *nganga*, who indeed must have a marvellous memory since he is supposed to know by whom each nail was driven into the feteich, and for what purpose.[27]

Unlike older accounts, which still maintained the distinction between 'idols' and 'fetishes' and thereby excluded figurative sculpture from any discussion of 'fetishism', nineteenth-century descriptions were remarkably consistent in their primary fixation on the human body.

After the discovery of the Kongo in 1482, the Portuguese contented themselves with overseeing the native king burn his 'idols' and announce his conversion to Christianity. They encouraged the replacement of images by crosses, while charms were substituted by crucifixes and images of the saints. The first Portuguese intervention was short-lived. Failing to find precious metals, Portugal dispatched a consignment of crucifixes but never sent sufficient missionaries to spread and consolidate their faith; 'The Christian religion waxed so cold in Congo, that it wanted very little to be extinguished.'[28] Between 1700 and 1720 the Flemish Capuchins established missions in the country, but their work was soon curtailed.[29] Not until 1888, after the Congress of Berlin (1884-5) when Leopold II of Belgium was acknowledged as sovereign of the Congo Free State, was evangelisation renewed by the Scheutist missionaries. Intermittent evangelisation had supported the development of a specifically Kongolese understanding of Christianity which facilitated European disparagement. Recalling the state of the country in June 1879, William Holman Bentley, entrusted with establishing a Baptist mission there, wrote: 'When we reached San Salvador in 1879, it was to all intents and purposes a heathen land. King and people were wholly given to fetishism and all the superstitions and cruelties of the Dark Continent.'[30]

But 'fetishism' was not evidenced by inchoate substances or the veneration of the so-called 'nail fetishes' (*nkisi nkondi*) portrayed on souvenir postcards and in travel accounts. Bentley goes on to describe: 'In a house in the king's compound were kept a large crucifix and some images of saints, but they were only the king's fetishes. If the rains were insufficient they were sometimes brought out and carried around the town.'[31]

Bentley also describes hunting 'fetishes' in the form

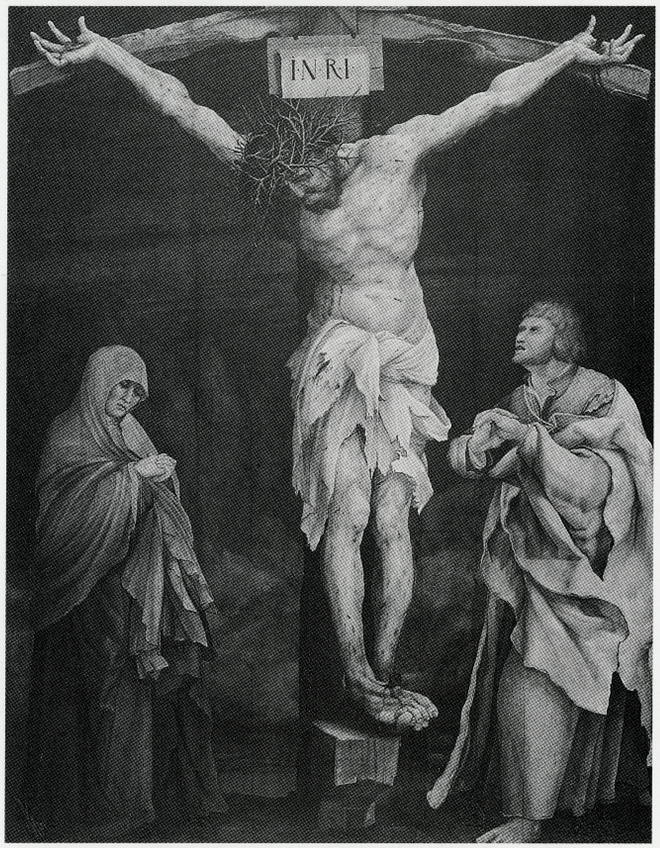
of flat wooden crosses, *santu*, daubed with the blood of animals which they had helped to capture. Alfonso I (1509-41), the most powerful of Kongo's Christian kings, presented metal crucifixes to all his clan chiefs and judges in an attempt to appropriate what he understood to be the source of Portuguese power. Christian images were institutionalised within established systems of authority; they were passed on at the investiture of new chiefs and represented the source of an efficacious and potent power that gave them authority to swear oaths, to punish oath-breakers, to dispense wise judgement as well as to cure sickness and free the mortally ill from the torments of evil spirits.[32] The incorporation of Christian imagery had also been commented on by Cavazza who, in 1687, noted 'that the magician-priests of the Congo painted their "idols" with the sign of the cross'.[33]

According to Balandier, Christianity was not understood as a means of personal salvation, but as a supplementary source of power under the control of ancestor and nature spirits.[34] Dennett was of the opinion that 'the old missionaries, before 1670, having taught the Fjort what God is, they have, by their ignorance and idolatry, so mystified them, that only hundreds of years of patient, severe, and strictly truthful teaching can undo the mischief they have done, and bring God clearly to them'.[35]

This view was repeated by other travellers such as Glave.[36] Among the first examples of 'fetish' figures from the Kongo to be described in the modern literature, therefore, were not indigenous styled carvings but appropriations of Christian images.

The origins of the justly renowned *minkisi minkondi* (*minkisi* is plural form of *nkisi*) or 'nail fetishes', remain enigmatic, but it is probable, though historically unproven, that they emerged from a synthesis of Kongo and Christian beliefs. Not only the style, but equally the constellation of beliefs appertaining to the body, mutilation and power may have been derived from the variety of Christian experiences introduced during the intermittent periods of European influence.

The parallels between medieval and Renaissance Christian ritual practices and images, and those found 400 years later in the Kongo are intriguing. Since the Middle Ages the body provided European Christianity an idiom with which to express metaphysical and spiritual concepts. Images of the pierced body resulting from the martyrdom of saints or the crucifixion of Christ have dominated Christian iconography. A painting in the style of the Rhenish school, dated between 1520 and 1530, unusually depicts the body of the Virgin Mary pierced by seven swords. The martyrdom of St Sebastian provided a



Mathias Grünewald
Christ on the Cross
Date unknown
Staatliche Kunsthalle, Karlsruhe

OPPOSITE:
Artist unknown
Our Lady of the Seven Pains, 1520-30
Staatliche Kunsthalle, Karlsruhe

much emulated subject for many artists, such that the portrayal of the saint's body pierced by arrows became a familiar image. The archetypal mutilation of the body by piercing was represented by Christ's crucifixion – one of the most ubiquitous and centralising images of Christianity. Representations of St Sebastian by, for example, Mantegna, or Grünewald's *Crucifixion* 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.

Christianity also attached particular meanings to objects of torture and martyrdom. The sword was itself frequently incorporated into religious paintings to symbolise martyrdom, arrows were interpreted as divinely sanctioned spiritual weapons, hammers and nails were symbols of the Passion.[37] The blood from the wounds of Christ was itself associated with magical qualities. By the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, artists were depicting the blood from Christ's wounds to symbolise the food of the soul which sustained the world.[38] The crucifixion as the archetypal sacrifice within Christianity destroyed Christ's ties of subordination to the world, freed him from all utility and restored him to a world of unintelligible caprice.[39] Suffering and death by mutilation not only restored and demonstrated Christ's divinity, but far more importantly provided the efficacious deed that resulted in humanity's salvation. The crucifixion provided a practical demonstration and acknowledgement of a path to power and authority. A particularly cogent image of the supernatural and magically charged body of Christ pictured with the instruments of its consecration is portrayed on the small triptych made for Antonius Tsgrooten in 1507 by the Flemish artist Goossen van der Weyden. In the central panel, behind the figure of Christ, appear the instruments of the Passion, the hammer and nails, the lance used to pierce the side of Christ on the cross, while the whip lying on the floor recalls the flagellation. The painting also makes an explicit parallel between Christ's blood and the milk running from Mary's breast to represent the twin fountainheads of spiritual and bodily food which constitute the irreducible foundation of human life.[40] The stigmata has been retained by Christianity as a sign capable of miraculously impressing itself on the bodies of persons showing extraordinary faith and devotion; that is to say as a sign of authority.[41]

Not only were the fifteenth-century Portuguese heirs to an impressive iconography of macabre bodily imagery which visualised mutilation as a means of achieving power or authority over life, but also of fantasies of the means to imitate the example of Christ through ritualised self-flagellation. So great was the medieval European loathing of the body, that the French historian Jacques Le Goff even accused the age of trying to 'deny the existence of biological man'.[42]

From the mid-twelfth century to the fourteenth century, the Christian hatred of the body was given physical expression through the flagellants, a deeply influential lay movement whose authority and example threatened even the stability of the Catholic church. Given the millenarian fervour in Europe and the desire among some religious orders to return to the example of worldly renunciation given by the church fathers, it is not unlikely that similar dogmas and practices were introduced abroad and fed into the Kongolese construction of Christianity.

Further parallels existed between the prohibitions, behaviour and assumption of supernatural qualities adopted by the European flagellant movement and Kongolese practices concerning knowledge of and the means of activating *minkisi*. The flagellants did not see themselves, nor were they seen by the population, as simple penitents. 'They themselves claimed that through their flagellations they were not only absolved from all sin and assured of heaven but were empowered to drive out devils, to heal the sick, even to raise the dead. There were flagellants who claimed to eat and drink with Christ and to converse with the Virgin; at least one claimed to have risen from the dead.'[43]

The lessons of images that taught that a form of semi-divinity was achievable through the mutilation and denial of the physical body were given practical demonstration through the example of the flagellants who sought the same path as the martyrs.

The ethnographers J. Maes and E. Peschuel-Loesche[44] long suspected that the overtly sexual and threatening *minkisi* figures might have had a European origin. Both their analyses and that of Jongman[45] of *nkondi* point to Christian-derived elements in their usage.

After examining a figure in the Museum voor Volkenkunde at Leiden and comparing the accounts of earlier researchers as to how the figures were rubbed, and not nailed, to activate them, Jongman concludes that the figure of a cross could be seen in the patinas found on a number of pieces – the result of generations of devotees lightly tracing their fingers across the wooden surfaces. Jongman even finds evidence to suggest that customs of pounding nails into images to enslist their supernatural intervention survived well into the twentieth century in parts of Europe. In Flanders, K. Ter Laan described the custom of driving a nail into an image or picture in order

to injure another person; a respondent to a folklore questionnaire recounted a miraculous head of a saint into which pilgrims could hammer nails to cure headaches; while young girls in one part of France stuck pins into the image of a saint to help find their future husbands.[46]

Parallels between images and practices of bodily mutilation and the acquisition of supernatural power both in Europe and the Kongo suggest that the style and perhaps even the modes of usage of Kongolese 'fetishes' may have been influenced by European missionaries. However, it cannot be assumed that similarities between forms or styles of objects from different cultures have any functional correspondence to shared ideologies. The aforementioned missionaries and other writers were Protestant or sectarian and shared an interest in dismissing previous Catholic missionary efforts as much as African beliefs. Rather than describe the significance of *minkisi* in the context of Kongo religion, these writers, in the main, were content to extrapolate and impose their own concepts of 'fetishism' on to the ritual practices and images they encountered. As John Mack argues in the following essay, the European cross probably represented nothing more than a transposition of the indigenous cosmogram and was itself easily incorporated into older beliefs. Nevertheless, it is interesting to speculate that what for many Westerners has been assumed to be the very embodiment of 'savage' art may also contain a reflection of Europe's own former iconographic conventions and beliefs. History comes full circle with the drawing by R. P. Nico Vandenhoudt, *The Crucifixion*, showing an African with nail and hammer, nailing Christ to the Cross.[47]

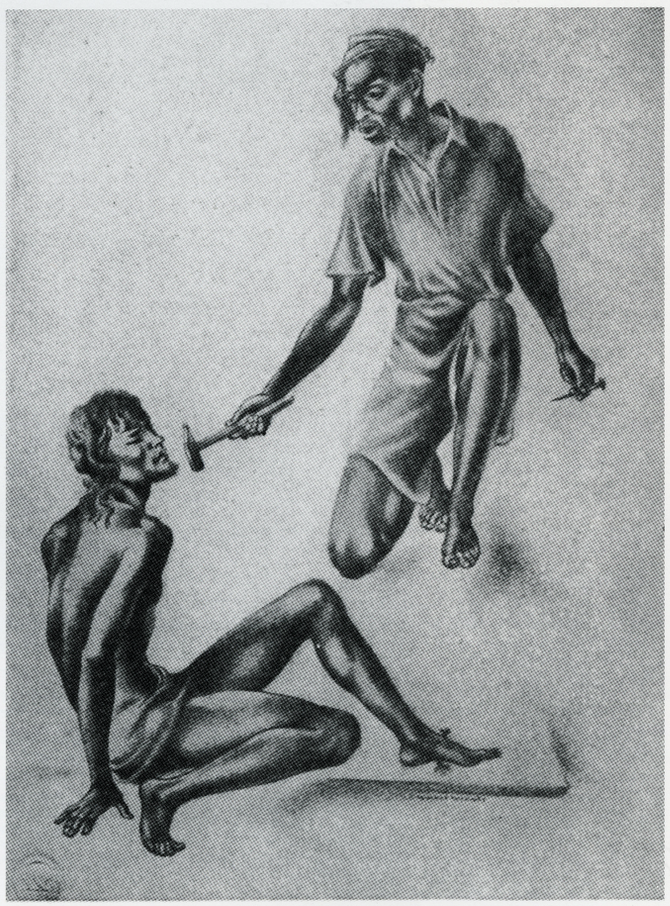
So persuasive had the imagery and significance of 'fetishism' become by the early twentieth century that it assumed a rhetorical value that could impute the sense of 'savagery' to whatever context it was applied. A year into the First World War, the *Illustrated London News* printed a page showing eight German war memorials, which were to have been erected to raise money for their campaigns by encouraging people to pay for the privilege of hammering a nail into them. In the centre of the page stand two Kongolese *minkisi*. Discussing the statue of Hindenburg erected in Berlin, the writer mused:

> ... the nails in the Hindenburg statue must be intended as appeals to the national hero to avenge the wrongs of his fellow-countrymen on their hated foes. No doubt the intention is not explicit in the German mind, but rather subconscious. German psychology would seem to be just evolving an idea which the more advanced natives of West Africa had developed into a logical system many years ago, and German *Kultur* would appear to have a good chance of attaining, eventually, the same plane as the 'civilisation' of negroid Africa.[48]

The British image of Kongo 'fetishism' provided a sense of the fragility even of European civilisation and the barbarous human nature which lay submerged under its thin skin. Clearly, the imagery on which we hang our prejudices of the supposed mental deficiency, amoral behaviour or spiritual lassitude of other cultures, and from which their persecution was justified, is nothing other than an expression of our own 'hearts of darkness'.

Exotic Reveries

In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault argued that from the seventeenth century onward, Europe embarked on a process to convert sexuality into careful codified and



R. P. Nico Vandenhoudt
The Crucifixion, *c.*1950

342—THE ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS, DEC. 25, 1915.

FOR GERMANS TO DRIVE NAILS INTO! ENEMY

1.

WITH regard to the German statues and other monuments here illustrated, the following is an extract, translated, from the article accompanying them in the paper from which they are taken: "Various forms of war memorials have been erected in Germany during the present war—mostly for the purpose of war-charities, money being paid for permission to hammer nails into them. We here give various

(Continued in No. 2.

2.

statues and other memorials which are in various towns in Germany—erected during the present war. The custom of hammering nails is an old one. In the Middle Ages workmen's apprentices used to stick nails into walls, statues in the market-places, etc., doubtless just to show their friends they had passed there. This custom, but for charitable

STUTTGART'S "OWN PARTICULAR HERO": THE STATUE OF THE BRAVE SWABIAN.

"GERMANY WAS NEVER DEFEATED WHEN UNITED": THE "IRON" OAK AT HALLE.

THE adjoining illustration shows a wooden idol, from the region north of the Lower Congo (Chiloango River), now in the British Museum. This figure simply bristles with iron nails and knife-blades driven into it by worshippers. The idol is known as Mangaka, and its aid is sought by men who have suffered from theft, accident, sickness, or misfortune. The victim, on payment of a fee, is permitted to drive a nail or knife-blade into the figure. This is to call the attention of the supernatural power, which the image represents, to the sad case of the worshipper, who believes that his trouble will soon be alleviated, and that divine vengeance will strike the enemy. Indeed, the miscreant can only escape supernatural punishment by paying the priest a still higher fee to extract the nail, and so, as it were, to withdraw the summons."

WITH NAILS AND KNIVES DRIVEN INTO IT LIKE BERLIN'S HINDENBURG: AN IDOL FROM THE CONGO.

BIELEFELD'S WAR MEMORIAL: A STATUE OF A GERMAN SOLDIER IN FIELD-GREY—FOR NAILING.

A GERMAN SUBMARINE WAR MONUMENT: THE "U" BOAT MODEL AT HÖRNUM, ISLE OF SYLT, WITH A BRITISH SEA-MINE AS BASE.

Considerable comment has been aroused by the craze in Germany for driving nails into large wooden statues of popular heroes, such as Hindenburg at Berlin, and von Tirpitz at Wilhelmshaven—a privilege which can be exercised by all and sundry on payment of a small fee. "The inner meaning of this strange performance," writes a correspondent, "and the nature of the satisfaction derived by the operator, are a trifle obscure. We can hardly see in the new custom a revival of the magical practices of an earlier date, when, to the accompaniment of appropriate incantations, waxen figures were stuck with pins and otherwise maltreated; for in the latter case it was believed that bodily harm was caused to the individual whom the effigy represented. A possible key to the riddle, however, is furnished by a wooden idol in the British Museum" (the left one of the two shown above). After

'For Germans to drive nails into!
Enemy war memorials and Congo cases of nailing'
The Illustrated London News, December 1915

WAR MEMORIALS—AND CONGO CASES OF NAILING.

poses, has been revived, and each town has chosen its particular hero to make a greater appeal to the inhabitants. So Stuttgart has the brave Schwabe who fears ; Dortmund, the Iron Reinoldus ; Hamburg, the Iron Michael ; Bielefeld and Leipzig each its warrior. The other small towns have erected statues which most appeal to

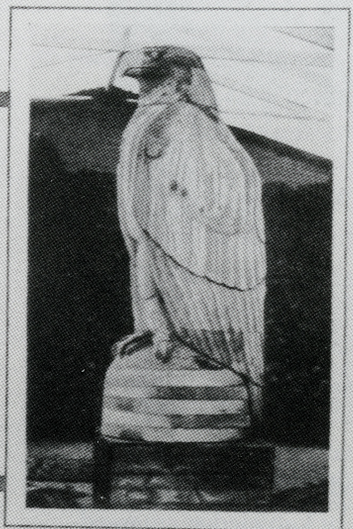
[Continued on p. x

LEIPZIG'S "OWN PARTICULAR HERO": THE MONUMENT OF A GERMAN WARRIOR.

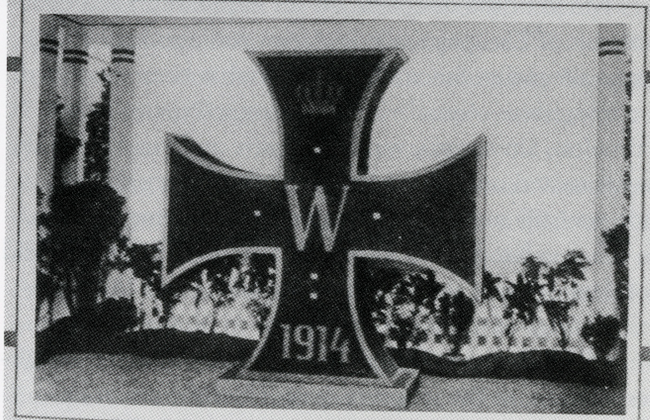
them. The North Sea island of Sylt has erected the representation of a 'U' boat, and nearly everything it is made of comes from the sea : the foundations are of oak ; the English sea-mine which forms the base, the support of wood to which it is anchored—all were picked up on the sea-shore. This 'U' boat, when 'nailed,' will become a real iron boat. Darmstadt has erected a large Iron Cross of 1914 ; Halle (Westphalia), an oak-tree ; Frankfort-on-Main, a monstrous eagle."

DOTTED WITH NAILS IN THE APPROVED GERMAN MANNER: A FETISH FROM THE CONGO.

THE figure shown in the adjoining photograph, now in the Royal Geographical Society's Museum, is thus described in the "Geographical Journal" : "The subject is a Fetish taken on the Congo in 1865, when the boats of H.M.S. 'Archer' . . . were engaged against the river pirates. . . . The figure is of wood. . . . A number of heavy iron nails have been driven into its body. The practice of knocking in nails has . . . two aspects. . . . A worshipper, desirous of obtaining some favour, pays a fetish-man a fee and is allowed to drive a nail into the figure while uttering his petition. . . . The other is in connection with unauthorised 'black magic.' . . . The votary wishing to harm an enemy pays a heavy fee to the fetish-man to let him drive a nail. It is believed that the victim will fall sick and die in consequence."



GERMANY'S EMBLEMATIC BIRD OF PREY: THE "IRON" EAGLE AT FRANKFORT-ON-MAIN.



GERMANY'S MOST POPULAR WAR DECORATION AS A MONUMENT: A COLOSSAL IRON CROSS THAT HAS BEEN ERECTED AT DARMSTADT.

A GERMAN COUNTERPART OF WEST AFRICAN NAIL-DRIVING FETISH-WORSHIP: HINDENBURG, BERLIN.

cribing it, as above, he continues :—"This seems to fit the German case ; the nails in the Hindenburg statue must be intended as appeals to the national hero to avenge the ings of his fellow-countrymen on their hated foes. No doubt the intention is not explicit in the German mind, but rather subconscious. German psychology would seem to be just bring an idea which the more advanced natives of West Africa had developed into a logical system many years ago, and German Kultur would appear to have a good chance of attaining ctually the same plane as the 'civilisation' of negroid Africa." With regard to the epithet "iron" applied to some of the German monuments, it does not appear to mean in these s that they are made of iron (as it is applied in the German original to the wooden statue of Hindenburg), but that they have iron nails knocked into them.

specialist discourses whose legitimacy it guaranteed by their then-emergent scientific status. Far from Western society censoring discussion on sexuality, it encouraged and channelled such discussions, building an extensive archive of case studies which enabled sexual norms to be defined and a pathology and corresponding etiology of sexual behaviour to be constructed.

The emergence of psychiatry, psychoanalysis, modern medicine and biological sociology defined and restricted 'normal' legitimate sexual practice to the conjugal family. Sex was given an entirely functional procreative role from which even the most minor deviations were mapped, described and classified with such rigour and ardour that, Foucault believed, the central subject itself was mostly evaded. 'Aberrations, perversions, exceptional oddities, pathological abatements, and morbid aggravations'[49] were isolated, defined and categorised in order to produce an inclusive repertoire of evils from which the individual, the family, even society itself had to be protected. At the heart of the analysis of sexual deviations was 'fetishism', what Foucault called the 'model perversion'[50] which provided the framework for the isolation, description and explanation of other so-called psychiatric disturbances. Alongside the medical and psychiatric etiology, other fields of knowledge emerged which provided additional interdictions against a debasement of sexuality's reproductive function. Discourses on demography, statistics, eugenics and political economy redefined individuals and communities as 'populations' to be counted and classified by age, sex, class, occupation, education and location to enable the establishment of centralised national planning through which the future economic and cultural vigour, and political identity of a nation, could be guaranteed.[51] It is not for nothing, as Robert Nye[52] reminds us, that anxiety about the size and condition of the French population, male impotence, sexual exhaustion and reproductive fertility, coincided with increased interest in fetishistic deflections of the sexual act. Sexuality denuded of eroticism was acknowledged as vital to the health of the social body as well as of the individual.

The de-eroticisation of sex at home[53] coincided with the objectification and eroticisation of the non-European female body.[54] The construction of the erotic Other, while embodying different 'natures', followed an essentially similar strategy and created like effects in all the lands that succumbed to European domination. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries eroticism was conflated with an exoticised Orient producing an image of Eastern women as mute and fecund – tainted by the motivation of mysterious emotions that gave reign to 'untiring sexuality' and 'unlimited desire'.[55]

The South Seas version is notable for its idealisation of woman living in a state of nature in a sexually promiscuous paradise untainted by the conventions of civilisation. In contrast to these views, Africa remained the 'Dark Continent', impenetrable both territorially and intellectually, medically and morally deleterious, menacing, both on the mind and the body. Within such 'wasteland', the archetypal woman was degenerate, untamed and promiscuous, represented in popular imagery by the Hottentot with her short stature and protruding buttocks.[56] Whereas in orientalism, the sexual submission and possession of the foreign female body mirrored the subordinate and dominant position between East and West,[57] African exoticism transcribed near-identical power relations between the geography of South and North. It was European men who explored, invaded, administered and worked Africa. Some historians have even argued that the propelling force of colonialism was a redirected male sexual energy,[58] away from hearth, home and country to the impenetrable and dark heart of distant continents.[59] As Patrick Brantlinger sardonically remarks: 'Africa was a setting where British boys could become men but also where British men could behave like boys with impunity.'[60] It is noteworthy that in neither novels nor memoirs were European women the subject of the sexual fantasies of colonial men.[61]

Much of the discourse on the exploration and establishment of European rule in Africa was permeated with sexual allegories. Since Hegel, Africa has been described as a mysterious sensual virgin waiting to be conquered. It is timeless, ahistorical, waiting: passive and yielding to the events visited on it. In the eighteenth century this attitude was still ambiguous. Mungo Park, writing in 1799, on the one hand insisted that physiological differences did not detract from 'the genuine sympathies and characteristic feelings of our common nature'.[62] Nevertheless, while Park found generous, sympathetic and kindly qualities in what, in the majority, were elderly women or slaves, he slandered young women as avaricious, rude, troublesome, demonstrative, wanton, lacking in sexual propriety, and prone to ungovernable curiosity. Bizarre forms of female behaviour, at least in European eyes, almost always attracted the attention of later writers. Ellis (1883)[63] mentioned a contingent of Amazons, 'beautiful' scarred female warriors, in West Africa; and Gorer (1935)[64] after similarly describing the female warriors of Dahomey, remarked how, in his opinion, the number of women reserved for the king had caused shortages in

their ranks, leading to unusual levels of 'perversion and neurotic curiosity'.[65] Such views were multiplied and elaborated during the heyday of colonialism as a result of greater contact with African women and their representation in the burgeoning travel literature and works of fiction.[66]

The European fascination with African women is not only evident in the literature of the period, but in the illustrations included in travel books and memoirs, and, to an impressive degree, in the picture postcards that by 1900 were being produced on a large scale. 'Sexual pleasure begins with the privilege of sight'[67] and the picture postcard and printed illustration were primary in fixing and codifying African women to the European gaze.[68] One of the most common poses, under the alibi of illustrating '*les types indigènes*' were scantily dressed young women poised in a rigid upright position, arms by their side, looking directly at the camera. Other postcards show files of up to twenty women with naked breasts abjectly staring into the lens, pairs of girls turned away from each other to show back and fronts of the body, and single women with hands clasped coquettishly behind their heads. Such illustrations were highly selective; in the main, they were of well-developed young women. Girls, older women and men were more usually shown at work and were not the subject of portraiture. The subjects were anonymous, unnamed, blending in easily to form a stereotype of the eroticised African.

What is found in the illustrations of photographers is equally explicit in the writing of the period.[69] In his fictitious account of the essence of the continent, *Impressions of Africa* (1910), Raymond Roussel employed highly syncretic images to model African women on easily recognisable and explicit sexually perverse and erotic roles. The emperors' young wives combine wild, undomesticated temperament with charm and beauty. Proud Rul in her torn red velvet corset that she wears over her loincloth provides the reluctant but defiant victim of sadistic torture, and Louise Montalescot, a European woman who, in the tropics, fell victim to Europe's preoccupying fear of degeneration, is described as a female transvestite with a penchant for military costumes.

Less perverse, but none the less sexualised female images are used in William Seabrook's *Jungle Ways* (1931).[70] For Seabrook, 'Wamba' is the embodiment of all African womanhood: 'She was not only a true sorceress, but a true Negress, true to type and true to the genius of her race – light-minded, sensual, a luxurious, pleasure-loving animal, comic at times, gaily insolent, yet good-

'Jeunes Féticheuses', nineteenth-century postcard
From R. Corbey, 'Alterity: The Colonial Nude'
Critique of Anthropology, VIII, No.3, 1988, p.90

Photograph by René Jacques of Guillaume Apollinaire's studio and library, Paris 1952-3

Photograph (1959) showing the African adoption of a Western mask for traditional masquerades Ugwuoba village, Ibo people, Nigeria

hearted – but with another side, another soul, dark and primordial, in continual unconscious deep communication with old, nameless things, demoniac and holy.'[71]

The conflation of eroticism with mysticism tied Seabrook to his more scholarly friend, the French anthropologist and writer, Michel Leiris. Apparently happy to accept similar characterisations of African womanhood, Leiris readily extended them to Afro-Americans, thereby locating a source of undiluted sexuality right in the heartland of America and Europe. His excitement on first seeing Josephine Baker, during one of her early performances in Paris, which he recounted years later, was infectious: 'Like the music, profane or religious, that seemed like a faint breeze wafted from distant Africa into the midst of our industrial civilisation, so the image of a Josephine Baker, abandoning herself to the rhythm of the Charleston, evoked something primitive akin to the *Christ inférieur des obscures espérances* of Apollinaire.'[72]

Neither Surrealist literature, such as Aragon's *Paris Peasant* with its exoticised, defamiliarised Parisian landscape, nor the peculiar subjects and strangely angled photographs they made of their surrounds succeeded so much in creating awareness of the exotic and erotic as did jazz and the black cabarets. Ideas and feelings of the

exotic and eroticism were reaffirmed in Europe, not only threatening firmly held beliefs and prejudices, but offering the possibilities of new sexualities previously repressed at home.

The wild, dangerous, potentially polluting and exotic qualities that European writers, travellers and colonial servants ascribed to African female sexuality were not dissimilar to the distillation of their religious, intellectual or moral beliefs in the 'fetish' figure – perhaps not surprising given that religious 'fetishism' provided the intellectual model through which sexual behaviour could be related. In both cases what was important was not the figure or body itself, but the prejudices about motivations and understanding, intolerance and the redeflection of sexual, aggressive and emotional instincts that had been denied and exiled from Europe to foreign territories. This proximity between religious and sexual fetishism was recognised by anthropologists, psychologists and psychiatrists alike. Alfred Binet, who adopted the psychiatric use of 'fetishism', noted the intellectual and moral weaknesses shared by 'savages' and the 'sick' which were sufficient to label them 'deviants'. 'The term fetishism suits quite well, we think, this type of sexual perversion. The adoration, in these illnesses, for inanimate objects such as night caps or high heels corresponds in every respect to the adoration of the savage or negro for fish bones or shiny pebbles, with the fundamental difference, that in the first case religious adoration is replaced by sexual appetite.'[73]

Freud also acknowledged similarities between African religious and erotic 'fetishes' and noted the acceptance by some authors of the view that sadism and masochism were the remnants of cannibalistic desire.[74] So close was the association between European notions of religious fetishism and African sexuality in the popular mind of the period, that one picture postcard, under a portrait of a partly-nude African girl, could meaningfully bear the caption 'Jeunes fétícheuses'.

A Change of Skin

Leiris's essay 'Le caput mortuum ou la femme de l'alchimiste' is among the first indications of European reaffirmation of the possibility of creating the sexually exoticised woman at home,[75] and 'fetishising' her body. As for Binet, so too for Leiris, sexual 'fetishism' was tied to religious 'fetishism'. In both cases, a part or substitute object assumes the identity of the whole or person. The experience of the object of fetishistic desire is intensified, leading to the illusion of metamorphosis. The twin themes of disguise and transformation were central in connecting the Other and the erotic in a general theory of 'fetishism' that drew freely on Freud's concept of disavowal to account for the suspension of belief in the quotidean world. In 'Le caput mortuum', Leiris discusses the effects and sensations aroused by William Seabrook's collection of leather masks.[76] The tightness of these masks created a heightened appearance of intimacy between the skin and the artificial epidermis that enveloped it, while, paradoxically, erasing the identity of the wearer. The masked person lost all personhood. Social indexes, race, class, age, gender, profession, were eradicated as was any sense of temporal succession. The image became a blank creation, form without consciousness, potentiality without objective, existence without determination – in short, a primordial archetype that escaped identification and transcended subjectivity.

Nancy Grossman
Untitled, 1968

The hoods did more than obliterate identity, they cancelled out the head and brain, thereby annulling reason and intelligence while refocusing the gaze on the remainder of the body. The experience of unmasked bodily imagery was intensified, promoting a shift in normal attention. The obliteration of the subject, the erasure of the physical head and the refocusing of the gaze elsewhere set up multiple paradoxes contradicting the functional hierarchy of the biological body while creating the conditions for its transformation. Human subjectivity becomes metamorphosed into bestiality, culture into wild nature awaiting domination and exploitation. Given the correct technology, the European woman could be endowed with the same mysterious and desirable qualities previously attributed only to her foreign sisters.

Nancy Grossman's *Male Heads* (1969-70) work in a similar manner and also reveal much about the effect of contemporary 'fetish' dress. Like Seabrook's hoods, sheathed in constrictive leather, the heads create their particular anxiety by their closure and displacement from the rest of the body. The bound head and neck is silenced, the eyes are blinded, the face obscured from communicating emotion by its enclosed epidermis of leather; enclosure transforms the subject into an object that can only suggest the missing body by parodying the phallus. The body of her *Male Figure* is tightly bound in a second skin of leather which perfectly traces the muscles and sinews concealed under its surface. Bodily senses (but not necessarily functions) are suspended; smell is overpowered by the pungent odour of leather, zips black out vision, silence speech and deafen sound. We are made to feel suspense as to whether the deprivation of senses of smell, sight and hearing are in any way compensated by the greater awareness of tactile sensations, but the blows or caresses that the posture of the body appears to anticipate never fall and our voyeuristic inquisitiveness is denied fulfilment. The leather skin creates a being that is culturally ungendered, though corsets are thought highly symbolic in the transformation of male into she-male. Even the body's anatomical features are ambiguous for, not only are its penis and testicles cradled in a leather sack, but the effect of the corset is to gather in the waist, while the posture pushes out the torso to suggest breasts.

Grossman's *Male Figure* conveys none of the ironic parodies of her head series. Its gender is challenging, and intimates both the male in bondage – powerless, vulnerable and silenced – and the feminised male struggling to escape its macho chrysalis. The power of the figure lies in its unresolved arbitration of the contradiction between

Nancy Grossman
Male Figure, 1971
Israel Museum, Jerusalem

the threat of death and castration and the rebirth of a new sex.

Masks or hoods are not the only means of defamiliarising and exoticising the body. According to the influential French critic, Jean Baudrillard, clothes, cosmetics, tattoos, scarification or piercings can all refocus and halt the gaze to enable any part of the body to assume fetishistic significance:[77]

> The entire contemporary history of the body is the history of its demarcation, the network of marks and signs that have since covered it, divided it up, annihilated its difference and its radical ambivalence in order to organise it into a structural material for sign-exchange, equal to the sphere of objects, to resolve its playful virtuality and its symbolic exchange … into sexuality

'Maîtresse'
From *Skin Two*, No.11, p.95
Demask, Amsterdam

taken as a determining agency, a phallic agency entirely organised around the fetishisation of the phallus as the general equivalent.[78]

Contemporary notions of the body dismiss any necessary 'naturalness' about its qualities. Instead it is seen as a medium capable of assuming multiple values and meanings which can be created and recreated, and whose interpretation is limited only by the unconscious anxiety of castration. Dress, whether sado-masochistic, leather, rubber, PVC cyberpunk, etc, divide it into erectile areas by creating boundaries with the skin on which the gaze can rest before succumbing to the apprehension surrounding phallic castration. The object of desire becomes displaced elsewhere on the body as the subject imputes to it sexual significance in struggling to deny his imminent confrontation with castration. For Baudrillard, unlike Freud, it is the mark that divides and imposes limits on the body; discrete areas defined by scars, piercings, boots, rips and loosely stitched clothes, become seen as erectile and surrogates of the disavowed phallus. The body, even in its entirety and especially when upright, can be fetishised as the phallus:

> Ankle boots and thigh boots, a short coat under a long coat, over the elbow gloves and stocking tops on the thigh, hair over the eyes or the stripper's G-string, but also bracelets, necklaces, rings, belts, jewels and chains: ... a mark that takes on the force of a sign and thereby even a perverse erotic function, a boundary to figure castration which parodies castration as the symbolic articulation of lack.[79]

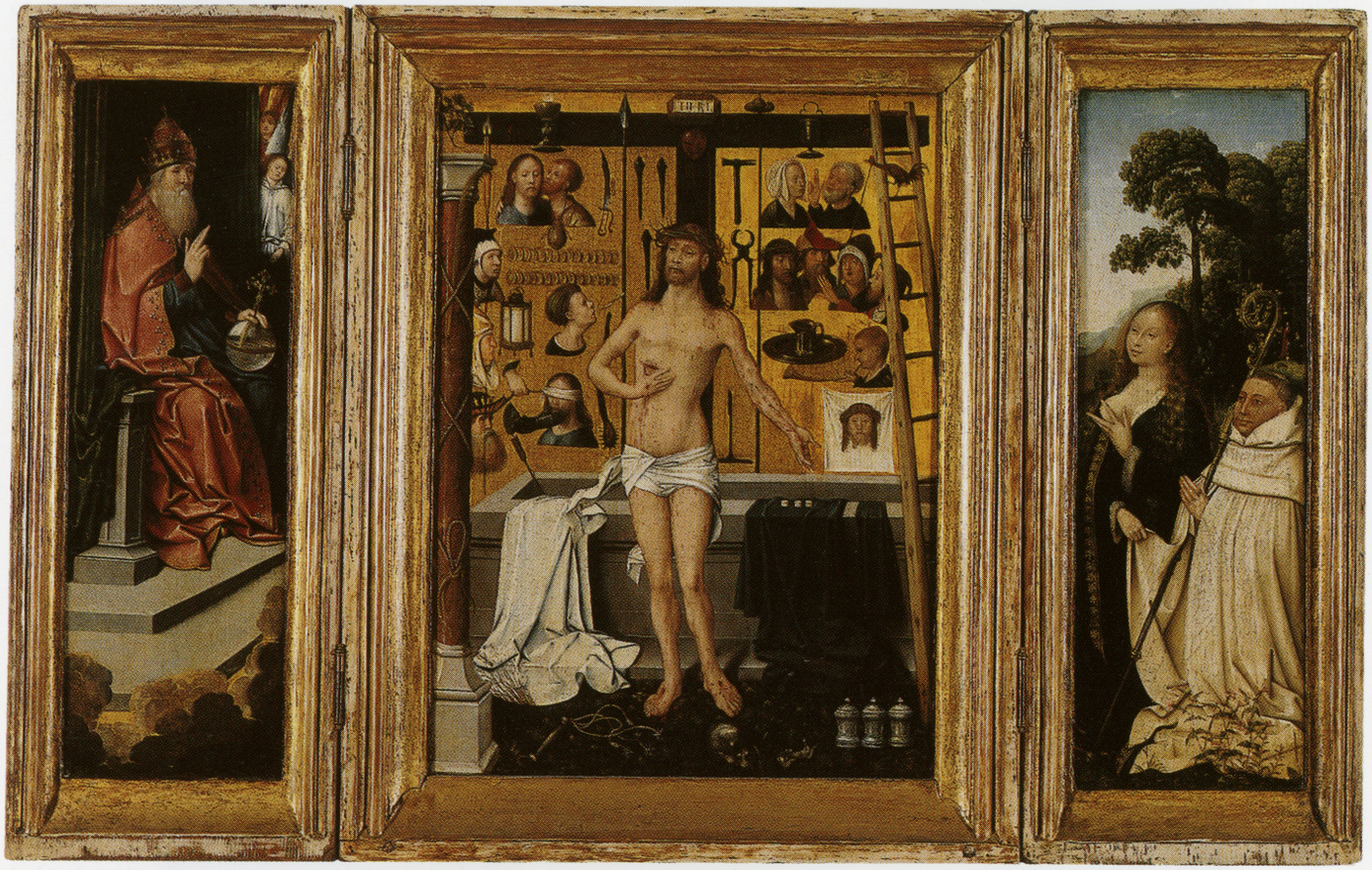
In the case of Grossman's heads and male body, it is not necklaces, bracelets or chains, but zips, straps and belts that dissect the body to create strongly felt erectile areas of the calves, torso, upper and lower arms and fingers that demonstrate the effectiveness, that Baudrillard notes, of the equivalence between 'the marks of "fetishism"' and 'the marks of sado-masochism (mutilations, wounds, cuts)'.[80]

The same appearance of erectility is used to produce the most psychologically effective images of the female *maîtresse* – the thin calves, legs, torso and arms stretched tall or long, suggesting a power analogous to the masculine penetrative force of the penis. The recognition of the body's plastic qualities attracts the attention of couturiers such as Jean-Paul Gaultier and Versace, as well as equally inventive 'fetish' designers like Pam Hogg or Erisian Garbs whose success stems from their effective creation and manipulation of the marks to move, arrest and refocus the gaze to displace sexualisation. Examples abound in anti-heroines such as Barbarella, Catwoman, Madonna and Andrea in Pedro Almodóvar's film *Kika*, which use clothes to fetishise parts of the body. In *Kika*, Andrea's 'otherness' is signified by a slashed black dress revealing artificial breasts dripping bright red blood, while her hair is covered in shiny black rubber wiring. Elsewhere, her costumes include torn and stitched black-sequined dresses, rubber jackets and bras, glass heels, fish-net stockings, and the video camera attached to her helmet or searchlight in place of her bra cups. The blood, thigh belts, zips, gloves, and open stitched, slashed dresses, that mark and divide Andrea's body create multiple sites for staged disavowal and fetishistic substitution.

'Andrea', from *Kika*, directed by Pedro Almodóvar
Costume by Jean-Paul Gaultier

Foucault observed that 300 years of sexual discourse could not help but stimulate non-productive desire which sought to play, subvert or travesty approved sexuality through scandal, exhibitionism and resistance. These counter-incitements against channelling sexuality into reproductive functions have pre-empted the fixation of intransigent boundaries around sex and bodies to create 'perpetual spirals of power and pleasure'[81] seen in art, cinema and the contemporary fetish scene.

COLOUR PLATE I
Jan Sanders van Hemessen, *Saint Sebastian*
Triptych (central panel), 1530
Musée du Petit Palais, Paris



COLOUR PLATE 2
Goossen van der Weyden
Antonius Tsgrooten Triptych, 1507
Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten,
Antwerp

COLOUR PLATE 3
Charm gown [Cat.26]
Asante people, Ghana
Nineteenth century
The Royal Pavilion, Art Gallery and Museums,
Brighton

COLOUR PLATE 4 Female power figure (*nkisi*) [Cat.12]
Kongo people (Manyanga), Central Africa
Collection Marc Leo Felix

OPPOSITE:
COLOUR PLATE 5
Power figure (*nkisi*)
with plumed headdress [Cat.11]
Kongo people (Vili), Central Africa
Collection Marc Leo Felix

COLOUR PLATE 6
Power figure tied to necklace [Cat.25]
Kongo people (Yombe), Central Africa
Collection Marc Leo Felix

OPPOSITE:
COLOUR PLATE 7
Power figure tied to necklace [Cat.24]
Kongo people, Central Africa
Collection Marc Leo Felix

COLOUR PLATE 8
Power figure (*nkisi*) [Cat.27]
Kongo people (Yombe), Central Africa
Katholieke Universiteit, Leuven

COLOUR PLATE 9
Power figure (*nkisi*)
Kongo people, Central Africa
Museum voor Volkenkunde, Rotterdam

LEFT:

COLOUR PLATE 10
'Altar' with three figures [Cat.22]
Songye people, Central Africa
Collection Marc Leo Felix

COLOUR PLATE 11
Power figure
Songye people, Central Africa
Museum for African Art, New York

COLOUR PLATE 12
Power figure [Cat.18]
Songye people, Central Africa
Collection Marc Leo Felix

COLOUR PLATE 13
Power figure
Songye people, Central Africa
Museum for African Art, New York

COLOUR PLATE 16
Trigo Piula (Congolese artist)
Ta Tèle, 1988
Museum for African Art, New York

The contemporary fetish scene with its fashion designers, stylists, literature, clubs and life-style, as heir to many of those previously exiled forms of colonised eroticism discussed previously, has constructed a Western Other, modelled on archetypal scenarios but performed by a community which has displaced racism and sexual exploitation by consent and respect among its members. From the *bricolage* of disparate psychological traits, literary scenarios, pictorial scenes and theatrical styles, 'fetishism' has constructed its own ritualised forms of behaviour, embodied images of power and legitimising genealogies of origin that together have created a captivating world whose form and motivation are often ascribed a transcendental power. Its highly structured forms, rules and use of religious metaphor are acknowledged by its contemporary practitioners, as they were by von Masoch when he compared his mistress to Titian's *Venus with a Mirror* and the predicament of Severin, her enamoured slave, with that of the Christian martyrs. The sexualisation of religion is well remarked in much of the literature. Terence Sellers, New York's Angel Stern, clearly articulates the erotic fetish as a form of religious sacrament. 'A fetish is an object that radiates a "magical" field. It has no qualities of its own, or rather, its essential reality is held in abeyance, during which time it acts as the vehicle for the essence of the Superior. Whatever belongs to a Superior is not merely a shoe, a scarf, a garter, a letter – it is the Superior for the fetishist.'[82]

Sellers's book also illustrates the degree to which ritual absolutions and prescriptions governing the relationship between slave and dominant have been formalised. 'The Superior finds the body of the slave more or less repulsive until it has been hygienically prepared to come into contact with her. A thorough cleansing, inside and out, the shaving of at least the pubic region, and bondage are the three preliminaries for the imposition of servitude.'[83]

As Gilles Deleuze observes, the relationship between *maîtresse* and slave is one of coldness, described by Anthony Graham as 'embodying the double edged attributes of unobtainable beauty and irresistible power'.[84] The power of the formal coherence found in contemporary 'fetishism' can, to a large extent, be explained by the recognisability and established history of its constituent parts and images.

While part of contemporary Europe has reclaimed what is again a highly syncretic form of 'fetishism' as a significant part of its cultural identity, some African American artists, realising its radical and powerful figurative qualities, have used the images and parodoxical discourse of 'fetishism' to provide a critique of the society which created and disavowed it. The painting *Ta Tèle* (1988) by the Congolese artist, Trigo Piula, cleverly appropriates Western images of the 'fetish', by depicting a mesmerised African audience looking into the abdomen of a traditional Kongo *nkisi*. However, in place of the medicinal substance usually concealed there, there is a television screen, while on the back of the heads of the viewers are painted the desires it generates. Commodity 'fetishism' is shown to be the real template to which religious 'fetishism' was subordinate. Other Black artists, like Renée Stout and David Hammons, have consciously reclaimed the Kongo idea of *minkisi* to construct palliative objects: 'Art is a way to keep from getting damaged by the outside world. To keep the negative energy away. Otherwise, if you didn't have a shield to let it bounce off then you start to really go crazy.'[85] Form, material and – in the case of Hammons and Stout who direct their objects at the community rather than the art market – significance, aim to re-establish a uniquely African concept and genre of art.

While the 'fetishisms' discussed in this essay share certain common internal characteristics, partly due to the unresolved ambiguity between the different contexts in which they have been devised and partly because of their rhetorical use to designate pathological or degenerative aspects of subject peoples, sexually excessive women or the insane, each is a distinct refraction of the basic trope.

'Fetishism', as a category, has gone through successive reinventions, combining distinct images, discourses and genres that, at different times and under distinct epistemological, cultural and political circumstances, have been disavowed or embraced. 'Fetishism' has come full circle, from a European invention, disavowed by the West and projected to disparage subject peoples, to a reclaimed and acknowledged form of cultural existence with its own Western community of followers. In other contexts its torturous paradoxes are providing a rich vein of critical and ironic guile for the groups it previously dispossessed.

NOTE. I would like to thank John Mack (Museum of Mankind), John Jarvis and David Reason (University of Kent), and David Mellor (University of Sussex) who kindly read and commented on an early version of this essay.

NOTES

1. Wyatt Macgaffey, *Astonishment and Power*, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington and London, 1973, p.32

2. William Pietz, 'The Problem of the Fetish I', *Res*, No.13, Spring 1987, p.37

3. W. Holman Bentley, *Pioneering on the Congo*, Religious Tract Society, London, 1900, p.256

4. W. Holman Bentley, *Dictionary and Grammar of the Kongo Language*, 1895, p.888

5. G. Cyril Claridge, *Wild Bush Tribes of Tropical Africa*, Seeley, Service, London, 1922, p.115

6. Dugald Campbell, *In the Heart of Bantuland*, Seeley, Service, London, 1922, p.240

7. Usually reserved for unorthodox sects and popular beliefs

8. R. E. Dennett, *Seven Years Among the Fjort*, Sampson Low, Marston, Searle and Rivington, London, 1887, p.50. The author's use of the term *nkissism* refers to 'fetish religion' and is derived from *nkisi*. See also his *At the Back of the Black Man's Mind or Notes on the Kingly Office in West Africa*, Macmillan, London, 1906

9. E. J. Glave, *Six Years of Adventure in Congo-Land*, Sampson Low, Marston, London, 1893, p.85

10. Bentley, *Pioneering on the Congo*, p.256

11. Joachim Monteiro, *Angola and the River Congo*, Macmillan, London, 1875, p.248

12. Dennett, op.cit. pp.49-50

13. Campbell, op.cit. p.234

14. Claridge, op.cit. p.119

15. R. H. Nassau, *Fetishism in West Africa*, Duckworth, London, 1904, p.14

16. Dennett, op.cit. p.49

17. Monteiro, op.cit. p.247

18. Glave, op.cit. p.77

19. Bentley, op.cit. p.256

20. ibid. p.293

21. Campbell, op.cit. p.234

22. Claridge, op.cit. p.121

23. Campbell, op.cit. p.243

24. Leo Frobenius, *The Childhood of Man*, Seeley, London, 1909, p.197

25. ibid. p.189

26. At least part of Dennett's own collection is illustrated in the plate on p.48 of his book on the Fjort. A number of the objects illustrated are now in the Royal Albert Museum, Exeter

27. Dennett, op.cit. p.66

28. Philippo Pigafetta, *A Report on the Kingdom of Congo, a Region of Africa*, quoted by Pietz, op.cit. p.38. But see the article by John Mack in this volume

29. Douglas E. Bradley, *Christian Imagery in African Art: The Britt Family Collection*, Snite Museum of Art, University of Notre Dame, p.6

30. As quoted by Sir Harry Johnson, *George Grenfell and the Congo*, Hutchinson, London, 1908, p.85

31. ibid.

32. Wannijn and Balandier, quoted in Bradley, op.cit. p.5

33. D. G. Jongman, 'Nail Fetish and Crucifix', *The Wonder of Man's Ingenuity*, E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1962, p.59

34. Bradley, op.cit.

35. Dennett, op.cit. pp.48-9

36. Glave, op.cit. p.82

37. George Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art*, Oxford University Press, London and Oxford, 1954

38. Carolyne W. Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast. The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1987, pp.270-1

39. This interpretation of sacrifice is taken from Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, Zone Books, New York, 1989, p.43

40. cf. Bynum, op.cit. plate 30. See also colour illustration in catalogue (plate 2)

41. The bodies of St Catherine of Siena and St Francis of Assisi were both reported to be marked by the stigmata (Ferguson, op.cit. p.50)

42. Jacques Le Goff, *The Medieval Imagination*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1988, pp.83-4

43. Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, Paladin, London, 1970, p.135

44. Quoted in Jongman, op.cit.

45. ibid.

46. ibid. p.61

47. *Les Arts au Congo Belge et au Ruanda-Urundi*, CID, Brussels, 1950, plate 87

48. *Illustrated London News*, 18 September 1915, pp.842-3

49. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1987, p.53

50. ibid. p.154

51. Ann Laura Stoler, 'Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power. Gender, Race and Morality in Colonial Asia', in Micaela de Leonardo (ed), *Gender at the Crossroads of Knowledge. Feminist Anthropology in the Post-modern Era*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1991

52. Robert Nye, 'The Medical Origins of Sexual Fetishism', in E. Apter and W. Pietz (eds), *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1993, p.14

53. Foucault notes that the working classes escaped the imposition of close sexual prescriptions for a much longer period than the middle classes (op.cit. p.121). Working class women were also the victims of the projection of eroticism outside of the middle-class family, coarseness

and animality forming a powerful lure (Mort, in *Formations of Pleasure*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1983, pp.37-8)

54. See E. Said, *Orientalism*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1985, p.190

55. ibid. p.188. Said finds that the trope of the oriental woman in Flaubert's Kuchuk Hanem, who never spoke of herself, represented her emotions or presence. 'The oriental woman is no more than a machine. She makes no distinction between one man and another' (ibid. p.187)

56. After death, various of their bodies were dissected by authorities no less renowned than Cuvier to ascertain whether any gynaecological abnormality could be found to explain such a presumption. The investigation was extended to promiscuous European women and led to an association being made between Africans and prostitutes. See Sander Gilman, 'Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine and Literature', Henry Louis Gates, Jr (ed), *'Race', Writing and Difference*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1985

57. Said, op.cit. p.6

58. Stoler, op.cit. p.54

59. See also Said, op.cit. p.219

60. Patrick Brantlinger, 'Victorians and Africans: The Genealogy of the Myth of the Dark Continent', in Henry Louis Gates, Jr (ed), *'Race', Writing and Difference*, p.209

61. Stoler, op.cit. p.67

62. Mungo Park, *Travels in Africa* (1799), Dent Dutton, London and New York, 1969, p.61

63. A.B. Ellis, *The Land of the Fetish*, Chapman and Hall, London, 1883

64. Geoffrey Gorer, *Africa Dances*, Faber and Faber, London, 1935, pp.54-5

65. ibid. p.153

66. In the main, fiction writers imitated the structure of travel literature, centring their stories around the themes of quest and adventure, much beloved by the Gothic romance (Brantlinger, op.cit. p.207)

67. Raymond Corbey, 'Alterity: The Colonial Nude (1900-1930)', *Critique of Anthropology*, VIII, No.3, 1988, pp.75-92

68. There already existed a convention whereby Africans were juxtaposed with white women to convey a sense of the sexual impropriety of the scene. Fanny von Pistor, Masoch's 'Venus in Furs', was often accompanied by African maids when disciplining her lover. In Manet's *Olympia*, the model becomes sexualised both by the pose and her juxtaposition with her African servant, Laura. The convention was used by Picasso in his celebrated *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907) which linked the women of the brothel with negritude by the use of African masks (Gilman, op.cit. pp.250-3)

69. Because of the later part of our argument we shall concentrate on Seabrook and Roussel, but many other writers also disclose these traits. Brantlinger (op.cit. p.213) mentions Rider Haggard, Joseph Thompson and Richard Burton. See also Brian Street's discussion of E.R. Burroughs's Tarzan stories (B. Street, *The Savage in Literature*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1975)

70. Also important are Alfred Jarry, the anarchist, playwright and author of *Ubu-Roi*, and André Salmon. The colonial Ubu and the black slave dancer in Salmon's *La Négresse du Sacré-Cœur* both combine elements of nudity, uncontrolled sexuality and lack of sexual propriety (Patricia Leighen, 'The White Peril' and 'L'Art nègre: Picasso, Primitivism and Anticolonialism'. *Arts Bulletin*, 722, 4, 1990, pp.609-30)

71. William Seabrook, *Jungle Ways*, Harrap, London, 1931, p.58

72. M. Leiris and J. Delange, *African Art*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1968, p.33. It was not until after the First World War that 'négrophilie' really began to engulf Paris. Gendron attributes the fad at least partly to the influence of foreign soldiers stationed in France. There were 163,952 Africans stationed in Europe under the French flag during the war and a large percentage of the 370,000 Afro-Americans serving in the United States Army were also encamped there. (Bernard Gendron, 'Fetishes and Motorcars: Negrophilia in French Modernism', *Cultural Studies*, 4, 2, 1990, p.145)

73. Quoted in Alasdair Pettinger, 'Why Fetish?', *New Formations. A Journal of Culture/Theory/Politics*, 19, 1993, p.85. Pettinger explores the conflation of religious and sexual fetishism in anthropological, psychiatric and psychoanalytical discourse

74. Anne McClintock, 'The Return of Female Fetishism and the Fiction of the Phallus', *New Formations*, 19, p.3

75. It is perhaps worth noting that the collusion of the erotic with the exotic and their incorporation into the heart of Western society coincided with the demise of direct personalised power as colonialism became more subject to rationalised administration. At the same time, opposition to colonial rule was growing, creating more restricted access to colonies. In the early twentieth century, Europe's image of Africa was heavily influenced by reports of atrocities committed in the Belgian and French Congo which probably contributed to demystifying romantic images of 'savage' life

76. These leather hoods were commissioned by Seabrook for his wife. Later they were photographed by Boiffard and illustrated in Leiris's article. See Rosalind Krauss and Jane Livingston, *L'amour fou. Photography and Surrealism*, Abbeville Press, New York, 1985. Also Dawn Ades in this volume

77. The connection between body-piercing, tattoos and mutilation to produce ecstatic states and former practices of non-Western cultures is acknowledged by many in the New Primitives movement

78. Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, Sage Publications, London and New Delhi, 1993, p.101

79. ibid. p.101

80. ibid. p.121

81. Foucault, op.cit. p.45

82. Terence Sellers, *The Correct Sadist*, Temple Press, London, 1990, p.69

83. ibid. p.19

84. Anthony Graham, 'Primal Therapy', in Tim Woodward (ed), *The Best of Skin Two*, Masquerade Books, New York, 1993, p.119

85. Dawoud Bey, *In the Spirit of Minkisi. The Art of David Hammons. Third Text*, Third World Perspectives on Art and Culture, London, 1994, p.48