AFRICA AND THE DISCIPLINES

THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF RESEARCH IN AFRICA TO THE SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES

EDITED BY

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Truth and Seeing: Magic, Custom, and Fetish in Art History

SUZANNE PRESTON BLIER

> A remarkable feature of all artworks (or to be a bit more circumspect, *practically* all art works) is what I call, in a broad sense, their *fictive* character. This fictive character consists in a false seeming . . . in a purporting to be something it isn't, in putting on an act or show.
>
> Monroe Beardsley, *The Aesthetic Point of View*

"ANY TRAVELER'S TALE that claims to be a fruitful report," writes François Hartog with regard to the ancient Greeks in *The Mirror of Herodotus* (1988, pp. 230, 232), "must contain a category of *thoma* (marvels, curiosities) . . . [objects or traditions which denote] the difference between what is here and what is there far away." The topics examined below are similarly concerned with marvels or *thoma* and the framing of issues of cultural sameness and difference, here made somewhat more complex by the task at hand of addressing the question of what African art historians can offer scholars dealing with other periods and pieces. My aim is not to present an annotate compendium of recent and interesting writing in the field of African art for the non-Africanist to explore and mine for data or methodological insights. Related references may be found in four rather lengthy overview papers on African art recently completed by Daniel Biebuyck (1983), Karen Barber (1987), Monni Adams (1989), and Paula Ben-Amos (1989).

This essay instead is about the making and breaking of boundaries and the construction of ideas of difference and sameness in the arts of Europe and Africa. If the present analysis is more concerned with issues and questions than with research as such, it is because, in my view, the distinctions between African and European art scholarship lie as much

in the framing of associated discourse as in real or perceived questions of art or cultural distinctiveness in the two areas. In the pages below, I explore the language of these differences through an analysis of three key terms bearing on the construction of cultural otherness: "fetish," "magic," and "custom." By fetish, I refer to those ideas that one chooses to believe despite the irrationality (groundlessness, artificiality) of their foundation; by magic, I mean the common practice of privileging the strange as other and the other as strange; and by custom, I refer to the retention of ideas whether "invented" or "found" on which one hangs one's hat because they are said to have always been and to always be.

In the course of objectifying the field through a discussion of these terms, I hope to point out the tenuousness of some of our core assumptions of difference. At the same time I examine related concepts and rhetoric used by scholars historically to highlight the otherness of African art, I argue that comparable otherness concerns and issues are critical to the intellectual viability of the discipline at large. While this essay owes much to contemporary deconstructionist discourse with reference to the conceptualization of the Other—most importantly the work of Edward Said (1978), Hayden White (1978), Johannes Fabian (1983), Mikhail Bakhtin (1987), Roland Barthes (1974), Julia Kristeva (1986), Fredric Jameson (1988)—in the end I suggest that post-structuralist methodologies themselves may be inadequate for the examination of the unique issues raised by African art.

Beginning on a methodological note, I would argue that all art historians, present or past, positivist or nonpositivist, formalist or antiformalist, elitist or materialist, structuralist or deconstructionist, share an interest in questions of truth (truths, "truth," untruth, counter-truth, falsehood—however defined) and with those methodologies which in one way or another address related concerns. It is through this shared interest, I maintain, that scholars in African, European, and other world arts can fruitfully benefit from intellectual exchange. I would suggest in turn that the most important knowledge that we as teachers can convey to our students (and we as Africanists can impart to "others") is the primacy of the question—the delimiting and asking of what previously had remained unasked, the discerning of the unfamiliar in what has long been familiar, the learning how to productively address new theoretical models, but more importantly, the moving beyond, through, behind, and under both customary and new theoretical frames into unchartered seas. Because methodological issues enter into associated arguments in critical ways, before I turn to the specific questions raised by fetish, magic, and custom, in the next few pages I will take up related concerns in a well-known work of literary fiction, *Cat's Cradle* by Kurt Vonnegut.

On Ethnographic Truth, Fiction, and Otherness

"All the true things I am about to tell you are shameless lies," proclaims the Caribbean religious text, *The Books of Bokonon,* in Kurt Vonnegut's 1963 science fiction novel.[1] Picking up the central theme of this invented Bokonon text, Kurt Vonnegut asserts: "My Bokonist warning is this: Anyone unable to understand how a useful religion can be founded on lies will not understand this book either" (1963, p. 16). The subject of Kurt Vonnegut's fictional religion in *Cat's Cradle* has come to the fore recently as an intellectual frame for a chapter "On Ethnographic Truth" in the recent and highly regarded book, *Paths Toward a Clearing* by the anthropologist Michael Jackson (1989). As Jackson points out, what is of central importance in *Cat's Cradle* is the question Kurt Vonnegut poses regarding the viability of impartial observation, nonsubjectivity, and empiricism, as well as the concomitant issue of "whether . . . truths are invented or found, fictional or factual" (1989, p. 170). The present paper similarly is about questions of truth and untruth (nontruth). It is about how untruths are made useful, and how, through their very usefulness, they are made secure.

Michael Jackson's interest in the problem of truth in the Bokonon religion described in *Cat's Cradle* is conveyed in several distinct lines of inquiry; the first is textual—the question of whether Kurt Vonnegut's "Bokonon religion" itself is factual or fictional. What intrigued Michael Jackson in his search for *Cat's Cradle* sources was knowing that Kurt Vonnegut had pursued graduate studies in anthropology at the University of Chicago in the years following the Second World War. Michael Jackson writes:

> Sometime between [1963, the year *Cat's Cradle* was first published] . . . and now I am sure I read a Caribbean ethnography which gave details of a religious cult centered on a prophet called Bokonon. I have searched for that Caribbean ethnography in vain, cursed myself for not having made a note of the one detail which might now prove the critics wrong and Vonnegut slyly right, which would make *Cat's Cradle*—as the title itself suggests—a kind of ethnographic science fiction. [1989, p. 170]

What Michael Jackson wants to know, in other words, is whether *Cat's Cradle* is a work rooted in fact or fantasy, "truth" or "untruth."

With respect to the above, I will herein reaffirm Michael Jackson's hunch and recollection. Bokonon religion does exist. However, it is found not in the Caribbean[2] but in West Africa, among the Fon of the Danhomè kingdom (Dahomey—today the Republic of Benin), a people Kurt Vonnegut would certainly have known about in his graduate train-

ing since the most famous Africanist of the time not only had published extensively on Fon religion (and its Caribbean offshoots) but also was teaching anthropology up the road a bit at Northwestern University.[3] Moreover, Melville J. Herskovits was a strong proponent of cultural relativism, a theory which, as Michael Jackson points out, Kurt Vonnegut incorporates into his discussion of academic discourse in his later *Slaughterhouse 5* (1970). Cultural relativism with its positivist and non-value laden grounding is still for many the *sine qua non* of ethnographic "truth."

Interestingly, in light of the above, Melville and Frances Herskovits' 1958 publication *Dahomey Narrative* is filled with the sort of simple tales of vacillating between good and evil mostly deriving from Fa (Ifa) divination, a practice which would have intrigued the young Kurt Vonnegut, argues Michael Jackson (1989, p. 170), and even may have inspired his anthropology master's thesis on "Fluctuations between Good and Evil in Simple Tales." It was the rejection of this thesis, Michael Jackson suggests, that led to Vonnegut's departure from the University of Chicago and, I would add, perhaps his turning away from the pursuit of "truth" (the exclusive goal and model of academic anthropology at that time) towards a search for "untruth" ("fantasy," "fabrication," "falsehood"—the standard designation of literary fiction in that period).

Truth and falsehood also are critical issues with regard to the Danhomè belief system. The diviner or *bokonon* is not only the principal source of local tales of good and evil but also a key intermediary between gods and humans. This person, whose name means literally the one who is familiar (*non*) with knowledge (*ko*) of the mysterious powers (*bo*) at play in the world, is seen to be at once a revealer of truth and a source of potential "lies." The latter designation is based on the belief that no person, not even the *bokonon,* can ever know everything about the world, thus no one can ever really know "truth." Moreover, because the diviner serves as spokesman for a diversity of gods, many of whom, like humans, are wily and wicked, in divination as in life the revelation of falsehoods often naturally accompanies the disclosure of truth. Accordingly in ceremonies for deceased diviners one sings: "we are going to the reunion of the liars. If the *bokonon* does not know how to lie [*nuvu*—literally "unravel something"], he should stay at home."[4] In the Fa divination sign, Gbe Tu Mila, humans in turn are encouraged to lie in life as a means of escaping death.[5] Life, in other words, is predicated as much on "lies" as "truth."

It is not primarily the problem of "truth" and "untruth" in Danhomè philosophy, religion, and divination texts which is of concern to us here, however, but rather the questions raised by Kurt Vonnegut and

the figure of the *bokonon* himself with regard to issues of veracity (truth, untruth, nontruth) generally and how they may relate to scholarly discourse. In our examination of Western terminologies used in the construction of otherness, critical questions of "truth" and "difference" in African and Western academic discussion are elucidated as well. The variant social and cultural values which scholars have accorded the fetish are particularly important in this regard.

Art Historical Fetish and Preoccupations with the Artificial

"Fetish" is a provocative term with a long and diffuse history in the West. While clearly distinct from the other terms discussed below of custom and magic, fetishes share essential qualities with the two. Like customs, fetishes are things that are valued (or just as frequently devalued) because of their identity with and/or disassociation from "one's own." Like magic, fetishes share important features of otherness as focuses of arcane or foreign belief. In the *Dictionary of Psychology* edited by Arthur S. Reber, it is suggested accordingly that, "Fetishes usually are articles used by *others* [emphasis mine], often but not always of the opposite sex (shoes, gloves, handkerchiefs), or parts of the body (hair, feet)" (1985, p. 273). Deviance also is important to fetish identity. Thus Sigmund Freud discusses the fetish *vis-à-vis* "sexual function" and the ". . . becoming dependent on special conditions of a perverse or fetishist nature" (1959, p. 14). Not surprisingly, the term fetish also has vital socio-political traces. Today it is linked not only to sexual aberrance but also to class difference. While historically linked to beliefs of the unschooled or ignorant masses, Karl Marx's famous dictum (1937) and the subsequent writings of Theodor W. Adorno (1961), Walter Benjamin (1973) and others, have identified fetishization with the upper classes, "fetish" connoting here the attachment with which the elite hold commodities.[6]

From the Latin *fasticious,* "artificial" or "manufactured," the term "fetish" in modern French, Portuguese, and English is identified with a range of other derogatory values. Webster's *New World Dictionary* (1966) accordingly defines "fetish" as "any object believed by Primitive people to have magic power; 2) hence anything held in unreasoning devotion: as she makes a fetish of dress." The *Oxford English Dictionary* definition (1971 edition) focuses more on Portuguese root associations of the word with "charms" or "sorcery," and identifies "fetish" (*feitiço*) as "originally any of the objects used by the negroes of the Guinea coast and the neighboring regions as amulets or means of enchantment or regarded by them with superstitious dread."[7]

In both its historic and current use, the term "fetish" conveys in this

way notions of superstition, unreality, falsehood, foreigners, and derogation.[8] William Pietz notes in this light that as early as 1764, Kant

> . . . tried to formulate an aesthetic explanation for African fetish worship . . . [and] decided that such practices were founded on the principle of the 'trifling' (*läppisch*), the ultimate degeneration of the beautiful because it lacked all sense of the sublime. [1985, p. 9]

This identity of the fetish with things lacking beauty and sublimity is of considerable interest for the present discussion since, until recently, it was especially the emotionally powerful or less-refined African works such as Kongo *nkisi* figures, Danhomè *bocio* works, and Bamana *boili* that were standardly identified as "fetishes." G. Hegel's view of fetishism is also interesting in its disparaging associations. He writes (1956, p. 99) that Africans take up as Fetish

> the first thing that comes their way. . . . Such a Fetish has no independence as an object of religious worship; still less has it aesthetic independence as a work of art; it is merely a creation that expresses the arbitrary choice of its maker, and which always remains in his hands.[9]

In these statements by some of the most influential thinkers in the modern European period, we can see how both Africa and its objects of worship are denegrated as at once "trifling," "arbitrary," and "irrational." Like the term "fetish" itself, however, such assertions are based on presumptions which are pejorative and without grounding, hence dependent on values which are at once "artificial" and "manufactured."

A masterful essay on the fetish by the historian Hayden White offers further insight into the use of this word in the West. He defines fetishism as

> . . . at one and the same time, a kind of belief, a kind of devotion, and a kind of psychological set or posture. . . . From these three usages [of fetish] we derive the three senses of the term . . . : belief in magical fetishes, extravagant or irrational devotion, and pathological displacement of libidinal interest and satisfaction to a fetish. . . . fetishism here [is understood] as a fixation on the form of a thing as against its content or on the part of a thing as against the whole. [1978, p. 184, and p. 195 n. 2]

The "fetish," in other words, has a role not unlike that of synecdoche or metonymy, with the part assuming essential values of the whole. In this, the term's social and historical importance is widely felt. As Hayden White observes:

> From the Renaissance to the end of the eighteenth century, Europeans tended to fetishize the native peoples with whom they came into contact by viewing them simultaneously as monstrous forms of humanity and as quintessential objects of desire. Whence the alternative impulses to exterminate and to redeem the native peoples. . . . When a given part of humanity compulsively defines itself as the pure type of mankind in general and defines all other parts of the human species as inferior, flawed, degenerate or "savage" I call this an instance of fetishism. [1978, p. 194, and p. 195 n. 2]

Fetishism, in other words, is contextualized wherever beliefs predicated on untenable values or irrational tenets are firmly held. As noted above, fetishes are as much a part of Western scholarly discourse as they are of the "deviant" other.

Several "fetishes" to which art scholars historically have held seemingly "artificial" devotion in non-Africanist art history can be pointed up as well. These include most importantly: (1) the primacy placed on models of development, (2) the privileging of things past, and (3) the identity of the artist as the principal source of artistic meaning. Although much of what scholars have come to call "new" art history has been actively involved in the deconstruction of these "fetishistic" pearls, African centrist art history offers both important additional insight into the above as well as a range of alternative models.

One of the most widely held and powerful of the Western art historical "fetishes" is that of artistic progress or development, a model long disavowed in our sister disciplines of history and literature. A range of revisionist scholars, including, among others, Svetlana Alpers (1979), have attacked the dominant metaphor of "progress" in European art traditions with its tracing of modern artistic foundations to ancient Greece and Italy. This model sets forth Greek art to be an improvement over Egyptian, Italian Renaissance as a higher form of Greek, Northern Renaissance as a stepchild of the Italian model, and abstract art as an improvement over earlier naturalism. While such developmental models are renounced by most art scholars today, what this developmental model still means in practical terms in most introductory classes and texts is the joining or stringing of art forms and artists into a single chain, leaving out (or awkwardly sandwiching in) those that do not easily fit, and seeing those who do as in some way derivative or departing from those which came immediately (or more distantly) prior.[10] Here (as with myth) in the words of Susan Buck-Morss, "[T]he passage of time takes the form of predetermination" (1989, p. 78).[11]

In the main, Africanists have had little possibility of formulating or following comparable developmental models, not because (as some sug-

gest) Africa is without history, or is deficient in either an important sense of history or internal models of development, but rather because so little of its history is known. Lacking many conventional historical documents, other models and paradigms have had to be employed. Interestingly, while some African art scholars have turned to creating "histories of the present," many others have been more concerned with framing questions in new ways which lie outside the general rubrics of traditional historical discourse altogether. One wonders, accordingly, if by magic one could remove all the dates from European art, in what new ways would these works be approached? What insights would such a break bring about? Would Western art scholarship stop? I think not. Like African art scholars for whom specific dates are a rare luxury, other questions would be addressed, questions which no doubt would inform the art works and the discipline as a whole in new and important ways. To some degree, the recent interests of "new art historians" in issues of response, psychoanalysis, and museum presentation coincide with the above, for while grounded in time and place, the date of a particular work often is less central to the discourse than are other factors. Models similarly could enrich Western art discourse in critical ways.

Another result of the Western art historical, teleological "fetish" with prioritizing the past has been the widespread disinterest in the discipline with contemporary artistic production, whether for its own sake or for its potential insights into both future scholarship and research on earlier periods. Few scholars—including modernists—investigate contemporary art as a fertile field in which to test long standing theories about creativity, reception, perception, the production of meaning, patronage, and the like. There are several reasons for this. Dissertation advisers tend to push students to study things which they themselves know (generally past artists) and to utilize methodologies with which they are familiar (archival work usually or, increasingly, theoretical queries). Debates about "what is art" and "what is not art" also come into play. There are other factors as well, but the fetishization of the past is the preeminent one. It would seem thus, that a validation of the present could promote new avenues of innovative research and critical art historical insight potentially impinging not only on contemporary art but also on the scholarship of past, present, and future eras.[12] In this light, the sort of detailed, interview-rich, and data-filled studies that scholars do in Africa with regard to local art forms may provide important models for the study of contemporary art in the West.

Another dominant "fetish" in art historical scholarship has been the privileging of the voice of the artist above all others *vis-à-vis* the production of artistic meaning.[13] Although Roland Barthes' redolent

proclamation (1989) that the author is dead rang through the university halls and offices of literary scholars over a decade ago, the ramifications of his statement are only now being addressed by art historians and principally in the form of studies centered on issues of viewership and reception (compare Andrée Hayun 1990, Jonathan Crary 1991, and David Freedberg 1991). African art scholarship again may offer insight as to alternatives to artist-centered meaning discourse. While the standard myth maintains that art in Africa is a collective, history-less, tradition-bound enterprise in which the artist—even if we knew his or her name—had (has) little real input into the work,[14] Africanists have been forced by their data to view meaning as far more complex than either artist- or reception-centered models often have acknowledged.

Field research has provided Africanists with opportunities to witness firsthand the complex interweave of individuals who both participate in the creative process as artists—diviners, ritual activators and the like—and bring signification to the work through their divergent roles as viewers, users, worshippers, and caretakers. I have argued (Blier 1988, 1987) that the artist and viewer (observer) represent only a small part of the larger meaning base. In this sense, there is much more than at first meets the eye in Roland Barthes' proclamation of the artist's demise. If by "magic" we could do away with all artists' names and identities in art history, innovative scholars would come up with new and vital questions to explore. For art history, thus, what this means is not loss but rather, in the end, scholarly gain and the realization that art works are richer than they first may appear.

The Necessity of Magic: Identifying the Familiar as Foreign

"Magic," like "fetish," is a term with rich semantic interest and vital connections to ideas of otherness. Used generally to designate a form of mysterious power or irrational belief, as with "fetish," the term "magic" is nuanced in important ways by socio-political concerns. Stated simply, magic also is the religion of the other. It is defined generally as a form of "irrational" belief held by those who remain at base "irrational." According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1971 edition) magic is: "The *pretended* art of influencing the course of events, and of producing marvelous physical phenomena, by processes *supposed to* owe their efficacy to their power of compelling the intervention of spiritual beings, or of bringing into operation some *occult* controlling principle of nature" (emphases mine).[15] Ironically, the term "magic" is used less in reference to African worship and religious practice as such, which is not all that different from ancient Greek or Roman traditions among others (compare Fustel de Coulanges 1956 with John Mbiti

1970). Instead, magic is used to signal those practices within the African religious realm which are perceived to be at variance with other religious forms. Moreover, in the above dictionary definition of "magic," if one removes the underlined pejoratives, the meaning of "magic" is strikingly similar to "orthodox" ritual and prayer in the West. In Catholicism, to give but one example, the mass, the Eucharist, and absolution are all understood by believers to be articles of faith and even mystery, but these individuals would never refer to them as religious "magic."[16] In Protestantism, similarly, baptism is accorded a value of individual empowerment and action equivalent in key respects to that associated with magic. Religious dogma among followers of other world religions—whether Judaism or Islam, Hindu or Buddhism—is similar. Yet in all these faiths, the term "magic" characteristically is used in reference only to the religious practices of others, to the beliefs and rituals of those individuals who are foreign, unschooled, and considered to be social outsiders.[17] The *Oxford English Dictionary* and other lexicons, accordingly, generally equate magic with "sorcery" and "witchcraft." R. Collingwood's discussion of "magic" is of special interest in this regard:

> The word "magic" as a rule carries no definite significance at all. It is used to denote certain practices current in "savage" societies and recognizable here and there in less "civilized" and less "educated" strata of our society, but it is used without any definite conception of what it connotes; and therefore, if someone asserts that, for example, the ceremonies of our own church are magical, neither he nor anyone else can say what the assertion means, except that it is evidently intended to be abusive; it cannot be described as true or false. [1977, p. 107][18]

Outside the West, the term "magic" has been applied to variant objects and acts, African and otherwise. The recent French exhibit *Magicians sur la terre* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou 1989), while seeking to elevate the status (élan and mystery) of third-world artists ironically labeled them as "producers of magic," thereby reinforcing their very otherness. Because of the term's decidedly derogatory associations, African art historians and curators over the years have been steadfastly removing it from texts and museum labels. Interestingly, however, while the word "magic" is eschewed by most Africanist scholars today because of its disparaging nature and "otherness" mystique, many still employ the term or its linguistic complements "charm" and "amulet" in reference to Islamic leather packets containing Koranic verse which are worn as dress elements in many parts of West Africa. This use, however, is an exception that proves the rule, for in African art discourse it is Islam that is the "othered" religion par excellence.

The concept of otherness in magic is reinforced in the long and interesting etymological history of the term in the West. The word derives from the Greek *magikos* (meaning "sorcery" or "wizardry") which in turn has its source in the old Persian *magush* or Iranian *magos*. This designated a member of a hereditary priestly class among the ancient Medes and Persians whose doctrines included belief in astrology. The above meaning has had continued relevance in Christianity, for, as is known to every young Christmas caroler, the *Magi* is a reference to the three (foreign) wise men from the East who were present at the birth of Jesus. To the ancient Greeks, similarly, the word *magikos* was employed to designate the religious practices of foreigners (called generally "barbarians"—Greek *barbaros*—"foreign," "strange," "ignorant"), whether they were country folk, folk from other countries, or city folk identified as others (generally, slaves).[19] Then, as in the present, just as everyone had an Other, everyone's Other was associated with belief in magic. As White has observed:

> In such a situation the tendency is to endow those parts of humanity which are, in effect, being denied any claim to the title of human with magical, even supernatural powers, as happened in the mythos of the Wild Man of the Middle Ages. If these magical or supernatural powers are fixed upon as desiderata for all men, including Europeans, then there will be a tendency to fetishize the imagined possessors of such powers, for example, the Noble Savage. [1978, p. 195 n. 2]

This framing of magic has been an important basis for the long-standing separation of Africa and its arts from Europe and the movement of Africa into taxonomic proximity with the Pacific Islands and Native America (compare Blier 1990*b*). In much of art historical writing, African art (along with Oceanic and Native American traditions) is likened to the Greek "barbarian" as something "foreign," "strange," and "ignorant" of the values accorded "high" art. Interestingly, African art also is widely seen to stand in relationship to Western art as woman to man in phallocentric psychoanalytic texts. Stated simply, African art is held to signify a lack, and accordingly is widely believed to lack: artists (at least those who are truly capable of making innovative changes and having intellectual insights); an interest in foreign cultures and universality; a concept of art apart from social setting; a perception of art outside of nature and the material world; and a valuation of history (and a "real" understanding of historical primacy).[20]

One could continue, but what is important to emphasize is that coupled with this sense of deprivation or lack is an assumption of surplus as Africa and African art are generally seen to display at the same time qualities of heightened sensitivity (emotional power) and danger.[21]

Here, too, psychoanalytic parallels with women are apt. As Kaja Silverman notes for the presentation of the woman in film: "As usual her body provides the means for representing this deprivation. She simultaneously attracts the gaze—appeals to the senses and represents castration" (1983, p. 223). In both gender discourse and views of Africa, a considerable amount of illogic (and indeed magic) goes to support these premises of simultaneous lack and longing, repulsion and attraction.

Moreover, in truth, it has been far easier politically and intellectually for art historians and others to follow the lead of both Africa-centrists and Europe-centrists in seeing Africa as Other. Technologically and economically, however, at the time of Africa's first encounter with Europe (during the late fifteenth to seventeenth centuries) sub-Saharan Africa was thought to be strikingly similar to its preindustrial neighbors north of the Mediterranean, a fact underscored by the degree of (favorable) surprise and lavish praise accorded sub-Saharan African cities and states by the early European visitors. The city of Benin, in one of the more frequently cited examples, was compared positively by the seventeenth-century Dutchman Olfert Dapper (1686) to the Dutch city of Harlem. In turn, with respect to art and cultural traditions generally, Africa shares far more in common with preindustrial Europe than it does (or ever did) with either Native America or Oceania (those areas with which African art is generally cojoined), a finding that should not surprise anyone with a cursory knowledge of world history and a map.

What has held these three areas together in art historical discourse is at once a form of retentive cultural Darwinism (promoted still today in H. W. Janson's widely used introductory survey, *History of Art* [1986]) and (paradoxically) a grossly simplistic sociological model of art history which sees these three areas as in some way sharing similar social, political, economic, technical, and even religious features in a strange (magical and fallacious), cross-cultural, trans-historical union of widely disparate political forms and geographic entities.[22] To be fair, Janson's ideas are grounded in late nineteenth-century theories of social and artistic evolutionary development which subsequent editors of the popular (and remunerative) text have never felt compelled to revise. In turn, most sociologically oriented art historians today would be quick to eschew such a mixed bag of art historical otherness with its veneer of materiality and pretexts of artistic and socio-technological similitude. The fact remains, however, that Africanists and Europeanists alike have found this fiction (untruth) useful and for this reason continue to promote it even while disavowing the more denegrating "primitive" nomenclature as they cojoin these disparate areas in introductory texts, surveys, and museum halls. By continuing to frame the Other as strange in this way, ideas of African differentness are continually reinforced.

Yet, were we able by magic to dislodge and disempower the longstanding traditions of "us" and "them," scholars of European art might be less hesitant to draw from African models in exploring in different ways their own works.

After having pointed out the problematic basis of magic as an othered taxonomy, in the next few paragraphs I would like to shift focus and suggest its potential importance for academic discussion generally. The concept (if not language) of magic, I suggest, has critical methodological significance for art historians of various fields. In my view there are two basic ways to go about doing art historical research. One involves the sort of careful, time-consuming, archival (and/or field) research many scholars in the discipline have done, wherein one hopes to chance upon a meaty tidbit of new information which subsequently will allow one to discuss the work in a different way, whether this involves finding a previously unknown collection inventory, a letter from a patron, an overlooked religious text, an unexplored scientific treatise, or whatever. The other method entails the same sort of meticulous, time-consuming research, but in this case grounded in premises, questions, or theories, which through the course of their exploration (and affirmation in associated data) place the object in a different light. Although scholars on both sides are often critical of the other, each accusing the opposition of framing research questions in such a way as to predetermine potential answers, these two avenues of scholarly inquiry are never mutually exclusive. Most of the best scholars do both, or at least are aware of the extent to which the questions they ask and the theories they employ may effect the answers they arrive at, to some degree qualifying those answers. If the second scholarly approach has gained ascendency in "new art history," however, it is also much harder to "explain" or even "teach," both because preestablished models are very hard to break (and as Thomas Kuhn has pointed out [1970] there is a tendency in every discipline to follow the accepted paradigm) and because once one has approached something in a new (different) way, it is no longer truly "new" or "different." African art research here too may offer important insight.

With this in mind, accordingly, I would like to reintroduce the importance of "magic" into the framing of academic discourse. One of the most productive ways I have found to see in a long familiar work something that is new, is by identifying the familiar elements in it as if they are in some way foreign. One needs to try to see in the most obvious and accepted details, that which is strange, that which is different, striving to view them in some way as "other," as visual or linguistic equivalents to "magic." In seeing the familiar as foreign, in this way, it is also essential to explore the basis for their very otherness. Fieldwork gener-

ally presents Africanists with the same dilemma but in reverse. Coming as most of us do from non-African cultures, there is the probability (borne out over and over again by experience) that much of what we see will be foreign to us. To "succeed" in this research it is encumbent upon us to translate the very foreignness we see into something familiar (if only because we must write in our own language and describe or analyze what we see and hear in a form in some way comprehensible to both our own and the "other" culture). At the same time we must not lose the essence of what exactly is foreign about what we are witnessing. With this in mind, we continue to pose questions with which we hope to both illuminate differentness and explicate elements of sameness. Through these various ways, African art scholars often have had to develop a keen ability to "sense" the presence and the roots of otherness and familiarity.

What Africanists can offer other art historians in this way is a valuation of magic (and a concomitant privileging of strangeness) as well as an appreciation of the complex interpretative issues which magic raises. This is not to say that historians of Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Carolingian, Italian Renaissance, or other arts are not keenly aware that the (now dead) societies that they are studying also are very different from their own, but rather that the cultural and historical values of continuity and sameness in the West are far more pervasive and difficult to break. Field work in a living foreign culture often provides ready evidence of difference and distance. And, as many of us soon learn, the degree of discomfort (strangeness) which one may feel with a given tradition, belief, or argument often is to some degree correlatable with the potential insights (magic) provided by pursuing that inquiry.[23]

Custom: On the Invention of Tradition

"Custom" and "tradition" are words that one hears frequently in the context of African societies and art. African art texts and label captions proclaim proudly that this or that work is "traditional," conveying through this means a sense of formal and iconologic continuity with some remote and "idyllic" past. This point is reinforced by the fact that the term "tradition" is still used today to differentiate certain locally defined but clearly modern (that is, nineteenth-twentieth century) art works which show some form of European influence (the use of foreign-derived tools, glass beads, imported pigments, factory made cloth, or external metals) from others displaying a more prominent influence from the West (new genres, "tourist art," and so forth), the latter of which are generally labeled "contemporary." In Africa as in the West, "tradition" and "custom" are mottoes of choice, both for those seeking

to rigidify mores or practices which are (and have always been) evolving (changing) and for those who wish to legitimate (and proscribe) newly established traditions (generally defined in this context as a return to some "real" or "imagined" past).

Deriving from the Latin *com,* "with," and *suescare* (from *suus*), "one's own," "custom" denotes in this way ideas of familiarity: it demarks a sense of valuation and validation based on accordance with one's own ways and ideas. "Custom" comprises accordingly those things or notions (invented or found) which one maintains (guards, esteems) because one has become accustomed to (used to, comfortable with) them. In art historical and other scholarship, both the following and the breaking of custom and traditions are to some degree suicidal.[24] Accordingly, to follow custom too closely is to wear blinders which prevent one from seeing new questions (and answers); to break from custom too far (too much) is often to incur the wrath of the larger discipline and/or to marginalize one's research because it cannot be fit into preexisting paradigms.

"Tradition," from the Latin *traditio,* "surrender" or "delivery," has different etymological roots. Originally tradition was associated with ideas of relinquishment and betrayal of valued ideas which were revealed to a third party. The association of tradition today with the handing down (usually orally) of practices or beliefs, however, retains little of its earlier pejorative identity. Nonetheless, both custom and tradition denote a valuation of the past as a source of beliefs and practices surrendered or delivered up from some bygone era.

Like fetish and magic, custom (and tradition) frequently denote a fictive frame, a means of legitimization for things defined as much or more by fancy (yearnings, recollection) as by fact. In Africa this is also the case. Accordingly, one of the answers that one frequently hears in the course of African interviews in response to a difficult question of why a given object takes a particular form, or why a specific practice is undertaken in a certain way is that *it is customary* (or *traditional*) that it is done this way because it has always been done in this fashion. That such a response often is provided in those cases in which the person interviewed feels at a loss for a better answer, serves to underscore the slippery scholarly terrain with which "custom" and "tradition" are identified. Both terms accordingly are words of enormous "thickness" (as Clifford Geertz might describe it [1973]); they are terms which bear considerable weight. When used by local personages in the context of interviews, they mean: Do not search further; Ask no more questions; It is the way it is because it is the way it has always been.

While important in the West, in Africa values of "custom" and "tradition" are deemed to be even more predominant.[25] Thus when Euro-

peans visited the court of the Danhomè kings and witnessed the lavish yearly new years' ceremonies (called *huetanu*, "ceremony [thing] at the head of the year"), which many of them not only attended but also described in exhaustive detail, they referred to these as local "customs." This word (*coutumes* in French) today still is employed when discussing these rites with Western visitors. The fact that the *huetanu* ceremonies were a relatively new invention in Danhomé (dating to the reign of Agaja—1708–1740) made no difference to these foreign visitors. However new, these ceremonies were perceived to be "customary" and "traditional."

As can be seen in the above, the terms "custom" and "tradition," whether used in African or other contexts, connote more than they appear to at first glance. They constitute in key respects a form of Legal Fiction (to use Henry Maine's term [1963])—a fiction which is believed, a "lie" which has become to many "truth." That the words "custom" and "tradition" are brought up in field interviews only as a last resort when a more viable or better answer is not known, underscores this distinctive aspect of their character as lie-truth. Custom and tradition have similar associations in art historical scholarship in the West. A case in point is the desire expressed by some scholars today to return to the discipline's "customary" or "traditional" interests with artists, periods, regions, media, iconographic problems, and questions of art making, rather than issues of theory and methodology. Similar debates are found in many disciplines currently, where terms like "custom" and "tradition" also are employed to convey a sense of legitimacy based on a valued past. Here, too, such terms serve as Legal Fictions or lies-truths. As Susan Buck-Morss points out for myths, they ". . . give answers to why the world is as it is when an empirical cause and effect cannot be seen, or when it cannot be remembered" (1989, p. 78).

There are numerous examples of the problems generated by custom or tradition following in both African and other art scholarship, but because the African art field is younger and custom or tradition is less firmly entrenched, the breaking of custom here is somewhat easier. Moreover, since certain art historical customs by their nature are impossible to follow in African art scholarship (for example, the domination of written texts, the privileging of particular media and oeuvres, and the primacy of developmental models), alternatives frequently have arisen which have encouraged new ways of thinking about old issues and accustomed ideas.

Another reason why custom-breaking is relatively common in African art scholarship is that African art itself in many contexts is a living art, fully entrenched in the variant and varying societal roots which make and frame it. This has meant that scholars working in this field

often have had to train themselves in a wide range of other disciplines in order to carry out effective research. The vast majority of one's time in turn generally is spent learning about society broadly rather than art more narrowly defined. Accordingly, the prototypical first comment by a returning African art Ph.D. student is: "I learned a lot about the culture, but about the art I 'got' almost nothing." For them and, to a somewhat lesser extent, their advisers, this presents a problem because ultimately the point is to complete a study of the art, however broadly socially framed. For the African art field this "problem" in the end often proves to be a distinct advantage, for what these students have witnessed (and in turn explore in various ways in their dissertations and later writings) is the integral grounding of art in life.[26]

African art scholars in turn often are both beleaguered and blessed by the fact that life and art within the cultures they are studying are not readily (or already) classified, categorized, and defined according to preexisting (read "customary") style, genre, or other taxonomies. While early African art scholars sought to follow the Western taxonomic orientations of their European colleagues in defining key typologies, in the end the less than satisfying results of this enterprise lead many to move away from such concerns.[27] Along the way they threw out concepts such as "tribe" and "tribal style," not only because of the latter's derogatory associations (and lack of comparative use for comparable contexts in the West)[28] but also and equally importantly because in large areas of Africa such labels have little real historical, socio-cultural, or stylistic value (René Bravmann 1973; Sidney Kasfir 1984).[29]

While the concept of "tribe" has had no similar importance in Western art historical taxonomies, there do exist certain "customary" methods of categorization which may mitigate against creative thinking. Long held stylistic rubrics are one example. Following African research models, it might be fruitful to think about breaking from "custom" in reevaluating some of these classificatory frames. Giotto, for example, in my early art history classes generally was accorded the label of the "first" major artist to forge a path toward the Renaissance. What would happen if Giotto instead (or also) was discussed as a late and "deviant" artist of the Byzantine? By shifting identities in this way, might we not see both the Byzantine and Giotto in a new light? So too, although we have grown accustomed to viewing medieval art as an outgrowth, development, or somewhat delinquent stepchild of ancient Rome, its pointed arches and flying buttresses derivative of southern vaulting, might there not also be interesting insights (following Alois Riegl 1901) in wrenching the Gothic from its long-heralded Italian roots? Might it rather be explored as a vibrant early form of northern Renaissance, looking for its principal ideational and aesthetic foundations in the (al-

beit few) extant works of sculpture and architecture which survived the destruction of colonial Roman forces? As disquieting as these suggestions may be, what really lies behind my argument is a claim for the necessity of looking at the familiar in an unfamiliar way. Questions of custom-breaking also emerge with respect to traditions of object hierarchies. African scholars perforce often have been obliged to break "customary" (for the West—and then generally post-Romanticism) ways of framing and valuing materials and object types.[30] If we understand "custom" and "tradition" in the above to delimit ideas or lines of inquiry with which scholars have become comfortable (for better or worse), what African art scholars may offer our Western colleagues are not only models for custom-breaking but also, and equally important, ways of discerning and acknowledging custom for what it is (that is, practice) rather than for what it purports to be (truth).

In light of the above issues, can it be said that African art scholarship is beginning to have an effect within the discipline as a whole? I would like to say yes, but my answer has to be no. Unlike many other fields—anthropology, history, and political science, for example—the canon has remained so rigidly fixed that any larger discussion of the arts of different areas or interests has been virtually impossible. A few medievalists may be reading Victor Turner (particularly on pilgrimage) and others may look at African travelers' accounts to bolster theories of universal responses to art, but African art scholarship as such generally is avoided. That the standard introduction to art history, Janson's *History of Art,* discusses African artistic form in a chapter on Primitive (sic) art which is filled with derogatory statements and egregious factual errors, no doubt plays a role in encouraging both teachers and students to avoid the subject all together. And, because African art is so rarely taught in art history departments in this country and in Europe, most students and scholars are never given the chance to form an alternative opinion.

Envoie: Deconstructionism and Formalism in African Art

When it comes to framing questions, few experiences are as difficult and rewarding as ethnographic field work. Such research not only is physically and emotionally demanding, but more so it constitutes a scholarly and intellectual challenge of the highest order. In such work there is rarely any of the sublime, contemplative silence of the Western archive library or museum. Even the most shy and reticent researcher necessarily must become extraverted and intrusive. Research of this type continually necessitates decisions not only regarding paths to take at a particular crossing but also when to forge entirely new paths without

ever really knowing where one would like one's final destination to be. Even on an "easy" day, field research is like trying to follow a maze in which the hedge borders are so wholly overgrown that boundary and path are indistinguishable. It is the kind of research in which, like this same maze, essential findings are often achieved through trial and error. It is an art one can only learn by doing. Each situation is unique. There is no model or customary way of proceeding. Interviewing, one of the most important field research techniques, in turn is a complex and often frustrating craft, particular when, as a foreigner, one frequently has no idea of what answer one is looking for and what line of questioning will achieve it. Despite the challenges and difficulties of the fieldwork enterprise, I know of no better way of both getting at the richness of art and culture and critically examining variant theoretical forms and methodologies.

Deconstructionism is a case in point. While academia as a whole and African art specifically has gained considerably through an examination of the larger issues raised by deconstructionism, by no means can its principal tenets be considered a panacea for African art or art history generally. Despite provocative examples of related scholarship—most importantly in Africa by scholars such as Ilona Szombati-Fabian and Johannes Fabian 1976; Johannes Fabian 1983; V. Y. Mudimbe 1986, 1988; Bogumil Jewsiewicki 1988; Michael Jackson 1989; and Anthony Appiah 1991—which have pressed scholars to recognize the complexity of "truth" and the political roots of what was hitherto thought to be "apolitical" positivist history, in some respects deconstructionism also has limitations when it comes to studying African art generally. What deconstructionism often has meant for Africa is the replacement of one form of "othered" identity with another. In the deconstructionist proclivity to privilege colonial history and Western perspective (bias) over all others, the distinctive pasts and identities of local cultures—both precolonial and modern—often have been trivialized or supplanted within the larger colonizer-colonialized dialectic.

Equally important, Africa and other "third world" cultures usually are mixed together in the same "global market" pot, the implications being not only that everyone is touched equally by global forces but also that their identities are so overpowered by these influences that little if any of their own distinctive cultural values remain. Africa (like Japan, India, and many other areas) indeed offers vital contemporary evidence to the contrary. At base, many such studies, however insightful and well intentioned, represent a new type of cultural hierarchy where self (the colonizer, the collector, the researcher, the writer) is again accorded the principal, privileged, and exclusive voice. Probably influenced in part by the recent best-selling books by Sally Price (1989) and

Marianna Torgovnick (1990), as well as the many insightful critiques by scholars such as George Marcus and Michael Fischer (1986), James Clifford and George Marcus (1986), George Stocking (1987), James Clifford (1988), Clifford Geertz (1988), and Adam Kuper (1988) to name but a few, armchair overviews of Othered art are becoming the genre of choice for some art scholars wishing to do creative scholarship without the expense or difficulty of additional in-depth fieldwork. While a welcome addition, in many respects, if such studies portend a general movement of African art research away from field research-based analyses, for the many reasons cited above, much may be lost in the process.

Peering around the corner, I see formalism, both resuscitated ("old") or reconstructed ("new") to be on the rise in art history and academics at large, each proposing to rectify (realign) some of deconstructionism's more radical tenets (nihilistic tendencies, some insist). Both forms of formalism offer many of the same intellectual and practical advantages (and difficulties) of deconstructionism. Each allows for a more distanced (nonfield based) approach to the "subject" arts and cultures. Advocates of a new formalism—Gilles Deleuze 1990 among others—however, in their search for unity and a sense of structure to replace the characteristic cacophony of postmodernist critique, have frequently substituted new myths or fictions for old ones still being aggressively fought for by Africanists of both positivist and deconstructionist stripes. The tendency of new formalists to press for hierarchical and developmentally based world system perspectives, in turn, while complementing deconstructionist global market orientations, undoubtedly will prove problematic for African art because, again, the African continent either will be relegated to the lower rung or elevated to a new mythic "noble savage" stature.

With "old" formalism, similar potentialities and problems come into play. While offering a (to some refreshing) return to the object, associated studies often have harbored assumptions that content can be discerned exclusively by visual appraisal and careful "looking." As Africanists who have done extensive field research know well, the very way one "sees" an object and comes to "understand" it usually is dependent on considerations outside the work itself, by factors of context, viewership, and society generally. To understand art, particularly that of a foreign culture (and one could argue in a way that all art is to some degree foreign), involves much more than formal looking, describing, and intuiting, however carefully and perceptively it is done. Again what African art can offer art historical discourse generally is not only a testing field for examining new and old approaches and theories, but also access to an extraordinarily rich and still understudied living and his-

toric art. If, in turn, African art is seen to offer insightful and instructive *thoma* ("marvels," "curiosities") for Western art scholarship—to use François Hartog's term—it is the clarity with which, through this art, one is able to illuminate the relative truths and untruths (counter-truths, lies, artificialities) of Western conceptual traditions such as magic, custom, and fetish which in the end will be of greatest significance. To paraphrase the Bokonon text in Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle:* Even useful theory may be founded on untruth.

NOTES

The research and writing of this paper was undertaken in the course of my recent residence at the Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities which I gratefully acknowledge. Among the scholars that year were several whose writings and conversation no doubt have had an impact on this essay, most especially Johannes Fabian, Thomas Y. Levin, and Hayden White. I also wish to thank Richard Brilliant, Johanna Drucker, and Eunei Lee for reading and commenting on earlier drafts.

1. In Haiti, however, the name *boko* or *bokon* is used to refer to someone skilled in the making of power objects, identified by many with "black magic." Many Haitian religious traditions derive from Danhomè (Alfred Métraux 1972, p. 267).

2. For a discussion of Melville and Frances Herskovits and the study of Dahomey art, see Suzanne Blier 1988, 1989.

3. For a discussion of the *bokonon* and Fa divination practice among the Fon, see Melville Herskovits 1967, Bernard Maupoil 1981, and Suzanne Blier 1990, 1991. Related traditions of Ifa divination are practiced among the Yoruba. See William Bascom 1969.

4. Interview with Ayido Gnanwisi of Sodohome (March 23, 1986).

5. Ibid. (April 25, 1986).

6. As Buck-Morss notes (1989, p. 24) following Walter Benjamin, "[T]he *fetish* is the keyword of the commodity as mythic phantasmagoria, the arrested form of history, it corresponds to the reified form of new nature, condemned to the modern Hell of the new as the always-the-same." Adorno explains in turn (1961, p. 42) that Karl Marx set out key differences between the static and the dynamic within his critique of fetishism, after situating the origin of fetishism in the realm of values we attach to commodities. Hayden White's perspectives on class and fetish also are of interest:

> But even more basic in the European consciousness of this time was the tendency to fetishize the European type of humanity as the sole possible form that humanity in general could take. This race fetishism was soon transformed, however, into another and more virulent form: the fetishism of class, which has provided the bases of most of the social conflicts of Europe since the French Revolution. [1978, pp. 194–95]

7. Paradoxically, fetishes of this type were particularly associated with early eighteenth century Ouidah (cf. William Bosman 1967), then the sea port of the Danhomè kingdom, the place in which "Bokonon religion" also is practiced.

8. Other individuals who have discussed ideas of fetish and fetishism include, among others, Gilles Deleuze 1972, Maurice Merleau-Ponty 1969, Susan Stewart 1984, pp. 163–64, William Pietz 1985, James Clifford 1988. In key respects fetishism also fits in closely with Edward Said's ideas of *monocentrism* (in Harari 1979, p. 188):

> Monocentrism is practiced when we mistake one idea as the only idea, instead of recognizing that an idea in history is always one among many. Monocentrism denies plurality, it totalizes structure . . . it decrees the centricity of Western culture instead of its eccentricity.

9. Freud's discussion of African "fetishes" which is similar in fundamental ways to that of both Immanuel Kant and G. Hegel is derisive as well. He writes (1961, p. 74) that, "It is remarkable how differently primitive man behaves. If he is met with a misfortune, he does not throw the blame on himself but on his fetish, which has obviously not done its duty, and he gives it a thrashing instead of punishing himself."

10. One scholar I know, seeking to move outside the fetishistic teleological canon, taught the introductory survey in reverse—much to the disgruntlement of both students and teaching assistants. The premise of this change, I would argue, also is problematic for reversal at base remains a form of reification and reaffirmation of the original model. What needs to be done instead is to step completely outside this model, a task made all the more difficult because as a discipline we are so accustomed to this particular way of perceiving and proceeding.

11. The fetishizing of the past is also evidenced in African art in the once ubiquitous catalog labels demarcating "ancestor figures" or the frequent peppering of the literature with the term "traditional," both descriptions, like "custom," having no real relevance except as labels for art works about which we have no known history. Both have served to convey an image of African art as in some way primeval.

12. The late African art scholar, Arnold Rubin, once taught a Los Angeles based fieldwork course for graduate students in art history. My own experience in teaching a graduate seminar at Columbia University called "New York Art Worlds: Studying Art Ethnographically" also has convinced me of the enormous potential for such a course in contemporary art studies generally.

13. See, however, Svetlana Alpers 1977.

14. In Africa this is compounded by the fact that then, as now, usually no one bothered to ask the artist's name.

15. In Webster's *New World Dictionary* (1966) magic is identified similarly as "the *pretended* art of producing effects or controlling events by charms, spells, and rituals supposed to govern certain natural or supernatural forces; sorcery; witchcraft" (emphasis mine). The circus magician similarly frames his performance with smoke, spells (hocus pocus), and a range of ritualistic props.

16. Interestingly, contemporary "witches" in the West and other religious outsiders wishing to emphasize their own positions as Others, often go out of their way to identify themselves with the use of magic.

17. In Judaism, magic also is identified with insiders who act dangerously. I thank Richard Brilliant for this insight.

18. R. Collingwood adds:

> . . . positivistic philosophy which ignored man's emotional nature and reduced everything in human experience in terms of intellect . . . further ignored every kind of intellectual activity except those which, according to the same philosophy, went to the making of natural science. This prejudice led them to compare the magical practices of the "savage" (civilized men, they . . . assumed, had none, except for certain anomalous things which these anthropologists called survivals) with the practices of civilized man when he uses his scientific knowledge in order to control nature. [1977, p. 107]

19. The barbarian, in essence, thus was defined as anyone who was *not* Greek. Other in this sense must be seen to include not only those who are "not us" but also those who are "not like us." The following point by Lucy Mair is interesting in light of the above:

> Apuleius, the author of *The Golden Ass*, when he was put on trial for practicing magic, remarked that the Magi were priests in their own country, and this brings home the point that an activity which in one context has all the sanction of authority may be treated as a crime if it is practiced without this authority. [1969, p. 25]

20. Hegel's negative presuppositions about Africa (1956, pp. 93 and 99) are still widely held today. As he has written in *The Philosophy of History:* "The peculiarity of the African character [is its lack of] . . . the principle which naturally accompanies all *our* ideas—the category of Universality" (1956, p. 93). Hegel then goes on to discuss other assumed lacks. Africa, he writes,

> is no historical part of the World, it has no movement or development to exhibit. . . . What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which has to be presented here as the threshold of the World's History. [1956, p. 99]

21. The lack/desire of psychoanalytic discourse (especially Lacanian) is based on the notion of possibility that lack "produces" a sense of longing or desire, thus the simultaneous attraction/repulsion (see also Said 1979). And, it is Africa's perceived inferiority that can be seen to parallel this lack.

22. To suggest that Africa with its complex variety of kingdoms, states, cities, rural farming communities, and hunting cultures as a single economic, technical, political or religious identity which is comparable to those of the distant Pacific islands or native America is illogical as well.

23. By way of example, one can cite an issue of importance to both Africanists and Europeanists. It is already so deeply embroiled in a "hornet's nest" of feelings and scholarly discord, that rational academic interchange is virtually impossible. I am speaking, of course, of Martin Bernal's query into the

philosophical links between Egypt and Europe in his controversial book *Black Athena*. I will not enter into the thick of the fray by discussing the relative merits or demerits of the work, but suffice it to say that I have heard amply and angrily from both sides. And even if I did have the expertise in both Egyptian and Classics to be able to give an informed opinion, my observations would be far more important at this point in time for their assumed political worth than for their scholarly merit. My past field work experience with issues of art, belief, and societal change suggests that because of the vitriolic tenor of the associated debates, *Black Athena* clearly must deal with a subject of vital scholarly importance. This assumption is based not only on the heat and discomfort it has generated, but also and most importantly on the fact that the associated discourse is grounded in vital questions of taxonomic definition and positioning. Although not generally framed in this way, one of the essential undercurrents in the above dispute is that of relative Egyptian and Greek otherness and sameness and the degree to which "magic" (here "self" and "other" philosophical doctrine) is being identified with each.

24. This situation is made all the more paradoxical in light of the fact that both custom and suicide derive from the same Latin root—*suis*.

25. The erroneous assumption is that in Africa the weight of custom or tradition is so great that no internal change is possible.

26. For a discussion of the complex world in which art revolves, see Howard Becker 1987.

27. Early African art scholars followed nineteenth-century botanists' endeavors to label and classify unknown flora (Blier 1988–89).

28. In Great Britain, for example, one could classify in a similar way the Scots, Irish, English, and Welsh; in eastern Europe, Serbs, Croatians, and other groups could be included. In the Middle East comparisons are equally apt.

29. Among others, these include the "Poro" groups of Liberia and the Ivory Coast, the Cross River area of Nigeria, the grasslands region of Cameroons, and the Masai and neighboring cattle-herding cultures of Kenya.

30. See also Zerner 1982. Although recent Western art scholars have turned their attention to issues (and subjects) of "high" and "low" (the recent Museum of Modern Art exhibit exemplifying this trend), generally in this discourse one of the two is privileged as either source or receptacle of the other. Related discourse and criticism as Richard Brilliant has pointed out, however, goes back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Even when breaking with custom in the West, in other words, customary hierarchic and developmental values, perceptions and thinking are retained.

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