Bosman's Guinea: The Intercultural Roots of an Enlightenment Discourse

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

Kant, *Anthropology from Pragmatic Point of View*

Although we no longer think of the Enlightenment as the ensemble of ideas that descended into history in the form of the French Revolution to punctuate a discrete stage in the progress of mankind, World Spirit, or Western civilization, there is still a tendency to conceive the Enlightenment as, to quote Cassirer, "only the continuation and consistent development of certain tendencies in the European mind."\(^1\) The Enlightenment still tends to be situated solidly within the tradition of Western culture and philosophy, as that tradition's intellectual response to the scientific understanding that began to emerge in the Renaissance. The appeal to general models of the noble and the depraved savage to interpret the Enlightenment notion of primitive peoples and religions contributes to this view by characterizing Enlightenment discourse about non-European cultures as a mere projection or byproduct of an already constituted Enlightenment ideology.\(^2\)

Such interpretations ignore the fundamental importance of ongoing colonial relations and cross-cultural mercantile practices for eighteenth-century Europe, and thereby fail to do justice to the full complexity and real novelty of that global intellectual response to contemporary history that was the Enlightenment.\(^3\) While there has been considerable attention to the influence of voyage texts on the European literary imagination, we are just beginning to take seriously the constitutive role of the problems and categories that developed in early European colonial experience for the discourse and project of Enlightenment theory.\(^4\) My paper is intended to contribute to this endeavor by approaching Enlightenment discourse about primitive religion and the mentality of savages, not through the familiar general images and abstract models, but through an examination of the specific intertextual genealogy of one important discursive figure, that of the African fetish worshipper.
My argument is that in this figure we can trace a direct continuity between a discourse developed in an ongoing crosscultural situation outside Europe—the discourse of fetishes and fetish worship that developed on the Gold Coast of West Africa during the late fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries—and the discourse about the unenlightened, superstitious fetish worshipper and the general theoretical problem of fetishism as the primordial form of ‘natural religion’ that was an important component of Enlightenment discourse. For eighteenth-century Europe, the figure of the African fetish worshipper was a paradigmatic example of what was not enlightenment. Moreover, a close textual study brings to light a common problematic among these discourses: an anthropological problem of cross-cultural judgement determined by the question of the social value of material objects, a question not central to the problematic of earlier Western philosophical discourse.

We might take the word “Guinea” as an emblem of the novel problem constitutive of Enlightenment discourse and theory. “Guinea” was the word used to designate black Africa—a non-European, non-monotheist land not covered by the histories and cultural codes of old Europe or classical antiquity—but “guinea” was also the word for the gold coin which, being the first machine manufactured coin and therefore the first coin immune to debasement by clipping and shaving around the edges, helped bring about the unprecedented monetary stability that Europe knew after 1726. The connection between the two meanings of the word is, of course, anything but arbitrary; the coin was first struck in 1668 by the English Royal African Company from gold it imported from West Africa. It is almost as if between these two psycho-geographical poles of the distant strange land and the newly mysterious monetarized Europe, all natural objects with commodity value appeared in a new, exotic light, almost a new field of consciousness. For “Guinea” was also an adjective added to familiar nouns to name new things and species which now appeared in Europe as commodities imported from faroff lands: not just “Guinea gold” but “Guinea fowl,” “Guinea hens,” “Guinea corn,” “Guinea pepper,” “Guinea wood” and on and on. Indeed the adjective “Guinea” came to stand for any faroff land, not just black Africa. For instance, “guinea pigs” are from South America. And of course a “New Guinea” was discovered in the South Seas already in 1545. Finally, the word “Guinea” connoted one of history’s greatest abominations, then being perpetrated by Europeans: the African slave trade. A “Guinea ship” was a slave ship, and a “Guinea trader” a slave-dealer.

The cognitive codes and textual practices of early European voyages to non-monotheist lands raised the problem of the material object in a new
way. The very production of a geography of navigation routes, charted measurements of distances and depths, and fixed terrestrial landmarks already assembled a world-picture of functional objects stripped of cultural meaning and social value. And while the first Portuguese voyagers to black Africa in the fifteenth century understood themselves and their actions according to the codes of feudal Christendom and the Crusades, their voyages were as often as not funded by venture capital out of Lisbon or Genoa; we can see an increasingly self-conscious mercantile mentality emerge in the accounts of West Africa during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In these texts we see the transcoding of material objects, not only across cultural boundaries, but out of their status as social values within the codes of both tribal black Africa and Christian feudal Europe into the mercantile code of the commodity form. The accompanying discourse of natural history which became so important in these texts was clearly complementary to the mercantile code insofar as it identified species and things as purely natural, nonsocial material objects that could then be evaluated as potential commodities or potential dangers to the orderly conduct of trade. It is no new insight to say that the codes of navigational geography, mercantile commodification, and natural history at work in these texts helped construct a new, self-evident "nature" filled with material objects experienced as pre-social and outside any general semantic order of transcendentally (whether Christian or Platonic) ordained human meanings. It is rather the cross-cultural context of this process that I wish to consider here as it appears in one discursive constellation.

It was the pidgin word "Fetisso" that emerged on the coast especially around the trade fort of Elmina which most clearly expressed this radically novel cross-cultural situation. For thirteenth-century Portuguese priests the word "feitiqo" named the amulets and non-Christian talismans worn by common people for certain magical effects; "feitiqo" was a synonym for 'witchcraft' but without necessary attribution of actual traffic with the Devil. Feitiqos were understood to be produced by ignorant, simple people; feitiqos might indeed produce effects through the natural magic of God's created world, but their users might also, either purposely or unknowingly, draw on demonic powers and might even call forth the Devil himself. In any event, feitiqos were in direct competition with the crucifixes, rosaries, and little saints proper to the Christian code, and their use was both heretical and illegal.

When the Portuguese voyagers first encountered non-Islamicized black kingdoms such as Benin, they faced a paradox, since orderly societies could only exist under a Law or Faith, and the only Laws were
those of the three monotheisms: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. While blacks might be conceived as pagan idolators, their religious duties and social institutions seemed to depend less on *idolos* (free standing statues) then *feitiços* (worn about the body or assembled from heterogenous ingredients) by which Africans took contractual oaths, swore to tell the truth during trials, and made offerings. Moreover, the *feitiços* that first attracted the voyagers’ attention were little gold rings and ornaments which seemed both religious objects like the European crucifixes, and marks of social rank, and yet at other times in the case of women, pure aesthetic ornaments. Europeans reported the astonishment that Africans proved willing to trade the gold fetishes—which obviously had great value for them—for objects the Europeans valued as little more than trifles. Astonishment was followed by contempt for these Africans who valued objects, both in the register of commodities and in the register of religion, that the Europeans regularly called “trinkets,” “trifles” and “trash.”

The pidgin word “Fetisso” that developed on the coast of West Africa gathered together semantically the essential problems not only of cross-cultural perceptions of social order, but of the transvaluation into commodities of objects that were social values. And it did this specifically in the register of a discourse about religious objects. By the time Pieter de Marees introduced the word “Fetisso” into the written languages of northern Europe in 1602, the word was simultaneously a name for African religious objects, emblems of nobility, vehicles for oaths, aesthetic and erotic ornaments, and gold rings and figures alienable as commodities, and also a term that characterized the general socio-religious system of African peoples in a complex and far from non-contradictory semantic field. In addition, the term’s original analogy to Catholic Christian objects and practices could be asserted as more or less an identity by Protestants of the new Dutch republic.

All the facets of this complex discourse of the “Fetisso” appear in the text which was the authoritative account of black Africa for eighteenth-century Europe. I refer to the Dutch merchant Willem Bosman’s *A New and Accurate Account of the Coast of Guinea*; as my title implies, the Guinea known by the Enlightenment was above all Bosman’s Guinea. Willem Bosman sailed to the Guinea coast at the age of sixteen in 1688 and by 1698 had become Chief Merchant for the Dutch West Indies Company, second in authority only to the Director-General on the Guinea coast. When his brutal superior was ousted by the company in 1701, Bosman was swept out with him and found himself at twenty-nine back in Holland at the end of his career. The book he wrote in 1702, which has been called “one of the most popular travelogues ever writ-
ten, was addressed specifically to the Board of Directors of the Dutch West Indies Company doubtless to remind them of his own value and unfair treatment, but also at least in part as an argument in favor of the gold trade and against the slave trade as the focus of company policy. Bosman, who was a true believer in the mercantile ideology of an ideal market society, did not so much argue that the slave trade was bad, as that slaving was bad trade.

But Bosman’s account found an audience that extended far beyond the directors of the Dutch West Indies Company. Upon its publication in Dutch in 1703, the book because of its greater scope and detail, superior factual reliability, and sceptical empiricist spirit at once displaced earlier authorities on the Gold and Slave Coasts of Guinea. French and English translations appeared in 1705, and a German translation was published in 1706. There was an expanded second Dutch edition in 1709 and three subsequent editions in 1711, 1718, and 1737. A second edition of the English translation appeared in 1721, and an Italian translation came out in 1752-54.

Another index of the supreme success of Bosman’s account is the frequency of its plagiarization by subsequent eighteenth-century accounts. And while Labat’s famous 1730 account of Guinea claimed to rely mostly on des Marchais, many of the facts, interpretations and anecdotes about the Gold and Slave Coasts were drawn from Bosman, whose acknowledgement tended to be avoided for reasons of nationalism and colonial rivalry in the area. In 1743-47 there appeared the great English collection of voyage accounts by Thomas Astley, who attempted a critical edition of all the accounts in the earlier collections of Hakluyt, Purchas, and Harris. In his preface, Astley justifies the need for such a critical edition because authors so frequently copied or stole from each other, he writes, “not excepting Bosman himself.” Bosman is clearly the byword for an original and trustworthy author. In Astley’s volumes on Guinea Bosman is by far the leading authority. Astley’s collection was translated, with additional material, into a famous French collection by the novelist Abbe Prevost (in 1746-68) and into a German version by Schwabe (in 1747-74).

Beyond its high status among readers specifically interested in Guinea, Bosman’s book at once gained the attention of the leading intellectuals of the day. We find copies of the French edition in the libraries of Newton and Locke, and a copy of the English version in Gibbon’s library. It is not listed among Adam Smith’s books, but Smith had a thorough knowledge of the text and refers to it frequently in his Lectures on Jurisprudence of the 1760s.

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

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

Bosman recounts the following creation story as widespread among “Africans”; the Negroes tell us, writes Bosman:

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

Here we have a curious intercultural myth enabled by the generation of an axis of opposition between gold (as the material object of selfish, natural desire, pre-ethical and pre-social, hence immoral) and writing (an order of knowledge, hence social and moral). If we ask the dialectical question recently rediscovered as a method by post-structuralism under the name “deconstruction,” In what sense is gold itself already writing and in what sense is writing itself already gold? thereby reversing the terms and seeking the historical context from which the underlying semiotic structure has been displaced, we are led to the ideas of the monetary values inscribed (written) on gold coins and of paper money (i.e. writing that “is” gold) and book-keeping accounts. That is, the new monetary system of commodity prices and cost calculations that had now become the self-conscious code and system of motives and actions for Europeans who came to the West African coast.
justifies the most horrific problem created by this new logic (the enslavement of blacks by whites) as punishment for African avarice—an interpretive reversal worthy of Freud's dreamwork theory. Indeed the way Bosman's anecdotes function in his text is not dissimilar to the way daydreams function in waking life as wish-fulfillments that reveal the underlying desires and problems that determine the interpretation of experience. It is especially Bosman's anecdotes about the cult of the snake fetish at the great slave port of Whydah that are of interest, since it was this snake cult that, beginning with Bayle in 1705, became the paradigmatic example of fetishism throughout the eighteenth century; and it is in these anecdotes that we can most easily examine the discursive structures that textualized and ideologized the earlier fetish discourse into the discourse that became part of the general language of the Enlightenment.

One often retold anecdote concerns the senseless massacre of a large number of hogs. We find this anecdote repeated in Labat (1730) in Astley and Prevost (1740s), in the popular journal The British Magazine (1761), in a 1765 article by Baaron d'Holbach on the serpent fetish in the Encyclopédie itself, and we find the incident mentioned in the 1757 text in which the word "fetishism" was first coined and proposed as the general theoretical term for the primordial religion of mankind: the Burgundian parliamentarian and philosophe Charles de Brosses' book On the Cult of the Fetish Gods, or Parallel between the Ancient Religion of Egypt and the Present-Day Religion of black Africa. The anecdote runs as follows:

In the Year 1697, my brother Factor Mr. Nicholas Poll, (who then managed the Slave Trade for our Company at Fida) had the Diversion of a very pleasant Scene. A Hog being bitten by a Snake, in Revenge, or out of Love to God's Flesh, seiz'd and devour'd him in sight of the Negroes, who were not near enough to prevent him. Upon this the Priests all complain'd to the King; but the Hog could not defend himself, and had no Advocate; and the Priests, unreasonable enough in their Request, begg'd of the King to Publish a Royal Order, that all the Hogs in his Kingdom should be forthwith kill'd, and the Swiny Race extirpated, without so much as deliberating whether it was reasonable to destroy the Innocent with the Guilty.

The King's Command was Publish'd all over the Country. And in Pursuance thereof, it was not a little diverting, to see Thousands of Blacks arm'd with Swords and Clubs to execute the Order; whilst on the other side no small Number of those who were owners of the Hogs were in like manner arm'd in their Defence, urging their Innocence, but all in vain. The Slaughter went on, and nothing was heard but the dismal sound of Kill, Kill, which cost many an honest Hog his Life, that had lived with an unspotted Character to his dying Day. And doubtless the whole Race had been utterly extirpated, if the King (who is not naturally bloody-minded) perhaps mov'd to it by some Lovers of
Bacon, had not recall'd his Order by a Counter one, importing, that there was already enough of innocent Blood shed, and that their God ought to be appeased with so rich a Sacrifice.

You may judge whether this was not very welcome News to the Remainder of the Hogs, when they saw themselves freed from such a cruel Persecution, whereof they took particular Care for the future, not to incur the same Penalty.27

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

But beyond this, the anecdote is textualized by certain discursive structures which occur throughout Bosman’s book in his characterizations of the people and society of Guinea, and which constitute the particular ideologization of the fetish discourse that Bosman encountered on the coast. One approach to ideology is to conceive it as the semiotic structuring of some real historical problem28 so that it appears to be a formal problem in which whatever counts as rational knowledge, on the one hand, and moral power, on the other, seem to have been separated, perverted, and set in opposition to each other. Reason, sundered from the purpose of legitimate moral power, appears perverted by immoral motives, while public power, sundered from the guidance of rational knowledge, appears directed by violent, irrational purposes. Such an ideological structure tends to generate a character system whose actors are seen to embody the different components of that structure.

Bosman’s anecdotes about the snake cult present us with a character system that has a familiar Enlightenment configuration. The immoral perversion of reason appears in the figures of the rational, economically self-interested priests of the cult who hypocritically manipulate the fears and superstitious credulity of the people. The superstitious, terror-driven populace, who represent African society as such, embody the combination of the principle of irrationality with a state of complete
political powerlessness (i.e. the lack of both knowledge and power). Another figure is the king, who embodies the corruption of the public power (complementary to the people’s absolute subjection), but who “is not naturally bloody-minded” and is therefore capable of hearing the voice of reason and becoming, at least momentarily, an enlightened rather than an Oriental despot.

An important character type associated with the snake cult that does not appear in this anecdote but appears in the others is the African woman. African women were a great scandal and fascination to the Europeans, and they were invariably presented—not only by voyage account authors but by learned Enlightenment writers such as Holbach, de Brosses, Kant, and ultimately Castilhon, who wrote a libertine novel in 1769 entitled Zingha, Queen of Angola, which was a source for the novelist Sade at the end of the century—as at once absolutely powerless slaves to their husbands (in the domain of African family life) and as over-powerful intruders in the domain of political power. In Whydah, the king’s wives were his principal executive force, and the women of the snake cult held high public esteem.

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

Women in Bosman’s text tend to embody that force of irrational pur-
poses and instinctive mendaciousness which perverts the institutions of legitimate power. The exploiting priests, the irrational women, the superstitious polity, and the despotic king constitute the basic character system of Bosman's Guinea as a world that will remain morally upside down until knowledge and power are reunited.

In the anecdote of the hog massacre we can see the nature of Bosman's own underlying desire in the wish-fulfilling moment when "reason" and legitimate political power are reconciled by the emergence of a new group produced by the general social crisis of the hog slaughter, none other than the suddenly self-conscious and unified bourgeoisie (in the form of the hog owners) who rise up to defend their property and who in their identity as "lovers of Bacon" (rational consumers) catch the king's ear and avert a disaster to society as a whole (permanent loss of an important food source) through the sovereign's exercise of his absolute law-making powers. Throughout Bosman's book fetish worship appears as the key to African society considered as a theoretical problem, and Bosman's explicit thesis—which Pierre Bayle and subsequent Enlightenment authors found compelling—was that fetish religion was the perversion of the true principle of social order: interest. Institutionalized superstition—the religion of fetishes—was interpreted by Bosman as the specific social force that blocked otherwise spontaneous and natural market activities that would bring about a healthy economic and a truly moral social order. This is consistent with Bosman's belief in mercantile activity as a utopian social principle, which is also evident in his allegiance to the dwindling gold trade and his hostility to the slave trade as an accidental aberration of the profit motive rather than a logical consequence of it.

Fetish religion was thus a priestly conspiracy; priests and merchants acted from the same motives, but where merchants were honest and moral, priests were hypocritical and immoral. But there is still the question of the nature of popular fetish superstition itself. Bosman's use of the fable genre in fact suggests his answer to this: blacks confused the impersonal order of natural things with the moral order of human society. They anthropomorphized nature, believed that animals talked or at least exercised other spiritual powers. But Africans also imported the mechanical character of nature into the human order of decision, purpose, and policy formation. Specifically this is explained by the first-encounter theory of the origin of superstitious fixations as a sort of erroneous primitive empiricism. In the following passage, Bosman claims to be quoting his principal native informant, who explains:

that the Number of their Gods was endless and innumerable: For (said he) any of us being resolved to undertake anything 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 fall in our way, whether a Stone, a piece of Wood, or any thing else of the same Nature. This new chosen God is immediately presented with an offering; which is accompanied by a Solemn Vow, that if he pleaseth to prosper our Undertakings, for the future we will always worship and esteem him as a God. If our design prove successful, we have discovered a new and assisting God, which is daily presented with fresh offerings: But if the contrary happen, the new God is rejected as a useless Tool, and consequently returns to his Primitive Estate: He went on in these following Words, we make and break our Gods daily, and consequently are the Masters and Inventers of what we Sacrifice to.\textsuperscript{31}

Now it is a truism that a member of any given culture tends to perceive the actions and motives of members of an alien culture as based on a principle of complete arbitrariness, an incomprehensible order based on pure chaos. What is remarkable is that this idea was proposed explicitly as a theory of African society by leading minds of the eighteenth century. In his influential presentation of the characteristics of the four basic races of mankind, Linnaeus proposed that while the regulatory social principle of Europeans was law, for American Indians custom, and for Asiatics opinion, the social principle of Africans was "caprice."\textsuperscript{32} For the Kant of 1764, fetish worship was explained by the most degenerate of aesthetic principles, "the trifling" (läppisch).\textsuperscript{33}

In short, African fetishist's superstition was understood to entail the personification of nature by attribution of spiritual purposes and powers to natural material objects, and the mechanization (or depersonalization) of the social order and human action by finding a principle of decision in the random encounters proper to natural events.

Now we can find more or less identical principles of explanation, structures of ideas, and systems of characters in exemplary Enlightenment texts. For instance, in Voltaire's \textit{conte philosophique} of 1759, there is a moment when Candide and his worthy valet Cacambo travel from that best of all possible utopias, El Dorado, back to a historical world in which reality is marked by the constant eruption of violent events whose extreme randomness is matched only by the extreme misery and horror that are their human consequences. This passage involves an encounter with an enslaved African fetish worshipper whom Candide and Cacambo find stretched across the road that leads from El Dorado to Surinam. Beyond his near nakedness, this figure is striking to the travelers for his lack of a left leg and a right hand. The conversation that ensues conveys an authorial message whose ideas and sentiments we all recognize as typical of Enlightenment discourse:
“Oh, good Lord!” said Candide to him in Dutch. “What are you going there, my friend, in that horrible state I see you in?”

“I am waiting for my master Monsieur Vanderdendur, the famous merchant,” the Negro replied.

“Was it Monsieur Vanderdendur,” said Candide, “who treated you this way?”

“Yes, sir,” said the Negro, “it is the custom. They gave us a pair of cloth shorts twice a year for all our clothing. When we work in the sugar mills and we catch our finger in the millstone, they cut off our hand; when we try to run away, they cut off a leg; both things have happened to me. It is at this price that you eat sugar in Europe. However, when my mother sold me for ten patacons on the Guinea coast, she said to me: ‘My dear child, bless our fetishes, worship them always, they will make you live happily; you have the honor to be a slave of our lords the whites, and thereby you are making the fortunes of your father and mother.’ Alas! I don’t know if I made their fortune, but they didn’t make mine. Dogs, monkeys, parrots are a thousand times less miserable than we are. The Dutch fetishes who converted me tell me every Sunday that we are all, blacks and whites, children of Adam. I am no genealogist, but if those preachers are telling the truth, we are all second cousins. Now you must admit that no one could treat his relatives in a more horrible way.”

“Oh, Pangloss!” exclaimed Candide, “you had not guessed this abomination; this does it, at last I shall have to renounce your optimism.”

“What is optimism?” said Cacambo.

“Alas,” said Candide, “it is the mania of maintaining that all is well when we are miserable!” And he shed tears as he looked at his Negro, and he entered Surinam weeping.

Not only has Candide through his encounter with the Negro fetish worshipper passed back to the non-utopian real world, he has moved from delusion to enlightenment, liberated from the dogmatic optimism of Leibnitzian systems theory whose premise of the necessarily harmonious unity of the existing world system enables Pangloss to demonstrate that noses exist to permit the wearing of spectacles, legs were created to fill up trousers, stones created to be shaped into castles for aristocrats, and pigs made to be eaten. Candide’s encounter frees him from this farcical faith that the natural purposes of material objects were designed to promote human happiness. Candide arrives at a new philosophical perspective personified by Martin the Manichean, who becomes Candide’s traveling companion at the end of the chapter after the Dutch merchant Monsieur Vanderdendur has run off with the last of Candide’s El Dorado wealth.

The ironic knowledge that the real world of events should be but is not a harmonious and unified rational system on the order of the Newtonian solar system, a mechanism such as a clock, or an ideal commodity market and monetary system, is of course a hallmark of Enlightenment thought, an idea crystallized in the historical imagination of the day in the form of the 1755 Lisbon earthquake (a natural catastrophe) and the Seven Years
War (a social catastrophe considered the first primarily colonial war between European nations).

An idea even more characteristic of Enlightenment thought than the scandal of the chaos of events is the equation of obedience to custom and tradition in the social domain with superstitious credulity in the domain of religion. We see this equation and its significance in the figure of the victimized African, whose blind obedience to custom (lying passively in the road, waiting for Vanderdendur) becomes, despite all the coercion and mutilation, a kind of self-incurred immaturity (to use Kant's famous phrase) through his credulous reverence for the African and European fetishes preached by his mother and the Dutch clergymen. Voltaire's point is that "fetish worship" keeps people happy no matter how miserable they are. He is using the familiar eighteenth-century figure of the African fetish worshipper to have Candide (and the reader) look into a contemporary historical mirror in which he perceives his own misery and dupery in that of the other. And indeed Candide attains his enlightenment that the rationalist optimism of modern scientism according to which there is a necessary built-in harmony between natural objects and human ends is no less a fetishism than that of primitive religion and Christian dogma.

The character system associated with the figure of the fetish worshipper in Candide is essentially that found in Bosman's account of the Whydah snake cult, with the significant exception that for Bosman the problem is the repression of the mercantile principle, while for Voltaire it is its unrestricted exercise.36

While Voltaire used the figure of the fetish worshipper as a simple rhetorical weapon, this period (the late 1750s and the early 1760s) was also the moment when primitive or "natural" religion was established as one of the fundamental problems of Enlightenment theory (although the issue can surely be traced back to Bayle at the beginning of the century). The seminal work was David Hume's essay The Natural History of Religion, which was published in 1757, but which had circulated two years earlier among French intellectuals.37 It is well known that much of the final third of the book by Charles de Brosses in which the term "fetishism" was coined was a word for word unacknowledged translation of Hume's essay, with the word "fétiçisme" substituted whenever the word "polytheism" occurred. This led to the opinion, already formed by Diderot and others at the time,38 that De Brosses' book was of little theoretical originality or interest. And indeed de Brosses offers no alternative theoretical explanations of primitive religious phenomena to those of Hume.
Hume argued that polytheism was the original religion of mankind because primitive peoples were especially subject to a multitude of sudden and capricious natural events (again, the insight that came to public consciousness in the form of the Lisbon earthquake). Polytheism, according to Hume, attributed "invisible, intelligent powers" (i.e. the gods) to natural things and events; this was the result of three distinct factors: ignorance of the true mechanistic causes of natural events; fear of one's helpless subjection to these unpredictable events; and the human imagination's propensity to anthropomorphize natural objects:

There is an universal tendency among mankind to conceive all beings like themselves, and to transfer to every object those qualities, with which they are familiarly acquainted, and of which they are intimately conscious. We find human faces in the moon, armies in the clouds; and by a natural propensity, if not corrected by experience and reflection, ascribe malice or good-will to every thing, that hurts or pleases us. Hence the frequency and beauty of the prosopoeia in poetry, where trees, mountains and streams are personified, and the inanimate parts of nature acquire sentiment and passion ... Mankind, being placed in such an absolute ignorance of causes, and being at the same time so anxious concerning their future fortune ... acknowledges a dependence on invisible powers, possessed of sentiment and intelligence ... In proportion as any man's life is governed by accident, we always find, that he increases in superstition.39

Superstition, argues Hume, like Bosman, rests on principles of the anthropomorphization of natural things and the subjection of human purpose to determination by the accidental events of nature.

While de Brosses repeats, indeed, copies out, Hume's arguments, he tends to eliminate Hume's argument for the fundamental importance of the ignorance of causes. Moreover, the argument about anthropomorphism itself becomes problematical in de Brosses' text. While de Brosses follows Hume in arguing that fetishism rests on "l'habitude de personifier ... une métaphore naturelle à l'homme" and that it completes "la superstition née de la crainte des accidents" proper to "l'empire du hazard," he asserts with equal force that fetishism is a "culte direct rendu sans figure aux productions animales et végétales."40 How is it that de Brosses can argue that fetishism rests on a principle of natural metaphor and still be "sans figure"? Indeed the opening pages of de Brosses' book are a denunciation of that mode of interpretation he calls "figurisme."

De Brosses presented his essay before the Academie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres in 1757. The members were sufficiently outraged to cause de Brosses to withdraw the work from the Academie; he published it anonymously in Geneva in 1760. The book was scandalous not merely

https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol9/iss9/3
for the general idea of fetishism that it framed, but for its historical claims and its historical methodology. De Brosses defined "fetishism" as "any religion which has for its cult object animals or inanimate terrestrial beings." It was thus, as Diderot wrote to de Brosses in 1757 after reading the manuscript, "la religion première, générale et universelle." In the late eighteenth century, fetishism had been widely accepted as the general form of primitive religion.

De Brosses' insistence that fetishism was the cult "of certain terrestrial and material objects" distinguished it from cults of celestial phenomena (which tended to be viewed as proto-Deist intimations of the orderly frame of nature) and from cults viewed along Euhemerist lines as religious practices and myths that were distorted commemorations of actual historical events and national heroes. But above all his theory opposed historical interpretations which viewed religions and myths as figurative expressions of the eternal truths of speculative metaphysics. By calling fetishism a cult of earthly objects and the concerns of what we would call "everyday life" (rather than of the exceptional and catastrophic events that Hume stressed) and as "direct . . . without figure," de Brosses set a materialist historical theory in opposition to the interpretive theories of the Western philosophical tradition. Metaphor and anthropomorphization were now located outside the rationalist logos and within a non-transcendent material world. This radical break with Western metaphysics constituted by the idea of fetishism is confirmed in Hegel's location of the African world (characterized by its principle of fetish worship) outside History: the fetish was that contradictory state of Spirit (more precisely, the very concept of contradiction was inapplicable to it) that managed to generate a social order and subjective type without participation in the Idea.

De Brosses' methodological position was equally radical. He insisted that ancient peoples and cultures (i.e. those of classical antiquity) could be interpreted only on the basis of analogies to actually observable present-day peoples. It is this aspect of de Brosses' work that won him recognition as a forerunner of modern anthropologists. De Brosses' final sentence states:

It is not in possibilities, but in man himself that one must study man: it is not a matter of imagining what might or ought to have been done, but of observing what is done.

In his ground-breaking anthropological work of 1871, Primitive Culture, in which he develops his theory of primitive religion as animism, E. B. Taylor took this sentence from Du Culte des dieux fetiches as his epigraph.
What was “enlightenment”? Both friends and critics of the Enlightenment have had difficulty finding any positive answer. In itself, enlightenment was a purely negative concept: its supporters find it most truly expressed in that moderate tolerance and liberal humaneness that opposed the excesses of the French Revolution, and in the general admonition to think for oneself. Its critics, whether conservative or radical, see the sheer negativity of Enlightenment thought as culminating in the Terror itself and generally in the ceaseless abolition of all particular social forms and positive values—expressed most completely in the radical relativism of Sade.

But “enlightenment” did have a specific other, its opposite: superstition. And it is in eighteenth-century theories of superstition that we can find a positive content, along with a way to situate Enlightenment discourse in its historical context. In the 1750s the problem of superstition was formulated in terms of the theoretical problem of primitive religion, and the novel term naming this problem was “fetishism.” Yet the basic structure of ideas and explanations found in Enlightenment discourse was in fact worked out to a great extent in the text of Willem Bosman. Bosman’s Guinea was that psycho-geographical reality which concretely exemplified a world without enlightenment.

But Bosman’s Guinea was a very specific interpretation: fetish worship was that principle underlying African social reality that effectively blocked natural market forces and mercantilist economic rationality. While this aspect was repressed in Enlightenment fetish theory, it was nonetheless intensely present in the discourse and in the world of those intellectuals using the term. For instance, de Brosses not only had estates and vassals in Burgundy and became president of the Burgundian parliament, both he and his wife lost much of their capital in investments with the French Company of the Indies. In a letter of December 31, 1764, de Brosses complains bitterly of having spent most of the year in Paris attending to business matters of the company, finally pulling out at the loss of half his capital and two thirds of his income.45 We should remember that by the period of the Encyclopedists the “material objects” of Europe and those of the colonized areas of the non-European world were united in a common monetary code in a very real way. When Voltaire was negotiating to rent Tournay from de Brosses, land values had risen as investments flowed inland as a result of the loss of French colonies and markets during the Seven Years War. Consider even the case of Immanuel Kant, who had neither feudal estates nor capital to invest. His first paying job was as curator of an aristocrat’s cabinet of ethnographic curiosities, and for many years his sole source of income derived
from the popular public lectures he gave on world geography and anthropology to the educated public of the port city of Konigsberg. Indeed it was Kant who first instituted a course of lectures on anthropology in a German university.

I must conclude here with the suggestion that certain aspects of Kant's philosophy—certainly the greatest theoretical response to the problem named by "Enlightenment"—can be clarified if studied as solutions to the colonial problematic of cross-cultural judgement and the social value of material objects. I have mentioned that in his pre-critical aesthetics of 1764 Kant explained fetish worship as an expression of the lowest form of the beautiful sensibility, "the trifling." That the question of fetishism continued to hold a place in Kant's theoretical reflections is indicated in one of Kant's last works, Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone, when Kant coins the phrase "legal fetishism" to name cults devoted to purely external observations and speaks of "fetishism, familiar in other connections." The question of anthropomorphism and of the conflation of the contingent order of nature and the ethical order of human freedom holds an important place not only in this work but in the Critique of Judgement as well. While Charles de Brosses had offered no original theoretical explanation of "fetishism," it had been his odd genius to formulate the idea itself by identifying that ultimate unthinkable historical fact for the eighteenth century—Egyptian zoolatry—with the cult of the snake fetish at Whydah described by Bosman and others. The resulting discourse of fetishism that brought together problems of anthropomorphization and the worship of organic terrestrial beings is an important unexamined source for Kant's most novel philosophical contribution: his theory of aesthetic and teleological judgement, whose ground Kant located at the very origin of the distinction between the order of nature (based on concepts of causal necessity and mechanical laws) and the order of ethical human action (based on concepts of unconditional freedom and final purposes). In Kant's theory of teleological judgement the basic problem is the radical inconceivability of natural purpose (the fusion of the mechanical laws of nature and a final purpose) in organic beings (such as a blade of grass or, for that matter, a snake). And it is not accidental that his explanation of aesthetic judgement in terms of the concept of purposiveness is an implicit anthropological theory of animism.

I believe we can shed new light on what the term "Enlightenment" meant as a theoretical problem for the eighteenth century by looking at the novel problem of the social valuation of "natural," material objects expressed in Enlightenment discourse explaining superstition, and by
locating this in turn in the problem of cross-cultural judgement whose roots certainly lay outside Europe and probably outside that questionable discursive construct named "Western civilization."

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NOTES


2. This is not to suggest that these models are "false" or even invariably unilluminating. For a recent application of the models see Weston, Peter J., "Some Images of the Primitive before 1800," History of European Ideas, vol. 1, no. 3 (1981): 215-236.

3. By the term "Enlightenment" I understand not so much an objective historical period (e.g. "the Age of Reason") as a word and idea that named a problem or focus of thought for eighteenth-century intellectuals themselves, and became the keyword of a discourse structured by the complex "Problem-Idea" named by the terms "Enlightenment," "Aufklärung," les lumières." The definitive moments of this discourse are found in France during the period of the Encyclopédie (1750-1765) and in Germany during the 1780s and 1790s, when the debate about 'Was ist Aufklärung?' raged and received its ultimate answer by Immanuel Kant. (For a discussion of the debate see Nisbet, H. B., "'Was ist Aufklärung?: The Concept of the Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Germany," Journal of European Studies, xii (1982): 77-95.

4. For instance, the chapter devoted to voyage accounts in Ira O. Wade's The Intellectual Origins of the French Enlightenment (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971) is concerned only with their effect on the literary imagination of Europe, as the title "Travel Fiction and the Drive for Continuity" indicates (pp. 361-391). The importance of voyage accounts as a source of new textual practices and administrative categories has recently been considered by Daniel Defert in "The Collection of the World: Accounts of Voyages from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Centuries," Dialectical Anthropology, 7 (1982): 11-20.

5. This is the date given by Pierre Vilar in his chapter on "The 18th Century Conjuncture" in A History of Gold and Money, 1450-1920, tr. Judith White (Atlantic High-


7. More specifically, Portuguese scholars have raised the question of the importance of roteiros (written as navigation guides) in the shift from the genre of the earliest accounts of Guinea written as feudal chronicles of great Christian deeds of crusading princes, to a more secular and "liberal" textual genre. For instance, contrast the court chronicler Azurara's The Chronicle of the Discovery and Conquest of Guinea (tr. Charles Raymond Beazley and Edgar Prestage, London, Hakluyt Society, 1896) written in 1453, with the I505 text of the navigator Duarte Pacheco Pereira's Esmeraldo de situ orbis (tr. George H. T. Kimble, London, Hakluyt Society, 1937).


9. I consider this in detail in another essay: "The Origin of the Fetish on the Mina Coast of West Africa during the late Fifteenth, Sixteenth, and Seventeenth Centuries."


11. For instance, Cadamosto writes in puzzlement that "Gold is much prized among them, in my opinion, more than by us, for they regard it as very precious; nevertheless they trade it cheaply, taking in exchange articles of little value in our eyes..." —Cadamosto, Alvise de, The Voyages of Cadamosto, tr. G. R. Crone (London: Hakluyt Society, 1937), p. 68. Cadamosto's was the authoritative account of black Africa by a European for the sixteenth century.

12. The account of Pieter de Marees (otherwise known as Arsus of Dantzig) was published in Dutch in 1602. French and German translations appeared in 1605. An English translation appeared in 1625 in the collection of Samuel Purchas.


15. While the most notorious of these was William Smith's A New Voyage to Guinea, Snellgrave, Atkins, and most eighteenth-century voyage authors 'borrowed' from Bosman. See Feinberg, H. M., "An Eighteenth-Century Case of Plagiarism: William Smith's A New Voyage to Guinea," History in Africa, 6 (1979): 45-50.


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21. "I have already informed you that the greatest Crimes committed at Fida are generally compensated by Money; and what followeth will convince you that their Religion seems only founded upon the same Principle, Interest."—Bosman, p. 367a. Of Gold Coast society, Bosman states "the Richest Man is the most honored, without the least regard to Nobility ..." (p. 132).

22. Students of West Africa frequently quote Bosman's declaration that "Being a lover from my Youth of the Descriptions of Travels and Voyages, and Accounts of Foreign Countries, I quickly took a distaste at such Authors as paulm'd precarious Reports upon the World for certain Truths; and having never stirred out of their native Country, take all for Truth that's handed to 'em from Abroad, and recommend it as such to the World ... . I had always a longing desire to go and see what I read of in Books; and during my fourteen Years stay upon the coast of Guinea, I had an opportunity of satisfying my desire, there being few or scarce any places upon the Coast, where I have not stayed for some time, and can now speak of with experience."—Bosman, p. i-ii.


24. Some idea of the enormous impact of a gold monetary system not just in isolated intercultural spaces along the coast but upon West African cultures themselves can be derived from an excellent study Akan Weights and the Gold Trade (London: Longman, 1980) by Timothy F. Garrard. The famous Akan gold weights were shaped in figures that referred to traditional proverbs and myths; they not only functioned within the new gold economy as weight measures, but as signs of specific proverbs and their edifying morals they were sent by one person to another as messages or tokens of friendship, rather than just as externalized letters. Indeed it has been argued that such material figures were the closest West African societies came to writing prior to the coming of Islam (see Garrard, p. 201-203).


27. Bosman, p. 381-382.


tion of Bosman; at the beginning of the nineteenth letter Bosman gives the following description of one type of capital punishment: "... two Blacks, both executed for Murther in the same manner, viz. they were cut open alive, their Intrails taken out of the Bodies and burned; after which their Corps were filled with Salt and fixed on a stake in the middle of the Market-place, where I saw them on my first voyage thither" (p. 357). In Juliette (tr. Austryn Wainhouse, New York, Grove Press, 1968) at one point the Pope gives a long ethnographic list of institutionalized atrocities, including the following: "In Juida the belly is cut open, the entrails removed, the cavity stuffed with salt, the body hung out on a pole in the marketplace" (p. 792).
35. Ibid, Voltaire, p. 16; Pomeau, p. 119-120.
36. There has been increased interest in the incident of Candide's encounter with the Negro fetish worshipping since 1958, when Ira O. Wade (Voltaire and 'Candide': A Study in the Fusion of History, Art and Philosophy, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1959) discovered an early version of the tale that lacked this particular episode. It is believed the episode must have been written by Voltaire in the fall of 1758, after the original version was complete, and one source for it has been located in a denunciation of the sugar industry and its taintedness with the blood of slaves by Helvetius in his book which in those months was causing such an uproar in France. I would like to point out another source for the passage: in the fall of 1758 Voltaire was involved in a negotiation by correspondence to rent the estate of Tournay from Charles de Brosses. Voltaire was surely aware of de Brosses' essay Du Culte des dieux fétiches ... , which had caused a scandal of smaller proportions than that of Helvetius the previous year. Indeed there is a letter of September, 1758 from de Brosses to Voltaire in which de Brosses mentions his "treatise on the antiquity of the cult of the fetishes in the Orient." (Foisset, Th., ed., Voltaire et le président de Brosses: correspondance inédite (Paris: Didier, 1858), p. 24.)
37. Manuel, p. 188.
41. De Brosses, p. 61.
43. See the discussion of Africa in Hegel, G.W.F., The Philosophy of History, tr. J. Sibree (New York: Dover, 1956), p. 91-99. Hegel concludes "What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which had to be presented here only as on the threshold of the World's
History” (p. 99). Following the first-encounter theory of the origin of fetishes, Hegel states that the fetish “is merely a creation that expresses the arbitrary choice of its maker . . .” (p. 94—see also Hegel’s Philosophy of Mind, tr. William Wallace and A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), p. 42-3, 297). Fetishism is thus a principle fixing subjective and social formations not structured by the concept, nor (as a work of art) by the idea of the beautiful; rather its principle is that of a radical and pluralist empiricism characterized as “arbitrariness,” “caprice” and “the trivial.”

47. Van de Pitte, Frederick P., Kant as Philosophical Anthropologist, (The Hague: Nijhoff