

BOOK REVIEW

J. Lorand Matory. *The Fetish Revisited: Marx, Freud, and the Gods Black People Make*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2018. 392 pp. Photographs. Bibliography. Index. \$29.95. Paper. ISBN: 9780478001058.

This dense and ambitious text cements J. Lorand Matory's central role in African-American studies. *The Fetish Revisited: Marx, Freud, and the Gods Black People Make* may be the most "double-headed" of Matory's works. While it can be read as an anthropological study of ritual and history from the point of view of Slave Coast encounters, it also presents a very enthusiastic examination of ritual objects and their contextualization amid the coastal and inner Yorùbá and Dahomey trading cultures. Matory connects the emergence of some new elements in the making of indigenous religion to the value of commerce, meanwhile challenging long-term Western philosophical and theoretical canons, contesting Marx and Freud's postulates on the "fetish."

For both Marx and Freud, the Afro-Atlantic religions and their sacred paraphernalia were expressions of a "savage" thought, representing the antithesis of what civilization should be, a civilization based on Western white bourgeois values. In fact, this paraphernalia represented "human-made gods," handmade or assembled artifacts, such as statues or objects (swords, mirrors, combs, birds, and others) that represents the *Òrìṣà* or Vodun. However, instead of seeing them as objects that hold value and embody the agency of those who manipulate them, Marx and Freud appropriated them for their own purposes (by calling the religion *falsity*). They identified the Afro-Atlantic religions as an expression of a lower culture from which they were desperate to be dissociated. One must remember that Judaism was often referred as a sum of superstitions and an illogical religion. Matory calls this process of projecting on the others the negative characteristic that they are being accused of as "ethnological *schadenfreude*." With this, the accused transfer their own ambivalent social identities onto those below them in the social hierarchy, in order to advance themselves and cement their identification with the dominant group.

One of the highlight aspects of Matory's arguments on the "fetish" is his courage to point out that there is no particular dissimilarity between the human-made gods and our Western (social) theories. In his own terms, "Theory is not a disembodied, universal truth but a creature dialectically

related to the social environment, material surroundings, and material interests of the theorists ... like the most powerful and spectacular of African ‘fetishes,’ the most powerful and spectacular European social theories embody not only the social ambiguity but also the political and emotional ambivalence of their creators” (39).

Discussing the nature of those human-made gods, although without mentioning it, Matory confirms Mauss’s gift theory, by arguing the mutual dependency between “made-gods” and worshippers, a relationship that “include feeding the god ... and asking him or her for favors that result in reciprocal obligations” (173). Moreover, the author alerts us that Afro-Atlantic priests recognize the “madness” of the gods by the vessels, beads, artifacts, and other elements, as much as by the initiation, a process that makes the deity (*se Òrìṣà/hacer el santo/fazer o santo*). However, there is a need to be aware of the gap between Afro-Atlantic parlance and Western categories of words. When it comes to translating cultures, the loss and constraints are massive. Gods predate humankind, but that does not mean that they are not made by humans at the same level, or by those who are aware of the cosmology of these religions. This paradox is solved by the fact that the vessels help to invoke the energy (àṣẹ) of the god. Just as a worker gives value to a product by the time spent in the production, the priest gives value to a made-god by the number of elements assembled in the vessel/pots and its economic and trade/exchange worth, such as beads, cowries, or alcohols.

Considering that the “other” and the trade work are sources of powerful objects, spirits, and gods, *The Fetish Revisited* may be a shocking read for Black movements and Afro-religious puritans, particularly in Brazil. Anthropologists there have helped to create an ideology of African purity, which together with the Black movements produced a utopia of *negritude* “freed” from white influence.

The Fetish Revisited is a long essay, full of relevant details on parenthood, on ritual meanings, and on the balance between masculine and feminine. In this notable book, Marx and Freud dance with Afro-Atlantic brides, horsemanship, monarchy, vessels, and trade beads, with their own piano, cigars, intaglio rings, and coats.

João Ferreira Dias 

Centre for International Studies – ISCTE

Lisbon, Portugal

jbfds@iscte-iul.pt

doi:10.1017/asr.2022.62

If you enjoyed this, you may also like:

Kibbee, Brendan. 2022. “Music as Socially Reproductive Labor: Murid Creative Practice in Dakar’s Médina.” *African Studies Review*, pp. 1–22. doi:10.1017/asr.2021.98.

- Wariboko, Nimi. 2021. "Theorizing the African Postcolony: Epistemology, Power, and Identity." *African Studies Review*, pp. 1–7. doi:[10.1017/asr.2021.123](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2021.123).
- Ampene, Kwasi. 2021. "Power and Responsibility: Royalty and the Performing Arts in Asante-Ghana." *African Studies Review* 64 (3): 523–46. doi:[10.1017/asr.2021.13](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2021.13).