

Under Imperial Eyes, Black Bodies, Buttocks, and Breasts

British Colonial Photography and Asante “Fetish Girls”

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“... fetishism itself, which is the jungle of jungles, an aggregation of incoherent beliefs” (Milligan 1904:137)

The camera never lies.” Once viewed as empirical and evidential inscriptions, nineteenth century colonial photographs, despite their diverse manifestations, are no longer seen as a simple, candid, colonial aesthetic reflection of a captured “authentic” and “exotic” Africa. In actual fact, as “material histories” produced for both private and public consumption, colonial photographs can be regarded as highly constructed documents that performed distinct discursive functions in the shaping of popular Victorian imagination and, in particular, the production, re-production, and maintenance of European colonial forms of knowledge. Colonial photographs are worth unpacking for the information they reveal about the people who took and used such photographs as much as for the subjects themselves—notably, the underlying politics behind the production of images, especially the triadic relationship between photographer, subject/object, and viewer, which suggests the motivational forces behind the production of such images, simultaneously assuming its influence on content and form. I have come to view colonial photographs—circulated extensively and trafficked indiscriminately as a “tool of the empire” and a technology of both representation and power—as material signatures that represent the flow of movement of people, objects, images and ideas, within the shifting ethnoscaples, ideoscaples, and mediascaples (Appadurai 1990) of capitalist modernity and colonialism, underscoring the ambiguities, contradictions, and, to a large extent, incoherence inherent in the “fetish” and “fetishism” discourse. As such, the terms “fetish” and “fetishism” must be located within the broader context of a Euro-imperialist pre-

occupation with ontological and epistemological distinctions between Africa and the Occident, as well as an Occidental discourse of West African religious traditions, materiality, and the material world. Using British colonial photographs of Asante women, I have sought to excavate a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the concepts of “fetish” and “fetishism.” Inspired by postcolonial theory’s engagement with colonial discourse and representation (Bhabha 1983; Mohanty 1988; Said 1978, 1993; Spivak 1988) psychoanalysis (Fanon 1963), critical theory’s notion of “discourse,” notably the production of power and knowledge (Foucault 1972, Mudimbe 1988) in the “contact zone” as a space where people once geographically and historically alienated come into contact with each other (Pratt 1992), and insights from social constructionism (Meskell 2002), I argue it is not at all fanciful to suggest that British colonial photographs of “fetish girls” as part of a “fetish” and “fetishism” discourse, as opposed to a material fact, was a late manifestation of a sustained effort that had continued for nearly four centuries. As such, it was one that, in keeping with much colonial propaganda, needed to define and maintain hegemonic constructions of difference between those in the colony and the metropole, in order to justify colonialism and capitalist expansion. Colonial domination did not rely solely on violence, dehumanization, exploitation, and disempowerment of the “inferior races”; rather, it was motivated and supported by specific ideological formations—the intimate marriage of power and knowledge in colonial discourse and representational forms of colonized peoples and places were de rigueur. Accordingly, I call into question the tautological, yet disturbingly pervasive discourse that describes “fetish” and “fetishism” as valuable analytical categories that equate the “primitive mind” with particular objects (Bosman 1967, Hegel 1975, Nassau 1904, Tylor 1871). Engaging British colo-



1 "Fetish girl, Gold Coast 1884."
Grant 1884, no. 308.

nial photographs and their making as my artifact of historical inquiry, I endeavor to do away with the "fetish" discourse as that which connotes the object world alone, in order to enter and render intelligible immaterial expressions of material forms and more abstract ways of comprehending the process of "fetishism" in nineteenth century Asante.

The specific focus of this essay is a collection of photographs entitled "Fetish and Gold Coast" held in the British National Archives (Grant 1884). Minimal information concerning the photograph collection exists. A large part of the collection, taken by Frederick Grant, is devoted to images of Asante women, described as "fetish girls." (Other photographs in the collection depict various aspects of Asante daily social life described as an Asante "fetish house," "fetish tree," and "fetish objects.") But what of their social biography and other related information? The only information we have of the photographer, Grant, is that he lived in James Town, Gold Coast Colony (present-day Ghana) and at 31 Arundel Street, London. Registered at the Stationer's Company on June 28, 1884, the photographs form part of a bundle of documents applying for copyright.

Questions arise concerning the photographer's original intentions: Were these photographs originally made for public consumption, as part of an increasingly expanding repertoire of European knowledge about Africa, or did the photographer decide to capitalize on images taken for private consumption once he returned to England? If public, do they bespeak the need by Europeans to record, document, and describe, aspiring to a "scientific" or "anthropological" status accorded to other emerging natu-

ral sciences during the nineteenth century, such as cartography, geography, and botany? Or, were they for popular consumption by a European audience, an aesthetic response to the demand for images from distant tropical locations? Or, can they be regarded as self-legitimated evidence for the potential for conquest? Or, are they symptomatic of a private interest, seen as an "objective" form of personal testimony of the people and places in the African colonies, as a visual chronicle, emblematic of an enthusiastic pastime in visual expression? It is not too trivial to point out here that in my attempt to answer such questions, it is imperative to consider the perspective from which looking occurs (hooks 1992, Geary 2008). It is important to "counter the seduction of images that threaten[s] to dehumanize and colonize" (hooks, 1992:6). I propose to challenge rather than produce and re-produce the very forms of (mis)representation selected for critique (Fig. 1).

From the second part of the fifteenth century until the colonial era, the "fetish" as an object of special interest was a commonplace feature in the Western popular literary and aesthetic imaginary. From this perspective, the British engaged in a discourse that describes Akan religious material culture, notably certain Akan objects, as "fetishes." For the Akan, the so-called fetish possessed the potential to transcend its materiality, describing the innate relationship between persons and things, spirit and matter, and the animate and inanimate embedded in apotropaic practice. But Akan "fetish" ideology should not be regarded as an exception, for sustained contemplation of these colonial photographs resonates with the suggestion that the British clearly had a "fetish" ideology of their own. This essay, then,



2 "Three Fetish girls in group with gold ornaments, Gold Coast 1884."
Grant 1884, no. 307.

poses a challenge to colonial knowledge production, advocating that oversimplified notions of the "fetish" and "fetishism" shroud a complexity that is emblematic of the relationships between the colonizers and colonized. Colonialism exerts control over people and places. I assert that these colonial photographs that depict Asante women as "fetishes" reveals a process of "fetishism" amongst British colonizers themselves. Thinking through fetishism as a strategy speaks to notions of romantic exoticism and constructions of identity and difference, disclosing the colonial imaginings of British males in Asante; on the one hand, it points to male fantasies, desire, and arousal, but on the other, to concerns, anxieties, and fear, especially those surrounding belief, knowledge, sexuality, and gender in the colonial encounter. To be sure, colonial contexts are founded upon contradictions, and indeed there was a gendered experience of colonialism, albeit not always directly and immediately evident in official colonial transcripts. Colonial photographs signal the "microphysics of power and discourse" (Hall 2000) in a condensed visual form. But I am particularly interested in departing from essentialist claims of the colonizer and the colonized subject. In other words, aside from the authoritarian grand narratives surrounding a number of permutations associated with the production of stereotypes regarding an image-Africa, such photographs unmistakably elucidate the position of subaltern women in relation to empire. The presence of Asante women in British colonial photography, articulated as "fetish girls" (Grant 1884) are intimately entangled within a "fetish" and "fetishism" discourse that negotiates race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. Moreover, this process of fetishization of Asante women, simultaneously colonial and patriarchal, exoticized, eroticized, and in some ways almost pornographic, is reflective of the personal sexual desires of British male colonial officials in nineteenth century colonial Kumase, Ghana (Fig. 2).

I. THE FETISH

THE FETISH IN WEST AFRICA

In 1883, Ellis entitled his book on West African societies and culture *The Land of the Fetish*. A highly promiscuous, malleable and capacious artifact of infinite durability, extensive longevity, and geographic scope, no such turn of phrase recurs more often than the "fetish" in European writings of West Africa. A discursive trope in response to an unprecedented situation (Pietz 1985), the so-called fetish epitomizes its own peculiar historiography and particular cultural connotations. Resolutely situated within both antiquated (and contemporary) European discourse of Africa, the allure of the "fetish" and "fetishism" captivated northern Europeans ad nauseam, near to the point of obsession. Considered emblematic of a pre-theological phase of evolutionary development, the so-called fetish was a tangible material object that traversed the boundaries of the private and public realms, to be found in matters religious and social, as well as those of the state and civil society. The historical genealogy of the "fetish" is a provocative example of European intellectual discursive tensions that influence Conradesque narratives by early northern European explorers, travelers, missionaries, colonial administrators, and emissaries of West Africa, its object world and religious traditions. Theorizing the alleged fetish and fetishism, I have come

to realize, is socioculturally, economically, politically and historically contingent; it highlights, primarily, the intellectual role of the object world from the perspectives of both West Africans and northern Europeans. It offers too a lens into the serviceability of rhetoric, making explicit the idea that the “fetish,” central to northern European imaginings of West Africa and West Africans. The “fetish” circulates and is embedded in discourses of power and subjugation.

The “fetish” can be traced back to the second half of the fifteenth century as part of a northern European discourse situated at the nexus of the cross-cultural European-African mercantile space, notably along the West African coast. Early visitors to the “Dark Continent” regarded Africans as “savages” “outside of history,” and the so-called fetish was seen as belonging to the realms of “magic,” “supernatural,” or “unseen,” articulated in terms of an aspect of religion fashioned by the hands of man (Awolalu and Dopamu 1979, McLeod 1981). The notion of the fetish was a useful tool for northern Europeans to bolster distinctions between “Us” from “Them” predicated upon skin color, religion, and culture, invoked in varying measures in line with nationalist imperialist strategies in the colonies. Clearly, what happened at the metropole had implications for the periphery. Discursive conceptions of the “fetish” and “fetishization” were subsumed under “culture,” which was in turn employed “to do specific political work; not only to mark difference, but to rationalize the hierarchies of privilege and profit, to consolidate the labor regimes of expanding colonialism, [and] to provide the psychological scaffolding for the exploitative structures of colonial rule” (Stoler 1995:27). Nevertheless, rather than discard the term “fetish” as a relic of imperialism and colonialist anthropology, the so-called fetish epitomizes its own specific history, as well as the cultural implications that go along with it (Pietz 1985, 1987, 1988). For the “fetish” is a “novel word that appeared as response to an unprecedented type of situation” providing a picture of the relationship between “cultures so radically different as to be mutually incomprehensible in the triangulation between Christian feudal, West African lineage and merchant capitalist social systems” (Pietz 1985:6).

The “fetish” and its associated nomenclature evolved in the mercantile cross-cultural space between two social orders so different as to be mutually incomprehensible. The Portuguese noun *fetição*, referring to amulets and the relics of saints, was applied to West African objects or practices, thought to pertain to “magical practice” or “witchcraft.” This term derived from the Latin *factitius* meaning “magically artful, manufactured, artificial,” and later entered the English and French vocabularies as “fetish” or “fetiche.” The phrases “to make fetiche” or “to take the fetiche” emerged, and the word “fetiche” itself was sometimes used as a verb. *Fetição* also provided the basis for the pidgin term *fetisso*, meaning “personification of material objects” and “fixed belief in an object’s supernatural power arising in the chance or arbitrary conjunctions” (Pietz 1988), used by middlemen involved trade who settled in West Africa, as well as the terms *fetiseros* or *fetisheers*, meaning “African priest.”

The “fetish” was characterized by its irreducible materiality; the fetish’s status is said to be that of the material embodiment of psychic investment or religious activity. A fabricated material

object worth about the body, the fetish embodied several heterogeneous components within a particular single entity; these elements are not only material but also aspirational. Worshipped indiscriminately, the “fetish’s” existence did not lie in its iconic relationship to some immaterial entity. On the contrary, it was valued according to judgments based upon the conscious and unconscious. The “fetish” was used to produce particular tangible effects, such as protection and healing. The value of the so-called fetish as discrete from the notion of personhood was socially constructed due to its ability to exert considerable power over the desires, actions, well-being, and identity of individuals. Thus, the European category of “fetish” included any object, act, or belief deemed important by West Africans. Regarded as an unprecedented phenomenon, however, the “fetish” discourse was not ascribed negative connotations.

It was not until the seventeenth century that the concept of “fetish” as a problem emerged (Pietz 1985). This was largely due to three fundamental external, but closely related, developments in Europe at the time—Christian theology and jurisprudence, merchant capitalism, and Enlightenment rational scientific thought. Voyage accounts and travelogues written by early northern European merchants, travelers, and missionaries visiting the Guinea coast describe the “fetish” as representative of a supposed irrationality amongst West Africans. Ideas surrounding the “fetish” put forth by the Portuguese, inherited and reproduced by Dutch Protestants, brought with them the Reformation’s intense dislike of and concern about Catholicism’s idolatrous practices. But unlike idolatry in medieval Europe, which was viewed as based upon faith and law, the “fetish” was perceived as based upon a natural and lawless process, founded upon an irrational belief—religious deviancy. Integrated into the church’s theory of idolatry, the fetish was associated with that which was “factitious” and “fraudulent.” To the Dutch, the idolatry of the Portuguese and the “fetishism” of West Africans were one and the same. Deemed as the West African equivalent of Catholic rosaries, small crosses, and other sacramental objects that mediate the relationship between believers and other nonhuman beings, the “fetish” was considered to rest on a haphazard amalgamation of different elements, concepts of personified things, chance conjecture, and Christian notions of “witchcraft.” According to such logic, the expression “fetish” was then used to designate any object, act, or belief deemed important by West Africans. Or for that matter, “any Thing they fancy” (Smith 1744:26–27). The “primitive mind” was considered able to comprehend only tangible objects rather than abstract concepts (Meskell 2004). Assigned to the inanimate and animate, the “fetish” was imagined representative of a moment prior to history; West Africans “worship the first thing that comes their way” (Hegel 1956:94). The fetish had become decidedly negative.

West African trade with the East India Company and West African polities in the late seventeenth century brought to light the question of value, which emerged due to the fact that it was necessary to develop a shared and recognized market value for commodities to be exchanged (Pietz 1985; Mulvey 1996). The paradigmatic image of the “fetish” tended to be that of a material object of desire.¹ But in European colonial “discourse about fetishes, this impression of the primitive’s propensity to personify



3 "Fetish girl, Gold Coast 1884."
Grant 1884, no. 309.

technological objects—or to regard them as vehicles of a supernatural causality—becomes conjoined to the mercantile perception that the non-European gives false values to material objects" (Pietz 1987). Evoking contempt for peoples who valued that which was purportedly trifling, Europeans considered themselves to trade worthless "trifles," "trash," and "baubles" for gold with West Africans. Conversely, West Africans thought the overestimation of gold by Europeans a bizarre error on their part.

FETISH, WOMEN, AND THE ASANTE

High regard for the "fetish" was often remarked upon by travelers, explorers, traders, missionaries,² emissaries of imperialism and colonialism,³ and early anthropologists to metropolitan Asante (Bowdich 1819, Dupuis 1824, Freeman 1843, Hutchinson 1858, Hutton 1821, Huydecoper 1817). Illustrating the strong ties between materiality and religion in Asante, the "fetish" was hung at doorposts, situated and buried in farms and royal households for protection and well-being, as well as suspended or attached to clothing and footwear and worn on the body.

Akan women entered the "fetish" discourse as Europeans noticed religious and aesthetic objects worn by women. Concerned with the penetration of Africa, the British, preoccupied with commercial imperial expansion, perceived economic opportunities and capitalist commodities and remarked upon Akan gold ornamentations cast into elaborate and varied animal, vegetable, and mythical forms, since gold was a valuable source of trade. Akan women "have little Pieces of Gold, exquisitely made, in divers Figures, which for Ornament the Blacks wear tied to their Hair, and about their Necks, Wrists, and small of the Leg; and these they call Fatisches" (Astley 1746:411) (Fig. 2). Such sensibilities were endlessly reproduced and took firm hold later in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: "I also had to pay my compliments to the King's women. They were standing apart from the men. There were at least two hundred of them, all handsome and decked with large pieces of fetish gold" (Huydecoper 1817:15). Others note a woman "folding her haire with many golden Fetissos, and Crosses, putting about her neckle a ring of gold" (Marees 1905:336; see also Pietz 1987), and also note the elaborate hairstyles of Akan women "between which they wear Gold Fetiche's" (Bosman 1967:119). Hence, a commodified object could simultaneously personify religious, commercial, aesthetic, and sexual values.

Aesthetic explanations for the so-called fetish worship viewed such a practice as the ultimate degeneration of the beautiful since it was assumed to lack all sense of the sublime (Kant 1960, Marx 1992). Little wonder, then, that in their simplified view, Northern Europeans conflated the sacred with other dimensions of value such as the aesthetic, erotic, economic, medical, sociopolitical, and technological. But it is well worth digressing for a moment on the religious and the aesthetic: the point has been made that Europeans failed to distinguish between the religious and the aesthetic (Pietz 1988), and indeed such classifications may be relevant according to certain European perspectives. However, it is worth stating that the notion that the religious is autonomous and separate from the aesthetic is somewhat Eurocentric in reference, and not necessarily applicable in the non-Western, and in this case, Asante context—a religious

object may be revered for its source of power as well as for other reasons such as its “beauty.” For “it is only from a very parochial (blinker) Western post-Enlightenment point of view that the separation between the beautiful and the holy, between religious experience and aesthetic experience, arises” (Gell 1998:97). This is not to say that in many societies objects cannot simultaneously possess multiple values, but materiality “provided the image and conception of fetishes on which Enlightenment intellectuals based their elaboration of the notion into a general theory of religion” (Pietz 1988:5). What is more, it was deemed irrational to personify material objects, though this was proclaimed to be characteristic of West African intellectual capabilities.

But more than that, it is important to observe that the conjoining of the “fetish” discourse with women was also reflective of the personal sexual desires of European men on the coast. The “fetish” was viewed as a temptation to superstition and promiscuity, since it also described an act that women performed. On the West African coast, the women “fetish with a coarse Paint of Earth on their Faces, Shoulders and Breasts, each the Colour they like best” (Atkins 1737:88). The implication of “fetish” as verb implies that “to fetish” was associated with “magic”; the marking of the body through ornamentation or adding material objects fetishizes it, creating a magical seductive sexuality (Baudrillard 1993). In this way, the conception of Asante women as purveyors of “magic,” “superstition,” and “witchcraft” is reminiscent of a similar discourse surrounding nineteenth century working-class women ubiquitous in the Victorian imagination. Certainly the preoccupation with the indiscriminate use of the term “fetish” had initially been a sign of economic desire, but it is also clearly evident that it was to later betray the entangled personal sexual desires of British colonial males, since viewed as a temptation towards superstition and promiscuity.

THE AKAN AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL FETISHISM

While scholars continued to refer to the belief that godly powers inhered in inanimate objects, there was a distinct shift in ideas from the late nineteenth to early twentieth century and earlier definitions of the “fetish” came in for criticism. Shifting from the notion that fetishism constituted the first of three stages in religious ideas—fetishism, polytheism, and monotheism—“fetishism” was replaced by “animism” in an attempt to account for the qualities ascribed to inanimate materiality in particular societies, simultaneously distinguishing “fetishism” from “idolatry” as a view of spiritual beings as embodied in, attached to, or conveying influence through inanimate “fetish” objects (Tylor 1871). While debate over the dimensions of the so-called fetish continued (Frazer 1922, Haddon 1921, Kingsley 2009, Rattray 1959), it would be amiss to not point out that although a good number of Victorian intellectuals posited questions regarding religion in linear evolutionist terms, many considered “primitive” religion as no more irrational than other religious forms. With the later demise of evolutionism, there was even less justification for the “fetish” concept; it is “a particularly dyslogistic and question-begging term, [that] had better be suppressed altogether so far as it was used as a category of general application” (Rattray 1923:392). Hence, it is not an overstatement to claim that the “fetish worship” rhetoric used by British visitors to Kumase

pertains not to the Asante reality but to the British Enlightenment narrative of Akan religious consciousness.

The Akan amalgamate both immaterial and material constellations in understandings of religion. Akan theology recognizes the intimate relationship between the “seen” and “unseen”: human and nonhuman entities, animals, plants, and spirits. There is a coherent hierarchy in the spiritual world. For the Akan, *’Nyame* or *Onyame* (Supreme Being) is the ultimate creator, considered the creator of all things and the source of all power—both good and evil, life and death—that ultimately affects all lives; he is before and above all things. Hence the Akan proverb, *Asase tere, na ’Nyame ne panin*, which translates as “The earth is wide but *’Nyame* is Chief.” *’Nyame* has no images or physical representations. There is a coherent hierarchy in the spiritual world. Below *’Nyame*, the Akan assign intermediaries and intercessors, known as the children of *’Nyame* and *’Nyame mma*, and are venerated as *abosom*, who, though without physical bodies, are said to have personalities which can be likened to those of humans. Ancestors also live in the spiritual world and receive visible veneration, in the belief that the spirits of departed relatives, as intermediaries, can affect the lives of those on earth. According to Akan cosmology (Opoku 1978), power from the spirit world is relied upon, as much as defensive or protective devices, for offensive purposes, as well as used to bring good fortune, since these powers are thought to originate from formidable forces, such as offended ancestors and other negative sentiments.

The Akan believe that objects are animated by the spirit world (Antubam 1963, Busia 1954, Gyekye 1987). The spirit world cannot be invoked lest it is represented in its material form. Heterogeneous physical and spiritual sources coalesce to produce a material form that has a single power. However, according to Akan belief, *nsuman* differ from other objects equally endowed, such as shrines of the gods or bones of dead ancestors, which are usually worshipped, prayed for, and adulated, and not termed *nsuman*. In addition, there are instances where *nsuman* can be promoted to the more orthodox pantheon of the higher gods, the *obosomdan*. According to the Akan, an *nsuman’s* power derives from the *sumsum* (spirit) found in plants or trees, directly or indirectly, from *mmoatia* (fairies/dwarfs), *sabonsam* (forest monsters), *abayifo* (witches), *saman bofuo* (ghosts of hunters), or from unfavorable contact with the dead. Thus regarded, the *nsuman* does not represent a spirit, but rather is the habitation of one or more spirits of inferior status. The *nsuman* is usually employed for personal ends, but not necessarily to cause harm, since its use is often for protective purposes as much as offensive. *Sumsum* can be licit as well as illicit spirits. Evil *sumsum* are evoked to cause misfortune through sickness, accidents, death, and so forth. The *sumsum* that animates *nsuman* is delicate and sensitive in nature and may at any moment depart from an object. Dynamic in nature and in response to the demands of particular circumstances, new spirits and beliefs appear whilst others cease to exist. Whilst a belief in the existence of spirits is regarded as characteristic of animism (Tylor 1871, Awolalu and Dopamu 1979), it can also be argued that the monotheistic religions of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam also acknowledge the spiritual world and unseen beings. That said, the power of the *nsuman* is not reducible solely to its material form, since it



4 "Four Coomassie women, two of them beating ju-ju in a mortar, 1884." Grant 1884, no. 279.

reflects the ideas and beliefs of its practitioners, acting as a mediator, translating the meanings and ideas surrounding belief, possessing both material and social effects.

The "fetish" discourse explores subject-object relations; it is an expression of the ontological slippage between people and "things" in apotropaic practice, and the relationship between spirit and matter. The importance of the physicality or materiality of an object derives from its ability to act as a connection between the psychological and physical worlds as well as the conscious and unconscious. "Fetishism" does not distinguish between persons and things. In line with this logic, there is no oppositional binary between persons and things, and materiality needs to be recognized as a crucial element in this social process. The physical material world ascribes "power" and "value" to the "fetish" embodied within the "religious" and "spiritual." A repository of power, the so-called fetish is an embodiment of the higher beings that inhabit the spirit world, thus their value is beyond their materiality; linking individuals with the spiritual realm, value derives from the relative position they occupy within society. In Asante, the "fetish" is tied up with notions of religious belief, the spiritual world, power and value.

II. COLONIAL PHOTOGRAPHY, THE FETISH, AND FETISHISM

COLONIAL PHOTOGRAPHY

Colonial photography emerged from a backdrop that was part of the "Scramble for Africa"—a vast continent associated with a series of tropes such as the "Land of Darkness" and the "White Man's Burden." Up until the nineteenth century, Europe's knowledge of West Africa had been a compilation of travel narratives by explorers, missionaries, and scientists, and oftentimes the "Africa" they constructed was "a mythical situation more suitable for legend than history" (Ajayi 1968:189), as much a discourse as a geographical location. The advent of photography, as the servant of imperial progress, united colonialism with the project of modernity. And modernity capitalized upon sight, linking visibility, knowledge, and power with photography and empire (Celik 2004, Landau and Kaspin 2002), so that by the late nineteenth century Occidental views of West Africa were more nuanced (Fig. 3).

Considered a metaphor for an "objective truth," colonial photography was a celebration of the colonial project, serving to camouflage and maintain systems of power and domination inherent in colonial ideology and the colonial effort to categorize, define, and subordinate. Colonial photographs signify a visually documented verification of an alleged innate cultural, economic, political, and intellectual superiority, the *raison d'être* of European imperial ideology. For it follows that the "Other" needs to be objectified in order to construct the "Self." Clearly, the colonial enterprise was entrenched in a specific global capitalist economic system (Memmi 1965), but the truth of the matter is that there has been no single coherent imperial enterprise. The various forms of colonialisms were polyvalent in expression, affected by particular specific local conditions and exigencies. Thus understood, European colonial ideology was not a monolithic thought process in its application, nor homogenous in its objectives; rather, it varied according to the oppressor and dominated in question, demonstrating an anxiety on the part of Euro-

pean colonials as to how to categorize the natives. While an overarching colonial ideology informs the epistemologies underpinning colonial photography, it is, at the same time, heterogeneous in application—there are contradictions and complexities embedded in the production, consumption and maintenance of colonial forms of knowledge, and colonial photography is distinctly historically and geographically specific.

British colonial photography renders intelligible the ways in which Britons imagined and envisioned notions of empire and imperial social order. “The British Empire was not only a geopolitical entity: it was also a culturally created and imaginatively constructed artifact” (Canadine 2001). To be sure, Enlightenment notions of superiority and inferiority dominated imperial ways of thinking, but it is important to note that understandings constructed along the lines of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality were ambivalent; discursive formations of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality were complex and unstable, frequently fragmented and, more often than not, contradictory. The West Africans whom European colonial officials, travelers, and collectors selected to pose and frame were a deliberate, manipulated and, time and again, fabricated presentation of “native life” in the colonial territories, and such representations were compiled, categorized, disseminated, and retrieved as part of an ever-increasing volume of data in circulation, considered to be of benefit to science, trade, and industry back at the metropole. As follows, colonial photographs were also a form of surveillance, providing an authentication of that which is not always easily verified. For instance, in 1869 the Colonial Office in London sent a circular to all colonial governors requesting that photographs be made of all the races of the British Empire in order to further scientific knowledge (Edwards 2001). Colonial photographs of Asante were an important facet of a bureaucratic, and essentially propagandistic, British state apparatus situated within a long tradition of confrontation between Africans and Europeans. This is seen in the series of Anglo-Asante wars unrivalled elsewhere on the Gold Coast, starting in 1824 and culminating in 1901, when the British defeated the Asante and rendered it a British Protectorate and Colony of the Gold Coast. Notwithstanding their extraordinary political and military systems, which had allowed them to resist British invasion, the Asante were also renowned for their sophisticated philosophical and religious systems. Thus, significantly, British colonial photography in Asante represents the intersection of discourses of knowledge and power of two famed empires—British and Asante.

During the late nineteenth century, the British were attentive to the precariousness of their political and economic situation in the Gold Coast. Aside from Asante resistance to British invasion, they failed to penetrate and control the interior, despite the assistance of Christian proselytization and the Berlin West Africa Conference (1884–85), which concerned commercial access to African resources by European powers; British economic expansionism was under threat. Defining centers, peripheries, citizens, and subjects through the photographic lens, British colonial photography in Asante served British colonial ideology to an audience at home. Highly selective in nature, documentation of the Asante Empire, including images dating back to the nineteenth century, illustrate the allure of Asante in terms of culture,

religion, philosophy and, to a large degree, power for the British. Certainly power in Asante was entrenched in Asante cosmology, and access to this power translated into political power and authority (Akyeampong and Obeng 1995). It is entirely feasible that the British believed that, once deciphered, a comprehensive understanding of Asante cosmology would provide the solutions for colonial conquest, securing control and cultivation of Asante resources, and ensuring profits for the British Empire, which in turn would impart progress and civilization. Then again, it is also reasonable to propose that British attentiveness to Asante cosmology represented a legitimate sense of bewilderment, fascination, and genuine interest. Nevertheless, the concepts of “fetish” and “fetishization” were always a European perspective on African religion; thus it is of use to consider such notions as a European concept. In effect, the British domesticated “fetishism.”

THE FETISHIZATION OF RACE, ETHNICITY, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY IN COLONIAL PHOTOGRAPHY

Fetishism is a strategy that enables a subject to negotiate the difference between the Self and Other(s). A hermeneutic strategy for dealing with anxiety and contradiction in order to reach satisfaction, fetishism draws on ambivalence in order to achieve a coherent and even creative interpretation (McCallum 1999). Colonial discourse repeatedly illustrates a fetishization of the “Other” surrounding notions of race, ethnicity, and gender, as well as that of sexuality in non-Western societies (Bhabha 1986). Race, ethnicity, and gender were constructed as politicized identities, elements in the identification and categorization process, simultaneously legally enforced and institutionally reproduced and highly evocative of colonial power. Colonial photographs aspired to provide a form of “truth” that engravings, sketches, diagrams, and written accounts could not. And, unsurprisingly, post-Enlightenment obsessions with classifications and taxonomies ensured that photographic representations were presented as scientific empirical “data.” Early photographs of the black female body, also known as the “colonial nude,” were intended as “ethnographic” and “anthropometric” records, so much so that even in the absence of scholarly agendas, photographers observed the conventions of ethnographic photography (Geary 2008). As quasi-science, these were imperative to established colonial discourses of race, ethnicity, and gender juxtaposed around a series of discriminatory metaphorical binaries: black vs. white, darkness vs. light, naked vs. clothed, childlike vs. adult, instinct vs. intellect, unbridled sexuality vs. morality, and so forth (MacGaffey and Harris 1992). But it is worth moving beyond such dichotomies to consider the creation of colonial subjects and subjectivities, the processes of subjugation and the ways in which images informed, produced, and reproduced visual representations of the fetishization of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality.

As early as 1838, Esquinol defined sexual fetishism as a disorder indicative of excessive sexual passions employing both known and unknown objects. Binet (1887) attributed “fetishism” to unusual sexual fixations, which led to a general adoption of the term for certain types of sexual interests, establishing the conceptual framework for erotic fetishism. Under official and pseudo-scientific pretensions, colonial photography serves



5 "Wife of a Coomassie chief, her right hand holding banana tree, 1884." Grant 1884, no. 304.

sexual fetishism—a phantasmic fantasy in which the omnipotent, colonial, male gaze sees but is never seen. So, while the photographs served as tools for colonial aggrandizement, the select and bound photographic representations of "fetish girls" as titillating, exoticized, and eroticized caricatures implicitly or explicitly intimate prevalent male British colonial anxieties. They enunciate and alleviate the unconscious colonial male psyche that hinges upon precise colonial ideologies and concerns that encapsulate the subtle sexual dynamics oscillating between attraction and repulsion, arousal and disgust towards Asante women as one of the central fantasies of British colonials in nineteenth century Kumase. Hence, it is plausible to view "fetishism" in nineteenth century Asante as a form of reverse colonialism, one in which the British fear being colonized by their own colonized subjects in the conceptual transformation of their own sexuality (Logan 2009).

The European imagination possessed a long tradition of viewing Africa as the "porno-tropics" (McClintock 1995), projecting European sexual fears and desires on to Africa. Accredited with lascivious, bestial sexual appetites, Africans were absorbed into polygenetic and monogenetic arguments over the seemingly radical difference between the races. The anatomy of the African female was instrumental, for if African sexual parts could be shown as inherently different from those of Europeans, it would be a sign that Africans were indeed from a different, separate, and lower "race." Moreover, African sexuality was classed as pathological, constructed as primitive, uncontrolled, excessive, animalistic, and representative of the darkness of the African continent itself (Gilman 1985). In West Africa, misperceptions of women's status in polygamous marriages, as well as the sexual liaisons that existed, added "a powerful erotic dimension to the notion of the 'fetish' as somehow the essence and explanatory principle of African society" (Pietz 1988:111).⁴

As objects of scrutiny by Europeans, African women figure as the epitome of sexual aberration and excess in the nineteenth century. Suffice it to say, prior to arriving in Asante, British colonials possessed preconceived ideas of West African women based on the saturation of European narratives on the matter and their direct experiences elsewhere along the Gold Coast.⁵ Anxieties over sexual interactions in tropical climes litter numerous written accounts by colonial officials. On the one hand, tensions arose since sexual contact with the "native" was debasing according to colonial tradition. What is more, miscegenation was looked upon as a threat to racial purity, opening up questions about the clarity of cultural conventions that secured colonial male white supremacy through the convergence of distinctions involving race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientations, as well as national origins. Contradictorily, at the same time, the colonies were marketed by colonial elites as a place where colonizing men could indulge their sexual fantasies (Cooper and Stoler 1997). Oftentimes, cohabitation or concubinage out of wedlock with "native" women in the colonies during the late nineteenth century was regarded as a "necessary evil," thought to ward off venereal disease and homosexuality. Such a set of ideas dovetails with notions of bourgeois respectability and sexual deviancy, validated by the colonizing state's discourse of what was considered "normal" and "abnormal" (Stoler 1995). Thus, the discourse over sexual relations also under-

scores connecting interpretations of manliness and accompanying vulnerabilities that occupy the individual and collective colonial imagination. Clearly, such a discourse over sex was a metaphor for power and control over colonial bodies.

Indeed, the gendered experience of imperialism has been well documented (Akyeampong 1997, McClintock 1995, Stoler 1995) and representational modes concerning women are a prominent feature of colonial photography's contributions to the poetics of the exotic (Allina 1997, Celik 2004). Paradoxically, in many ways, colonial photography renders the unfamiliar familiar. Images of African women bequeath profundity to tropes of a gendered Africa, a female Africa. As analogy, Asante women come to encapsulate the body politic; invariably, the implication is that Asante women are to be conquered and possessed in the same way as the Asante Empire. Such representations are illuminating in that they conform to all the venerable paradigms of the times (that as with all "native women"), the underlying assumption is that Asante women were perpetually subject to patriarchal oppression and were tradition-bound.⁶ The reality was quite different, however: it is true that the "Western sexualization and pathologizing of the African female body sharply contrasts with traditional African ideologies of womanhood ... as the givers of life, as guardians of moral integrity, and as a cornerstone of family continuity and communal identity" (Thompson 2008:29), but to focus on such roles is to miss a critical point about women in Asante. Asante women were highly sophisticated political entities in a matriarchal society, unlike British women in Victorian England. An Asante woman was also an icon for the "royal and imperial" as a Queen Mother. Moreover, Asante women as resisters posited serious challenges to British colonial expansion, most notably with Yaa Asantewaa, the Queen Mother of Ejisu (the Asante Confederacy), who led the rebellion known as the War of the Golden Stool (1900) against British invasion. In many ways these colonial photographs of "fetish girls" reflect Akan matriarchal ideas of gender.

As objects of fascination, women's bodies offered a source of erotic pleasure through the act of looking by absent and invisible white colonial males. Social or cultural contextualization is only partially applied to the pictorial framing of Asante women. Visual fetishism embellishes the most visible aspects of difference, an act central to mastery and power over the racialized "Other" simultaneously tied up with notions of "negrophilia." As such, this gives emphasis to the relationship between pornography and race, the conflation between aesthetic judgements and erotica into "aestherotics," whereby, in the course of projections, the photographer becomes pimp (Alloula 1986). "Fetish girls" signal the intersections of both political statement and fantasy; they are a reflection of British colonial male's voyeurism, rather than how Asante women saw themselves.

These Asante women knew they were being photographed. The theme, composition, and technical execution of this collection of "fetish girls" attest to the photographic skills and ideologies of the image-maker. "The seeming snapshot quality of the picture, the freezing of a special moment ... is deceiving, however, because the vantage point for the tripod camera was no doubt carefully chosen" (Geary 1990:150). The collection's oeuvre is of multiple similar, if not almost identical, shot

sequences. The shots are staged, that much is clear. The Asante landscape is confined to the background; there is little evidence of social life in Asante. In other words, it is right and proper that Asante succumb to British imperial expansion. Attempts to portray Asante women as objectively as possible notwithstanding, the images remain static. Captions that reify Asante women as "fetish girls" accompany the images, positioning the photograph and interpretation process. None of these women are named; when deemed worthy of description, they are merely assigned the appellation "fetish girl" and are reduced to the status of an object—depersonalized and robbed of identity, reduced solely to their physical appearance. The images of Asante women are often in full profile and the highly gendered sexual overtones are unmistakable. As objects (as opposed to subjects), the women cannot avoid the objectifying male gaze, though clearly this was of little or no consequence. At times (Figs. 1–3), the women do not appear relaxed or at ease, as if the presence of a male photographer cause them some sense of anxiety.

Almost complete nakedness is depicted, and nudity becomes emblematic of conventions of modesty and the negation of the morality of Victorian bourgeois values. Depictions of bare breasts, buttocks, and genitalia, customarily the focus of European interest, can be seen as a part of a cheap exoticism characteristic of broader photographic tradition in Africa, one that imagines African women as sexually available to Europeans, although at times, at odds with representations of Asante women as complacent children. The materiality of bodily adornment as "fetish" serves as a metaphor for "Otherness." Materiality coupled with nakedness is the marker of the "authentic primitive." But whether they are performing household duties (Fig. 4), pictured with domestic accouterments, or simply standing posed for the camera, it would be a mistake to characterize Asante women as passive recipients of British colonial authority, forced into performing for the camera. Representation is not always the sole prerogative of the colonizer. Asante history plainly elucidates that advancing British male colonial hegemony did not go unchallenged.

At first glance, it may appear that the fetishization discourse as simply "woman-as-sex-object" will suffice, but there is a distinction to be made between sexual *objects* and sexual *aims*. Sexual objects are those with whom we have sex; sexual aims are the actions we perform in order to achieve sexual pleasure (Freud 1962). Moreover, it is the idea of "drive," which is associated with the need to see—in other words, voyeurism—which is the structure through which pleasure emerges, connecting with desire (Kripps 1999). In this way, "fetishism" contains an element of perversion that resides not in an unusual or socially unacceptable object of desire but in the way in which the structure—in this case colonial photography—highlights the relationship between the production of pleasure and the achievement of desire. By deferring access to the object of desire, in this case Asante women, due to the notion of "forbidden sex," the colonial subject lingers with the lure of fetishization, demonstrating that pleasure resides in engaging in fetishization, as well as the object of desire. As the photographs demonstrate, part of this pleasure also derives from the return of the gaze (Fig. 5), regarded as partaking in visual intercourse (Alloula 1986).

CONCLUSION

Colonial photographs of “fetish girls” supported a “fetish” discourse that was embedded in a long historical tradition—one that needed to define and maintain notions of difference between those in the colony and those in the metropole in order to justify the colonial project. Careful reading “against the grain” of the colonial photographs entitled “fetish girls” makes possible new forms of knowledge. The role of the “fetish” is firmly situated at the vanguard in the production of colonial forms of knowledge for, by, and about Europeans with regards to West Africa. Without a doubt, examining the European “fetish” discourse is a starting point for analyzing materiality and Akan religion, in order to understand what religious consciousness meant for the Akan themselves. However, colonial photography is predicated within a distinctly masculine tradition, and consequently is oftentimes, fixated by the feminine subject. The colonial “fetish girls” photographs provide ample material evidence to give rise to the coun-

ternative that such interpretations are the product of the British colonial male imagination, highlighting the fact that British colonial officials had a fetishization of their own. The “fetish” and “fetishization” mediates the complex and fluid relationship in the ontological slippage between objects and people, as well as materiality and processes. The “fetish” may be inanimate, such as an object, or a person, but it has never been an Akan concept—rather, it is one that has always been European, and in this case, British.

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Notes

I thank Emanuel Akyeampong, Amy Burce, Paulla Ebron, Erin Hasinoff, Ian Hodder, Barbaro Martínez-Ruiz, and Nan Rothschild for their insightful comments. Any omissions or errors are, of course, my own. I'd especially like to thank Lynn Meskell for her constant inspiration and guidance. As always, I am grateful to Shelly Coughlan and Ellen Christensen for their support. I thank Doran Ross, Leslie Ellen Jones, and the Editorial Committee at African Arts for this opportunity. I also thank Paul Johnson for permission to use photographs from the collections at the British National Archives. This paper was presented in honor of Nan Rothschild at the Society for Historical Archaeology (2007). Research was made possible with funding from the Archaeology Center at Stanford University.

1 The “fetish” became deeper entangled in mercantile transactions when West Africans requested that Europeans take “fetish oaths” before trade transactions, said to guarantee business efficacy.

2 “The following were the interesting if somewhat repulsive ingredients of this very powerful fetish. There was first, and chiefly, the brains of the old man's father, who had gained eminence and success according to Fang ideals. Some days after the father's death, when the body was partly decomposed, the son visited his grave at midnight—entirely naked—opened the shallow grave, severed the head from the body, and hung it up in a house, letting the decomposing brain drip upon some white chalk. To this he added one of the old man's teeth and a bit of his hair and cuttings of his nails, also a strip of flesh cut from the dead man's arm and dried over the fire. When the owner of such a fetish is about to engage in any considerable enterprise he rubs a portion of the brains upon his forehead and thereby possesses himself of all the serviceable qualities of the deceased—his adroitness in lying, his skill in cheating, his cleverness in stealing goods or other men's wives or in killing his enemies. If he is going to talk a big palaver he place the strips of dried flesh in his mouth, and keeps it there all the time that he is talking, that he may be eloquent and successful” (Milligan 1904:236).

“Prempeh, that beastly king of Kumassi, whose fetish-trees were regularly watered with the blood of human beings; and who, when at length his lust for blood had become insatiable, had a slave put to death each night for his entertainment—and probably, also, to appease the hostility of the spirits” (ibid., p. 237).

3 “The death of Quamina Bwa, our Ashantee guide, in the early part of last week, creat[ed] an idle, but popular superstition that he had been killed by the fetish

for bringing white men to take the country; I was applied to in the King's name, to ameliorate this impression, by contributing an ounce of gold towards the custom to be made by the King for his repose ... Mr Tedlie had brought Quamina Bwa (our guide) into a very advanced state of convalescence; but he so eagerly betook himself from low diet to palm oil soups, and stews of blood, that he soon relapsed, and a gathering formed on his liver, aggravated not a little by the various fetish draughts he swallowed ... Qwamina Bwa was fetised until the last moment, and died amidst the howls of a legion of old hags, plastering the walls, door posts, and everything about him, with chopped egg and different messes. I forgot how many sheep he sacrificed to the fetish by the advice of these harpies” (Bowdich 1819:103, 115–16).

“The application of the word Fetiche, so commonly in use with Europeans and Negroes in this part of Africa, requires elucidation; yet it would, perhaps, be impossible to select from any known language a term of corresponding signification. Sufficient may be said, however, to explain its general import. Fetiche is evidently a corrupt relic of the Portuguese, introduced to the country, probably, by the original explorers of that nation, and adopted by the Africans to accommodate to the understanding of their visitors, such things connected with religion, laws or superstition, as could not be explained by the ordinary use of a few commonplace expressions, and that could not be interpreted by ocular demonstrations. Religion, as we know, was a leading feature in the Portuguese and Spanish armaments of those days. Any exclusive power, or faculty in human nature, is deemed an inspiration of the Fetiche, such as slight of hand, necromancy, invocations of departed spirits, and witchcraft. The religious laws of particular sects or casts, (for they are probably as various in Africa as elsewhere) are described to Europeans, at the present day, under the denomination Fetiche” (Dupuis 1824: 107).

4 “The women are fondest of what they call Fetishing, setting themselves out to attract the good Graces of the Men. They carry a Streak round their Foreheads, of white, red, or yellow Wash, which being thin, falls in lines before it dries. Others make Circles with it, round the Arms and Bodies, and in this frightful Figure, please” (Atkins 1737:61).

5 “The women also are generally handsomer [than those of the Fante], but it is only amongst the higher orders that beauty is to be found, and amongst them, free from all labour or hardship, I have not only seen the finest figures (which the ease of their costumes and habits may account for) but, in many instances, regular

Grecian features, with brilliant eyes set rather obliquely in the head. Beauty in a Negress must be genuine, since complexion prejudices instead of imposes, and the European adjudges it to the features only, which appeared in this class to be Indian rather than African; nor is it surprising, when we recollect that they are selected from, or are the daughters of the handsomest slaves or captives; or are expressly chosen by their interior neighbours, to compose part of their tribute to the King of Ashantee, who retains but small proportion ... The lowest orders are generally dirty. Occasionally, small delicate patterns in green or white are traced on their cheeks and temples. The Moorish negresses darken the edges of their eye lids ... The bosoms of young girls thirteen and fourteen are frequently models, but the young women sedulously destroy this beauty for what is considered a greater, wearing a broad band tight across their breasts, until ceasing to be globular they project conically. Their heads are shaved in fanciful elaborate patterns, having as intricate an appearance as a rich carpet” (Bowdich 1819:318–19).

6 Amadiume (2008) argues that it is during the postcolonial period that patriarchal orthodox Christian and new fundamentalist Christian values imposed a new and damaging form of patriarchal control over women and their body images.

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