

## ART AND THE AFRICAN WORLD: A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF THEIR INTERCONNECTION

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### *Introduction*

THIS essay offers an historical analysis of how the definition of Africa as another culture is interconnected with the selection and characterization of an African object. Since relatively intense contacts between Africa and Europe were established (c.1600), European natives started defining Africa as an other culture. From the outset, this undertaking of cultural definition was based on the selection of a characteristic artefact. For more than three centuries (c.1600-1900), the fetish was taken to be the cultural object that summarized the cultural identity of Africa. The turn of the century brought about a major change in this cultural discrimination. Then, the intelligentsia of the main European capitals decided to attribute a (primitive) art object to Africa. Traditionally, this *démarche*—from fetish to art object—has been seen as an important step towards a deeper appreciation of

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African culture in general. My analysis shows that 'the African art object'—as it was defined in the first half of this century—shares its main characteristics with the fetish of the previous centuries. 'The African art object', therefore, cannot be taken simply as illustrating a recently discovered cultural equality.

The analysis below sets out to localize where the African fetish and the African art object overlap as instruments of the European intelligentsia in characterizing Africa under a fetish paradigm. In the concluding part of this essay I assess how far current anthropology of African art underwrites this paradigm.

### *The Fetish, an Object and a Religion*

Our 'story of African art' begins about four centuries ago, when the northern European merchants and clerics first recorded their travels to the dark continent.<sup>1</sup> Generally, the most striking aspect of these early travelogues is, as Gerbrands (1990: 14) observes, 'how such early European descriptions of the different customs of another people often show a great deal of impartiality, and even respect'.<sup>2</sup> The language of Pieter de Marees and his Dutch predecessor Paludanus provide good examples of the amazement and fascination that fills the pages of these first accounts.<sup>3</sup> One could easily be moved by the restraint and open-mindedness with which Paludanus tried to make sense of the religious practices of the people of the African Gold Coast. This attitude can be seen in the organization of the texts themselves. In both accounts, the parts on religion comprise a loosely structured collection of stories told to them by their strange customers and trading partners. An attempt to systematize these accounts was not believed to be very promising, because an overall system of religious beliefs was simply not there. Making sense of a pre-religion was definitely a hard job: 'First of all, as far as

1. The following account is based on three original Dutch sources: Paludanus 1912 [1596], Pieter de Marees 1912 [1602] and Willem Bosman 1704. It is not enough to provide conclusive evidence, but it helps to illustrate further the much better documented study of Pietz (1985, 1987, 1988). My line of reasoning, however, differs substantially from Pietz's.

2. It has been drawn to my attention that 'impartiality' is a problematic term in any account of cultural contact. Whatever the specific meaning Gerbrands wants to convey, I intend to contrast the open-mindedness of the early travellers with the religiously or ideologically dogmatic stance of later travellers and philosophers.

3. Pietz (1987: 39) refers to de Marees as a Calvinist Dutch traveller. However, both attributes ('Dutch' and 'Calvinist') are problematic. In the introduction to the 'Lindtschoten Vereniging' edition of 1912 the editor (S. P. L'Honoré Naber) cites evidence (his name and the Flemish dialect words) to the fact that de Marees is Flemish or at least the son of Flemish immigrants. In the argument below I shall follow Naber and consider de Marees as a Catholic Flemish traveller.

their Religion is concerned they don't possess any knowledge of God nor of his commandments, Some of them worship the Sun and the Moon: others worship certain trees, or the earth, because it brings them food' (Paludanus 1912: 266-7).<sup>4</sup> As far as material culture is concerned there is a double standard. If any objects are referred to as particularly interesting they are either objects of economic value for the Europeans, often gold, or objects that are highly valued by the indigenous people. A good example of such an object is the fetish, an object that is a 'trifle' from the material point of view but is treated with utmost care and attention by the Africans. When interrogated about the workings of their magical instruments, we hear a diversity of reasoning: fairy-tales about powerful amulets manipulated by dangerous wizards and witches, thrilling accounts of disease, murder and mutilation, and fragments of historical lore about poisoning, warfare and famine. De Marees gives us a lively chronicle of these unbelievable 'explanations' that fits nicely with what the Portuguese intended to convey by the term *feitiço*: objects with spiritual power, constituting the material component of a pre-religion.<sup>5</sup>

A hundred years later this idea had changed substantially. The fetishes, and the indigenous practices and beliefs surrounding them, were inscribed in a newly found paradigm: fetishes are evidence of idolatry and function within a religious system that can be compared with Catholicism. That is the message contained in the 'Tenth Letter' of the Protestant traveller Willem Bosman (1704: 136-52). The paradigm of Catholicism proved extremely productive. It enabled Bosman to describe both the newly discovered religion as false as well as the obviously false beliefs as religious. In other words, Bosman makes 'Guinea'—at an earlier stage a locus of paganism and numberless exotic practices—intelligible as a community of heretics whose material culture and social organization exemplify their (false) beliefs.

Idolatry plays a key role in this process. On the one hand, it is used in its then contemporary meaning as defined by the Protestant-Catholic iconoclastic controversy: the fetish cult rests on an inadmissible fusion between economic and spiritual interests. As in Europe during the Reformation, the priests<sup>6</sup> are the ones who 'deceive these credulous people ruthlessly and do them out of their money' (Bosman 1704: 143).<sup>7</sup> This evidently makes a very active reference to New

4. 'Eerstelijcken belanghende hare Religie en weten van God ofte zijn ghebodt gants niet, de sommige aenbidden de Sonne ende Maene: andere sekere bomen, ofte die aerde, om dat zij daer voetsel van genieten.' Unless otherwise indicated all translations into English are mine.

5. Pietz (1987: 39) refers to de Marees as the first northern traveller to introduce the term *fetisso* into the languages of northern Europe.

6. '*De Papen*': literally, 'the priests who recognize the Pope' (Bosman 1704: 143).

7. '...weten dees ligtgeloovige Menschen dapper bij de Neus om te leyden en in de beurs te tasten.' Readers who are familiar with Dutch might be puzzled by the contraction of 'om de tuin lijden' and 'bij de neus nemen' to 'bij de neus lijden'. However, this construction reinforces the active element in the policy of the clergy to deceive their flock.

Testament iconoclasm, that is, Jesus's spectacular action of removing the merchants from the temple. On the other hand, the 'worshipping of wood' has a whole range of historical and Old Testament references.<sup>8</sup> Its worshippers can be characterized as adhering to an opposite, thus false, belief system. The fault of the idolaters is to mistake the object of worship, namely God, for the object worshipped, namely the idol. As we shall see shortly, both aspects of the religious controversy between Protestants and Africans were to be rationalized in the following centuries by the Enlightenment philosophers Kant, Hume and Voltaire, and their successors Herder and Hegel.<sup>9</sup>

### *The Fetish, a Religious Object and a World-View*

By the middle of the eighteenth century, African artefacts and African religions were seen and understood as strongly interconnected through the idolatrous beliefs of the worshippers. Moreover, Africa had become a 'thinkable' unit defined by the misconceived thoughts of its inhabitants. Voltaire states this position in a general remark: 'They [Africans] are incapable of concentrating; they hardly combine, and it seems as though they are made neither for the advantages nor for the disadvantages of our philosophy' (1963, ii: 306).<sup>10</sup>

As early as 1748, Hume knew that the 'Negroes' were naturally inferior to the Whites because there were no 'ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences' (1825: 521). Drawing on the evidence provided by Hume, Kant could only speculate on the reasons for this undeveloped African mind and—how surprisingly—comes to the conclusion that: 'The religion of fetishes so widespread among them [the Negroes of Africa] is perhaps a sort of idolatry that sinks as deeply in the trifling as appears to be possible to human nature' (1960: 111). To put it in Pietz's words: 'African society was seen to be structured and perverted by the core religious institution of fetish worship: an order of obligation...rather than recognition of that rational rule of law and contract' (Pietz 1988: 115). Opposing 'fetish' to anything 'law-governed' is quite illuminating. It conveys the

8. That these 'Old Testament' connotations of iconoclasm were also very active in the following (eighteenth) century is obvious in Voltaire's 'Essai sur les mœurs' (1778). There he gives a lengthy account of the idolatrous controversy between 'us' and the Jews, immediately following a short statement on serpent worship in Africa (Voltaire 1963: 13-18).

9. Pietz (1988: 105) regards Hume, Voltaire, de Brosses and Kant as members of an anti-Leibnizian moiety among the champions of the Enlightenment who read and appropriated the northern European travelogues.

10. 'Ils ne sont pas capables d'une grande attention; ils combinent peu, et ne paraissent faits ni pour les avantages ni pour les abus de notre philosophie.'

idea that Africans dwell in a world that is exemplarily a non-universe: it is lawless. This was already implied in the rejection of the 'Law of God' by the idolaters. In the course of the nineteenth century this idea was developed further along two lines: lawlessness in interpersonal behaviour and therefore social organization, and the impossibility of the African seeing his world as governed by natural laws.

These two ideas underlie Hegel's account of Africa in his lectures of 1822-31 on the philosophy of history (see Hegel 1956, 1975). On the one hand, intersubjectivity as defined by moral relations is entirely absent. In Africa presumably no respect whatsoever exists for the other human being: the African murders his enemies as well as his friends and relatives, drinks their blood and eats their flesh (1975: 182-4). On the other hand, there seems to be 'no awareness of any substantial objectivity—for example of God or the Law' (ibid.: 177). Therefore, one cannot speak of a religion or a constitution in the proper sense of the word. Moreover, the African lacks any (historical) consciousness, his actions and thoughts 'appear' at random, even by surprise.

This state of affairs is particularly troublesome for the philosopher who wants to come up with an explanation. How can one predict the unpredictable, historicize the unhistorical, moralize the immoral, in other words, 'intentionalize' the unintentional? Obviously, one cannot, unless 'unintentionality' can be described as the intention of the unintentional actor. For that matter, Hegel can rely on the African expertise of his predecessors, the Protestant travellers. Their 'African fetish religion' offers him the necessary conceptual tools to fulfil his philosophical mission. The 'Guinea' of the eighteenth century was a religion, constituted of false beliefs, the products of which were numberless fetishes. Fetishes were worshipped objects, instances of the failure to distinguish between the worshipped god and the objects used for worshipping the god. As well as being a deadly sin for the Protestants, it was a fundamental error of reasoning for a rationalist. In other words, the false beliefs observed by the Protestants became the fetish mode of thought for Hegel. Consequently, what the former saw as an African religion became a rationalization of that mode of thought, or a world-view.

On this basis, Hegel could easily argue (ibid: 181) that 'a fetish...has no independent existence as an object of religion, and even less as a work of art' while not contradicting his sources, which described the fetish as a religious object. The categories 'religion' and 'art' are used here as universal categories, in the same sense as we would describe Hegel's account as (the reconstruction of) a world-view. In order to make it clearer I can draw a parallel. For the Protestant traveller it was obvious that the strange practices and objects sprang forth from religious beliefs. These beliefs were false, in the sense that the Africans did not believe in one God and therefore worshipped religious objects. For Hegel it was obvious that fetish manipulations were the outcome of a particular mode of thinking. This mode of thinking was false, because it lacked the objective category of God, and therefore the Africans had no religious objects. That the atheism of the Africans was an illustration of their 'bad reason' was already

advocated by Voltaire when he started his description of primitive religion with: 'the knowledge of a god, creating, remunerating, and revenging, is the product of cultivated rationality' (1963: i, 13).<sup>11</sup>

Drawing together the above remarks, we are led to conclude that from the end of the eighteenth century onwards a distinction is made between intra-cultural concepts and descriptive, universal concepts. The new descriptive category that we see originating here, namely world-view, receives its status and content from the paradigm of religion introduced by the Protestant travellers. But notice a major transformation. For the Protestants to evaluate fetishism as a non-religious religion was the expression of a religious controversy, for the Enlightenment to describe fetishism as a non-cultural culture was to state a scientific fact. As noted above, the Protestants used the fetish as the main witness of an idolatrous religion, the philosophers extrapolated the workings and nature of the fetish to a particular, African and primitive mode of thought. Two main characteristics of the fetish mode of thought are particularly relevant for our subject.

First, the absence of any 'distance of objectivity' between man and his world prevents him from seeing natural phenomena as empirical data. Africans dwell in a conceptual world, undisturbed by the falsifications that, if simply observed in the broad daylight of reason, could lead to correction and verification. Unfortunately, the belief in the fetish is blind, and Hegel can report a number of instances when 'many negroes were torn to pieces by wild beasts despite the fact that they wore amulets' (1975: 218). In more general terms, the universe of the African was 'immanent': no differentiation was made between cause and effect, between intention and action, between concept and reality.

Secondly, the absence of subjectivity is also described in 'immanent' terms. The African does not distinguish between his physical power and his spiritual motivation or in Hegel's words: 'it is no positive idea, no thought which produces these commotions;—a physical rather than a spiritual enthusiasm' (ibid.: 98).

This is also a main characteristic of the fetish object itself: the African idol was material and spiritual 'taken together' and its interconnection with the world outside was one of power. Whether one can really understand this or not is not our concern here. What we do not have to understand are the anti-terms rather than the terms they were the opposite of. And these are fairly clear: the fetish is *not* a material representation of a spiritual state. Consequently, the fetish is not so much a representational object as an object that represents a world-view where objects exemplify the non-representational thinking of its users. Now it becomes more intelligible how Hegel had an argument sufficient to deny the Africans their 'art object' (ibid.: 181).

The fetish after all was exactly the opposite of a work of art. Although some African artefacts may have looked naturalistic or resembled previous objects in a tradition, their very nature was non-representative and non-historical. It would

11. 'La connaissance d'un dieu, formateur, rémunérateur et vengeur, est le fruit de la raison cultivé.'

take me another essay to prove that it was not Hegel's idiosyncratic definition of art that prevented him from seeing the African artefact as an art object. Most probably, it is not a matter of definition at all. As Summers (1987) and Hulse (1990) have recently pointed out, the art object—when in the Renaissance it received and could only receive the status it still holds—was generally identified as an instance of imitation that 'copied nature or the works of others while simultaneously transcending them' (Hulse 1990: 158). This is to say that the eighteenth century could build on an image of the fine arts as both theoretical and historical. The arts did not only reproduce, they also added a meaning to the representation by conveying a message about the reality depicted or by commenting on earlier interpretations. The major consequence of this is that the art tradition becomes reflexive in the person of the artist. He is the one who authorizes the 'slice' of theory and history inserted in the representation. The meaning of an art object is the product of an intentional process of reflexive depiction.

Overlooking the above statements, we might not be surprised that for the early nineteenth-century intellectual an 'African art' was simply unthinkable because the African world supposedly lacked all critical aspects of an aesthetic attitude: reflection, intentionality, history, contemplative mood and so on. However, this is a strange way of putting it. As we recall, Africa was defined under the paradigm of an anti-culture: it was not because Africans did not have art that they were non-cultural. Our argument shows that it went the other way around: first Africans were non-cultural, and consequently they had no art.

What is more surprising is the fact that half a century later, the African art object is discovered. Before we take a closer look at the 'miracle of African art' we must focus on the other side of the anti-defining paradigm. Africa was not merely described and explained by stressing the absence of intellectual qualities, it was also characterized by over-stressing the presence of non-intellectual qualities. Two of these have already been mentioned: the African's attitude was anti-empirical, thus conceptual, and his relation to the surrounding world was not one of 'reflection about' but 'reaction upon': representation was replaced by power. These two *epitheta ornans* (conceptual and powerful) of the African mind were nicely underpinned by accentuating the non-intellectual quality *par excellence*, i.e. emotion.

Hegel's contemporary Herder, while writing on such serious matters as the philosophy of history (1800), could allow himself a semi-pornographic style when turning to the subject of the 'Organization of the People of Africa' (ibid.: 145-56). The poor intellectual qualities of the 'descendants of Ham' were due to a mere construction fault of the Almighty whose creative error was physiologically balanced by the generous gift of some extremely sensual organs. In sum: 'that finer intellect, which the creature, whose breast swells with boiling passions beneath this burning sun, must necessarily be refused, was countervailed by a structure altogether incompatible with it' (ibid.: 151).

We have dwelled long enough in the *antichambre* of idealist cultural science and the curiosity cabinet of cultural artefacts. It is time to make our way to the atelier of the French cubist and German expressionist, the scene of the miraculous conception and birth of a bicephalous creature: the primitive masterpiece, baptized with the name of 'African art'.

### *A Cultural Miracle: African Art*

In an essay written sometime between 1935 and 1951, Malraux tried to catch the *fin-de-siècle* atmosphere that surrounded the post-impressionist artist. He remembered saying to an audience, some twenty years before: 'Europe, then at the height of her power, seemed to be calling in the arts of the non-European world to counteract the poison in her blood' (1954: 541). The poison was 'that belief in Free Will which since the days of Rome had been the white man's birthright' (ibid.: 543), and it could only be counteracted by 'consent to the supremacy of that part of him which belongs to the dark underworld of being' (ibid.). This supplies us with the ingredients necessary for constituting the environment that gave birth to the notion of primitive art in general and African art in particular.

First, we must take into account the changing context of modern art in the West. Although it would be more appropriate (given the previous discussion) to rely on the aesthetic theories of such writers as Croce and Bell to sketch the changing mood of the European art scene, it is not less accurate to let the artists speak for themselves. The 'free will' Malraux talked about ventilates the major concern of the artist: the empirical paradigm that has reigned over the fine arts must be broken down entirely.

To spell out the long evolution preceding this 'decision' would take us far away from the subject of this essay. Let it suffice to say that from the eighteenth century philosophical aesthetics formulated the non-intellectual qualities (subjectivity, creativity, non-conformism) of the art work in order to find a basis for distinguishing art from science and philosophy (see Eagleton 1990). The Post-Impressionist moment in the struggle for the autonomous work of art was also part of this double process. On the one hand, it aimed at disconnecting art from verifiable science and falsifiable philosophy; hence it refused to take up the empirical challenge as formulated in the Renaissance. On the other hand, it kept underlining the status of its content as intuitive philosophy, which combined the psychologically deep and the sociologically critical in the person of the artist and his products.

Secondly, we must assess the image of the primitive and his artefacts in the intellectual and artistic circles of the end of the nineteenth century. The above analysis provided us with two major elements of the 'African character': the fetish mode of thought—as the fetish object itself, which served as the model on which

the particular mode of thought was built—was ‘immanent’ (no differentiation between cause and effect, intention and action, idea and form, and so on) and anti-empirical (enclosed, conceptual). These anti-capacities were compensated for by such non-capacities as emotional abundance and physical strength.

In the hands of the *fin-de-siècle* artists, the non-intellectual qualities of the primitive mind and the European work of art were combined. This gave birth to the ‘primitive work of art’, while fostering the ongoing European quest to define the ‘artistic mind’ in non-intellectual terms. By formulating the aesthetic paradigm shift in this way we have taken one unsupported step: the way in which the non-capacities of the primitive were transformed into seemingly positive qualities.

This, indeed, had been the ‘task’ of the late nineteenth-century historians and ethnologists, and they fulfilled it. Let us return to the anti-empiricism of the primitive. This was transformed into a more positive ‘attitude’, but it remained the very foundation of his world-view. When describing *Fetischismus* as ‘the religious worshipping of perceptible objects’<sup>12</sup> by the savages, Schultze (1871: 1) advocated a truly anthropological understanding of this strange phenomenon by looking deeper into ‘the state of consciousness of the Primitive’ (ibid.: 29).<sup>13</sup> His conclusion was that: ‘consciousness, world and intention are harmoniously interconnected’ (ibid.: 54).<sup>14</sup>nn

A more direct metaphor for anti-empiricism was used by Avebury. Here the fantasy world of de Marees’ Guinea is made intelligible as Hegel’s non-objective, world-blind, world-view: ‘religious ideas of lower races are intimately associated with, if indeed they have not originated from, the condition of man during sleep, and especially from dreams’ (Avebury 1911: 225).

Subsequently, Preuss (1904-5) described the primitive interaction with the world as founded on *Zauberglauben*, or as Vatter put it, the belief in ‘the power of intention, the identity of intention and reality’ (Vatter 1926: 27-28).<sup>15</sup> This makes Malraux’s statement that ‘an African mask is not a fixation of a human expression; it is an apparition’ (1954: 565) perfectly intelligible.

At this point, however, the early culture theorists are once again confronted with Hegel’s problem of ‘intentionalizing the unintentional’. Moreover, the artists and the ethnologists are forced to come to terms with the imperative of representation (intention—action; idea—form). That is to say, the claim that the art object is a pure ‘apparition’ may be an illustration of exotic ‘thinking’; as a new description of artistic inspiration, it was simply not good enough. For this problem, an inter-cultural solution was devised. That is to say, the construction at hand is believed to be based on ‘knowledge’ of the primitive in general and of

12. ‘...einer *religiösen* Verehrung sinnlich wahrnehmbarer Gegenstände’ (italics mine).

13. ‘...denn Bewusstzeinszustand der Wilden’.

14. ‘...denn Bewusstsein, Welt und Wille sind solidarisch verbunden’.

15. ‘...die Macht des Wunsches, [an] die Identität von Wunsch und Wirklichkeit’.

the African in particular, as it was displayed in the literature on the religion, history and evolution of these peoples. Once again, the matter is zestfully articulated by Malraux:

Then we have what are often mis-called fetishes—masks and figures of ancestors: an art of collective subjectivism, so to speak, in which the artist invents forms deriving from his inner consciousness, yet recognizable by all, thus mastering with his art not only what the eye perceives but what it cannot see. (1954: 547)

This text summarizes the three main elements of the solution: 1. Generally, art is the expression of inner realities and not the representation of the external reality. Here, the 'conceptual' attitude of the primitive and the depth of the artistic psyche are reconciled. 2. As far as the mechanics of communication are concerned, art is a *direct* expression of 'the deep', which gives it its frankness and power. The European art object should borrow these characteristics from the fetish: it should be animated, personal, and vigorous.<sup>16</sup> 3. As far as the content is concerned, the work of art conveys the collectively felt rather than the universally known. This comprises two aspects. First, the unarticulated beliefs of the primitive are coupled with the non-discursive nature of the art object. Secondly, the universal value of the content of art (a claim inherent in its very status) is transformed into 'collective relevance'.

#### *Still, an Artwork and a Primitive*

The intercultural meeting of the fetish and the art object resulted in two new phenomena. It produced a European art object that resembled a fetish and an artistic mind that aspired to the directness and simplicity of the primitive mind. This, for me, is the less surprising aspect of this evolution. After all, the primitive, since its very origin in the nineteenth century, was defined as non-intellectual, and European art, since its aesthetic awakening in the eighteenth century, wanted to be

16. It would take us too far to illustrate this assertion comprehensively. A few quotes should suffice to explain what I mean. According to Fry (1990: 72), writing in 1920, the African artist 'manages to give to his forms their disconcerting vitality, the suggestion that they make of being not mere echoes of actual figures, but of possessing an inner life of their own. If the negro artist wanted to make people believe in the potency of his idols he certainly set about it in the right way.' Pietz (1985: 11-12) draws our attention to a text in which Leiris (1929) describes all true art as being like a fetish. Leiris elaborates a number of fetish metaphors, and it is really astonishing how these link up so directly with the 'fetish mode of thinking' theory of the previous century. He starts by comparing true fetishism with 'love' as the direct expression of feeling from the impassioned body to the objective world. He pursues this metaphor by comparing the art object with 'tears' as intensely personal projections. Finally, he associates tears with 'moments of crisis' which 'appear' in the life of everyone. The opinion of the German Expressionists is voiced by Nolde when he stated 'we are now seeking guidance from the vigorous primitives' (quoted in Herman 1978: 128).

defined as non-intellectual. In the intercultural space of the turn of the century they could help each other, so to speak, in their conflict with the mainstream. However, there was a major difference in agency between the primitive and the cubist. The latter's newly found self-definition was the outcome of an active policy, while the former's new image was just another not-that-negative redefinition by just another interest group. Moreover, we witness the appearance of a new primitive fetish that resembles an art object and a new primitive mind that could be compared with the artistic mind. These are the 'historical artefacts' anthropologists in general and anthropologists of art in particular have to come to terms with.

When describing the primitive mind and African cosmology in even more modern terms as 'traditional', and qualifying this statement, as Lévy-Bruhl did, by referring to 'the law of participation' in primitive mentality as opposed to the 'logical law of contradiction' in modern thinking,<sup>17</sup> one should become at least suspicious about the fetish origin of these ideas. However, there are more enlightened attempts by respectable scholars, and by Africans themselves, to try to define their thinking in terms of non-literate world-views and non-scientific cosmologies. Although it is outside the scope of this essay, and I will not pursue them in any depth, two remarks are indispensable. Whatever the positive aura of 'holistic' thinking or 'practical' reasoning may be in the 'century of alienation' and the 'decade of the environment', anthropology can no longer justify its relevance by rationalizing these crises and/or *vogues* as non-Western philosophies. It must remember that the non-Westerner (the very term) was made to that purpose by the Catholics, Protestants, Rationalists and Idealists. In reproducing this underlying model it is less a cultural science than a discipline erected for the purpose of scientifically legitimizing old cultural oppositions. That is to say, in that case anthropology is not *about* this historical process but *part of* this anti-culture tradition. The phenomenon of making sense of other cultures by constructing an explanatory scheme (beliefs, world-view, cosmology etc.) that is by definition emic but not explicit, and non-discursive for the indigenous people but transcribable by the anthropologist, seems to be a highly ambiguous undertaking. It seems at once metaphysically necessary and scientifically impossible (see Boyer 1990). At least anthropology could make a start by rethinking the very concept, not as a methodological tool, nor as a theoretical instrument, but as a cultural imperative.

Returning to the proper subject of this essay, the twentieth century accepted the legacy of 'an African fetish that resembled an art object'. That it remained a fetish attributed with art qualities is expressed in the terms 'African art' or 'primitive art' (or numerous alternatives) themselves: it was art but not quite so. Moreover, 'fetish' was both an object (idol) and an explanation of that object

17. In the context of a discussion of African art it is interesting to note that in Rattray's *Religion and Art in Ashanti*, Blake refers to Lévy-Bruhl's insightful account of pre-logical systems and primitive mentality as a basis of understanding Ashanti art from the Ashanti point of view (Blake 1927: 346).

(idolatry), both a confused artefact (matter and spirit) and a confused mind (idea and form), both a medium (art) and a world-view (African). This seems to be the ultimate trap of 'African art(s)': if Africa has art it is not really art, and if it has no art it is not really a culture. The task of initiating the dismantling of this dilemma rests on the shoulders of historical anthropologists, rather than in the hands of the empirical fieldworker.

### *Conclusion*

Analysing the developments in the European art scene about a century ago, we could understand the historical conditions under which an African art object could originate at the crossroads of an 'art discourse' and a 'primitive discourse'. Nevertheless, however confused and misconceived discourses may be, they have 'real' consequences. The more so because the discourse is taken over by cultural specialists, such as anthropologists and art historians. What they took over in the first place was a cultural art object, that is, an object that was explainable in terms of the culture that produced it. Here already we encounter a paradigmatic difference from Western art. As mentioned earlier, the Western art object is minimally a meaningful object, and it was the 'decision' of the Renaissance to consider meaning as the reflection (theoretical and historical) of the artist inserted in the form he or she created. Moreover, this personalized meaning-making was the precondition for the development of an aesthetic psychology that located the value and status of art in the mental capacities of the artist. (Indeed, it was the ultimate reason for calling in the help of the 'primitive mind' to substantiate that psychology.)

However, for African art objects the story is quite different. As far as meaning in general was concerned, a model was immediately available: the fetish paradigm was taken over from the culture theorists of the early nineteenth century. If the fetish was an exemplar of a world-view, the art object was the exemplar of its surrounding culture. In other words, as for the Protestants and the Rationalists, the art object incorporated 'cultural meaning' as such. Therefore, the European artist could easily be replaced by another relevant 'cultural unit': the tribe. Moreover, the 'cultural meaning' encoded in the art object was not to be found in indigenous reflection or verbalization but in the reconstruction of the anthropologist. To draw our parallel further, the European artist did not want to give a verbal account of his 'meaning', and the African tribe could not do so.

This brings us to our main argument. The African art object is a historical combination of a fetish and an explanation thereof, at once an artefact and a world-view. On the one hand, it stands for a cultural universe that should be explained in its own terms. For that matter, cultural relativism should be stretched to its very limits. No exotic beliefs in rain-making amulets or fertility-bringing rituals exceed

the imagination of the non-Westerner. On the other hand, it is a work of art invested with the philosophical intuition of its maker, the tribe. Like the artist who projects his whole world, not least the unconscious part, into the objects he or she creates, the tribe projects what it paradigmatically cannot know into its ethnic masterpieces.

Therefore, if Africans have art, it is not really art. The tribe does not reflectively authorize the meaning-making process that art is. Now we know at least the historical background of this construction. The post-impressionist crisis did not define Western art, it redefined it. And it did so not by abolishing the relevance of the artistic message—a ‘cultural relativism’ applied to artists—but by accentuating the subjective in the mechanics (psychology) of invention and communication. In the same context, African art was not defined, instead the African fetish was redefined. And not by extending the relevance of its message—an artistic universalism applied to tribes—but by stressing the artistic mechanics (fetish psychology) of deep invention and non-discursive communication.

Therefore, if Africans have no art, they do not really have culture. If the tribe has no exemplary media for expressing its deepest thoughts (philosophy and art) or its cultural meanings (world-view, cosmology) how can we think of it as a culture, even in the broadest sense of the word? The question ‘Art or not art?’ might seem to carry the load of persisting cultural relativism or reactionary absolutism. However, I think it does not. As far as I can see now, the matter can be taken further in two directions.

First, one can answer the question positively: Africans have art. Consequently one will be forced to ask the proper art-historical questions. One will question the historical nature of African art traditions. If dealt with seriously (see McLeod n.d.), it can provide a way to start exploring, for example, other time systems, say experiences of time exemplified in the creation and use of artefacts. One can also investigate meaning-making as a reflective, purposeful and culture-creating process. If pursued earnestly, as by Morphy (1991) in his study of Yolgnu (Australian Aboriginal) art, it can open the way to an exploration of painting as a constitutive activity for establishing relationships between people, their landscape and their history. These are two examples of how applying a universal sensitively can be the beginning of exploring cultural differences on a more relevant level than: ‘although they don’t know, they believe...’.

Secondly, one can answer the question negatively: Africans do not have art. Then, evidently, nothing else is said than: art is a culturally specific way of making (sense of) one’s world. This is also an anthropologically relevant point of departure. The question then, however, will be put in a somewhat different way. Not ‘How can people make a culture without art?’, but ‘Why do people need art to make their culture?’

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