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Transatlantic Souls of Black Folks:
W. E. B Du Bois and Indigenous African Religion

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In *Souls of Black Folks*, W. E. B. Du Bois insisted that the religious life of African Americans did not begin in America because it was built on "definite historical foundations," the religious heritage of Africa. Characterizing indigenous African Religion as "nature worship," with its incantations, sacrifices, and attention to good and evil spiritual influences, Du Bois invoked the African priest as both the guardian of African religious tradition and the mediator of religious change under slavery in America. As a result of colonization, passage, and enslavement, African social formations were destroyed, "yet some traces were retained of the former group life," Du Bois observed, "and the chief remaining institution was the Priest or Medicine-man." With the destruction of established African social relations of kinship and political sovereignty, which bore their own religious significance in Africa, the African priest represented a relatively mobile, transportable focus of religious life. Assuming multiple roles, operating as bard, physician, judge, and priest, the African ritual specialist "early appeared on the plantation and found his function as the healer of the sick, the interpreter of the Unknown, the comforter of the sorrowing, the supernatural avenger of wrong, and the one who rudely but picturesquely expressed the longing, disappointment, and resentment of a stolen and oppressed people." In these evocative terms, Du Bois recalled the creativity of the African priest, who deployed indigenous African religious resources under radically altered conditions.

Although the religion of the African priest came to be known by different names, such as "vodooism" or "obi-worship," Du Bois provocatively proposed that another name eventually adopted in America for indigenous African religion was "Christianity." Within the limits of the slave system, but also within the space opened by the African priest, "rose the Negro preacher, and under him the first Afro-American institution, the Negro Church." According to Du Bois, this church, in the first instance, was not Christian but African, since it only placed a "veneer of Christianity" upon the ongoing adaptation of indigenous African beliefs and practices

under slavery. Suggesting that the Christianization of indigenous African religion should be regarded as a gradual process of religious transformation, Du Bois observed that "after the lapse of many generations the Negro church became Christian." In reviewing the "faith of the fathers" in *Souls of Black Folks*, Du Bois sought to establish a basic continuity in religious life from Africa to African America. The "study of Negro religion," he insisted, had to carefully track a transatlantic process of religious development, "through its gradual changes from the heathenism of the Gold Coast to the institutional Negro Church in Chicago," which began with indigenous African religion.[1]

I want to look more closely at Du Bois' handling of the "definite historical foundations" of African religion. Among his many interests, Du Bois was an African historian. During the long course of his life, he took up the challenge of providing general historical overviews of Africa and the African diaspora in five books, *The Negro* (1915), *Africa: Its Place in Modern History* (1930), *Black Folk: Then and Now* (1939), *The World and Africa* (1947), and *Africa: An Essay Toward a History of the Continent of Africa and Its Inhabitants* (1963). Certainly, Du Bois' interest in writing these books was not strictly or merely historical, although his wide reading enabled him to synthesize a diverse range of historical and ethnographic sources into coherent narratives. In the process of providing accounts of African history, Du Bois engaged the African past as a basis for forging a Pan-African future. Looking back in order to look forward, Du Bois concluded his earliest account of African history in *The Negro* with the promise that the "future world will, in all reasonable probability, be what colored men make it."[2] All of his histories of Africa were similarly focused on the African future.

In reconstructing the religious history of Africa, Du Bois had to have been tempted by prevailing forms of racial, ethnic, territorial, or geopolitical essentialism about Africans, African Americans, and the "dark continent" of Africa. Occasionally, he seems to have given in to those temptations. In *Souls of Black Folks*, he suggested that African Americans could essentially be defined by their inherent religiosity because the Negro is "a religious animal."[3] In his earliest historical overview of Africa, *The Negro*, he suggested that Africa is essentially a religious continent, the "refuge of the gods."[4] Reinforcing assumptions about wild Africans, the "religious animal," from the "refuge of the gods," he proposed that when their religion was transposed to America it inspired a "spirit of revolt."[5] As I hope to show, however,

Du Bois' efforts to understand the role of indigenous African religion in Africa and the African diaspora went far beyond such essentialist stereotypes. By wrestling with the dilemma of representing indigenous African religion, Du Bois raised crucial issues for the study of religion in Africa and African religion in the Americas that remain salient and urgent.

By tracking the development of Du Bois' representations of indigenous African religion, I want to highlight three problems—humanity, divinity, and transatlantic continuity—that will recur in his historical overviews of Africa. These problems will appear under different terms in what follows, but they recur nonetheless. Put simply:

Du Bois might have characterized the African as a "religious animal," but he also argued that Africans, enslaved, were dehumanized by being rendered as less than animals, since they were commodified as material objects, as trade goods in a capitalist economy. This is the problem of fetishism.

Du Bois might have referred to Africa as the "refuge of the gods," but he singled out one African deity, the Yoruba God, Shango, as the exemplar of an African divinity, more powerful, he asserted, than any other, who certified political sovereignty. This is the problem of theology.

Du Bois might have suggested that indigenous African religion, transposed to the Americas, evoked a "spirit of revolt," but he became increasingly skeptical of the efficacy of African religion in advancing revolutionary political projects either in America or in Africa. Despite academic interests in transatlantic continuity or discontinuity, with deference to positions associated with Herskovits or Frazier, this political problem with African language, culture, and religion is the problem of diaspora.[6]

In what follows, I explore these problems of humanity, divinity, and transatlantic continuity in Du Bois' historical writings about Africa. Tracing the shifts in his representations of indigenous African religion from 1915 to 1947, with some surprising effects, I hope to revisit the challenges he raised for our thinking about the role of religion not only in our representations of the past but also in our projects for the future.

The Negro

As a significant part of African cultural heritage, the indigenous religious life of Africa featured in *The Negro*. In his discussion of African religion, Du Bois seemed concerned with three things, the meaning of the fetish, the belief in God, and the continuity between the indigenous religion of Africa and African-American religion across the Atlantic.

Initially, Du Bois adopted a social evolutionary framework to account for religious development. Borrowing familiar terms from the scientific study of "savage" or "primitive" religion, Du Bois maintained that the "religion of Africa is the universal animism or fetishism of primitive peoples, rising to polytheism and approaching monotheism chiefly, but not wholly, as a result of Christian and Islamic missions."[7] By adopting the terms "animism" and "fetishism," Du Bois seemed to align his inquiry into African religion with the interests of European theorists who had been searching for the origin of religion in the fetishist's worship of material objects or the animist's attribution of spiritual life, agency, and power to material objects. A variety of evolutionary schemes, from Auguste Comte to E. B. Tylor, had identified this "primitive" religious materialism, whether characterized as fetishism, animism, or totemism, as the origin of religion.[8] For evidence of this "primitive" origin, they looked to reports by European travelers, traders, missionaries, and colonial agents about "savages" in Africa, the Americas, Asia, Australia, and the Pacific Islands. Through a remarkable intellectual sleight-of-hand, European theorists used reports about their living contemporaries, these "savages" on the colonized peripheries, as if they were evidence of the original "primitive" ancestors of all humanity. In the process, they speculated about an evolutionary trajectory, beginning in fetishism, which left both "primitives" and "savages" behind in the developmental process of human progress.[9]

Popular accounts of fetishism, however, did not always place the fetish at the origin of evolutionary progress. By stark contrast, European politicians, journalists, and especially Christian missionaries often represented fetishism not as the beginning of human evolution but as the end of human degeneration. For example, one of Du Bois' sources, the American Presbyterian missionary Robert Hamill Nassau, who had spent forty years in West Africa, insisted that fetishism was the primary cause of African degradation. In his monograph, *Fetichism of West Africa*, published in 1904, Nassau maintained that the fetish stood at the center of African religion. Fetishism, in

Nassau's rendering, was a superstitious regard for the power of insignificant material objects that wove witchcraft and sorcery into every aspect of African thought, government, family, work, and daily life. Although meaningless, according to Nassau, the fetish nevertheless produced disastrous practical effects, leading to distrust, poisoning, secret societies, cannibalism, and depopulation, which effectively degraded Africans.[10]

Although he briefly deferred to an evolutionary theory of religion with the fetish at its origin, Du Bois seemed more concerned with countering this missionary account of Africa's fetishistic degradation. As if he were responding directly to Nassau's accusation, Du Bois sought to rehabilitate the fetish. "It is not mere senseless degradation," he insisted. "It is a philosophy of life."[11] Instead of rendering fetishism as superstitious regard for material objects, he recast the fetish as the material focus of an indigenous African philosophy. According to Du Bois, the fetish represented both a logical and practical recognition of the dynamic forces of life, the positive and negative spiritual conditions within which Africans lived. "Fetish is a severely logical way of accounting for the world in terms of good and malignant spirits," he asserted.[12] Amplified by reports about the material spirituality of the Ewe of West Africa and the Xhosa of South Africa, Du Bois' account of fetishism placed the fetish in a positive light. In recovering an African history of the fetish, therefore, Du Bois in 1915 suggested that fetishism was not superstitious ignorance, fear, or fraud but a coherent material philosophy of the spiritual dynamics of life.

Reinterpreting the fetish, however, was not sufficient to demonstrate that indigenous Africans had their own religion. Africans also believed in God. In this respect, Du Bois found the Yoruba as his privileged example of Africans who not only believed in God but also made that divinity the foundation of organized political life and state building. In *The Negro*, however, Du Bois deferred to the testimony of European reporters to establish indigenous African belief in God. "The African has a Great Over God," the explorer Mary Kingsley observed.[13] No matter how superstitious Africans might be, the missionary Robert Hamill Nassau found, "I do not need to begin by telling them that there is a God."[14] In Du Bois' account of indigenous African religion, European observers—the explorer, the missionary—were invoked as authorities on the indigenous theology of Africa. Effectively, they certified that Africans believed in God.

In the light of the evolutionary theory of religion that Du Bois had cited, this assertion that Africans were not merely fetishists or animists but also theists was surprising. Supposedly representing a more advanced stage in the development of religion, belief in God should not have mixed so easily with the earlier stage of religion's supposed origin. Perhaps, by juxtaposing fetishism and theism, not in opposition but in counterpoint, Du Bois was working to undermine the developmental premises of religious evolution. As both material philosophy and spiritual theology, African religion could not so easily be claimed as the point of origin for the evolutionary progression of all humanity. Instead, African religion could be recovered as a different kind of origin for the development of the material and spiritual life of Africans in America.

Nevertheless, in *The Negro*, Du Bois clearly relied upon the reports of outsiders—the European explorer, the Euroamerican missionary—to certify the existence of an indigenous African God. Certainly, such witnesses were problematic, since they were entangled in a complex history of repression, translation, and representation. Although searching for the "unknown God" all over the world, they often reported that such a deity was absent in Africa. In Southern Africa, for example, explorers and missionaries frequently testified to the absence of any belief in God among the Khoisan, the Xhosa, the Zulu, the Sotho-Tswana, and other people in the region.[15] The lack of African belief in God, as well as the absence of any trace of indigenous African religion, was reported by Richard Burton in the lake regions of central Africa, by James Grant on his "walk across Africa," and by René Caillié on his "travels to Timbuctoo."[16] Arguably, these insistent denials of religion, these recurring discoveries of religious absence, fit with broader colonial projects in representing Africa as an empty space for conquest and colonization. With no God, these denials seemed to suggest, Africans lacked any transcendent claim to political sovereignty.

In his handling of belief in God in *The Negro*, Du Bois seemed to recognize this link between theology and polity, observing briefly, in passing, that the Yoruba believed in a God who established the basis for royalty, sovereignty, and independent statehood. Nevertheless, he emphasized the authority of Kingsley and Nassau, the independent witnesses, in certifying indigenous African understandings of deity. Relying upon these reports, Du Bois was able to establish that belief in God was an indigenous feature of African religion that was not necessarily introduced by Muslim

or Christian missions. Although he reviewed the importance of these missionizing religions in Africa, Du Bois appeared to regard them primarily as a disruption of African life, noting, for example, that the modern slave trade coincided with "the greatest expansion of two of the world's most pretentious religions."[17] Between the practical philosophy of the fetish and belief in God, however, African religion had its own integrity.

Crossing the Atlantic, Du Bois argued in *The Negro* for a basic continuity between African indigenous religion and African American religion. In the transportation from Africa, the indigenous priest, responsible for religion and healing, carried that continuity. As he had proposed in *Souls of Black Folks*, Du Bois asserted in his account of African religion in *The Negro* that the African priest, even within the alien, alienating environment of the plantation system, continued to function as "the interpreter of the supernatural, the comforter of the sorrowing, and as the one who expressed, rudely but picturesquely, the longing and disappointment and resentment of a stolen people." Not only transporting African religion across the middle passage, the priest created a free space for transposing indigenous religious resources, even translating them into Christian terms.

Again, Du Bois held that the Black Church, "the first distinctively Negro American social institution," emerged directly from these indigenous African religious resources. "It was not at first by any means a Christian church," Du Bois insisted, "but a mere adaptation of those rites of fetish which in America is termed obe worship, or 'voodooism.'" Similar arguments of African continuity had been advanced. In his analysis of the fetish, for example, the missionary Robert Hamill Nassau had also proposed a direct continuity between Africa and America, but he complained that the religion of the fetish, "the evil thing that the slave brought with him," not only endured but actually grew under slavery. Against the background of his rehabilitation of the fetish, however, Du Bois proposed that fetishism was not an "evil thing" but the authentic religious inheritance from Africa. The philosophy of fetishism, with its attention to material signs of good and evil forces, provided the solid foundation for African religious life. Although eventually covered by a "veneer of Christianity," Du Bois argued, "the Negro church of to-day bases itself upon the sole surviving institution of the African fatherland," the indigenous religion of the fetish.[18]

Clearly, this formulation of transatlantic African religious continuity was important to Du Bois. With slight modification of phrasing, but almost word for word, the same account appeared in *Souls of Black Folk* (1903), in *The Negro Church* (1903), and even in a section on historical background for a Carnegie-funded report, *Economic Co-operation among Negro Americans* (1907).[19] When he came to writing his first history of Africa in *The Negro* (1915), Du Bois integrated this same account of African religion, tracing the essential religious continuity from African fetishism to African Christianity.

Although he certainly was not trying to advance a general theory of religion, Du Bois' intervention in representations of indigenous African religion carried significant implications for the history of religions. Poised between the evolutionary theory of religious progress and the missionary theory of religious degeneration, Du Bois' handling of the history of African religion could not be contained within either theoretical model. Implicitly, he challenged both the scientific evolutionists and the Christian missiologists. On the one hand, by attempting to rehabilitate fetishism as a viable material philosophy, he challenged the social evolutionary model that postulated a developmental trajectory from primitive fetishism to the modern material philosophy of science. On the other hand, by representing the Christian conversion of Africans in America as a veneer placed over the indigenous African religion of the fetish, he suggested that Christianization represented not progress but degeneration of authentic African religion. In either case, Du Bois placed indigenous African religion in a different kind of history, neither a speculative evolutionary history nor a missionary faith history, which he outlined in *The Negro* as a basic continuity, despite the radical disrupture of slavery, in fetishism, the material philosophy of spiritual influences.

Black Folk

Nearly twenty-five years later, Du Bois substantially revised and expanded his earlier account of African history in *The Negro* for publication as *Black Folk: Then and Now* (1939). With respect to African indigenous religion, his discussion in *Black Folk* remained largely unchanged from his treatment of fetishism and God in *The Negro*, except for one dramatic alteration. Removing the explorer Kingsley and the missionary Nassau, who had reported on West African beliefs in God, Du Bois introduced the Yoruba God, Shango. Through this intervention, he effectively

dismissed the authority of alien observers, however much they might have served his interests earlier, in preference for a direct appearance, almost a theophany in the text, of an indigenous African deity. No European explorer or Euroamerican missionary, he seemed to be saying in this erasure of Kingsley and Nassau, is necessary to certify the meaning and power of an indigenous African God. Shango, as he appears in *Black Folk*, is sufficiently powerful to display his own meaning in indigenous African religion. In place of alien authority, therefore, Du Bois in this account presented Shango.

In Yoruba religion, Shango (or Sango) is God of thunder and lightning. As the deity of such awesome heavenly power, Shango has been recognized as comparable to other West African gods, such as So among the Ewe or Ga among the Gua, but in Yoruba tradition Shango has also been regarded as a historical figure, the fourth king of Oyo, a dynasty that extended from Benin to Dahomey. As king, Shango discovered a ritual technique to summon lightning, but when he deployed this technique, the lightning destroyed his house and killed his family. In the aftermath of this destruction, Shango left the world, according to different accounts killing himself, ascending to the heavens, or descending under the earth, to control the spiritual forces of thunder and lightning. Besides exercising this heavenly power, Shango reinforced political authority in the world. Yoruba kings of Oyo, according to this tradition, could be traced back through a royal lineage to Shango. Within the priesthood of Shango, the head priest was responsible for initiating kings into the mysteries of this tradition. Synchronizing religion and politics, Shango stood as a transcendent deity of power among the Yoruba.[20]

In *Black Folk*, Du Bois introduced Shango as an African God of Thunder who "soars above the legend of Thor and Jahweh," thereby transcending the power of the European and Semitic thunder-gods. This assertion of the preeminence of an African God over the deities of Indo-European and Semitic tradition was a remarkable claim. During the nineteenth-century debates over what should be regarded as the original language, culture, and religion, biblically-based assumptions about the preeminence of Ancient Israel contended with new scholarly formulations of the priority of ancient Indo-European societies. Stretching from ancient Ireland to India, the Indo-European, Indo-Iranian, or Aryan represented a cultural zone that could be recovered in direct opposition to the Semitic culture of the Bible. As Maurice Olender has shown, defenders of Indo-European and Semitic origins asserted competing claims not only

about human prehistory but also about establishing access to the original "language of Paradise."[21] Almost casually, Du Bois dismissed this entire controversy by introducing Shango. Soaring above the Indo-European and Semitic deities, this indigenous African God left them far behind. By bringing Shango into the revised history of Africa that formed the text of *Black Folk*, therefore, Du Bois dismissed both alien authorities like Kingsley and Nassau and alien deities like Thor and Jahweh from his account of indigenous African religion.

As a textual effect, the introduction of Shango in *Black Folk* is also startling. Seeming to appear from nowhere, inserted as an unreferenced quotation, Shango simply registers as a force. Bringing death, giving life, causing fear, inspiring love—Shango is devastating and invigorating. Without providing any indication of the source of this profile of Shango, Du Bois announced the transcendent power of the African God:

> He is the Hurler of thunderbolts, the Lord of the Storm, the God who burns down compounds and cities, the Render of trees and the Slayer of men; cruel and savage, yet splendid and beneficent in his unbridled action. For the floods which he pours from the lowering welkin give life to the soil that is parched and gladden the fields with fertility. And, therefore, mankind fear him, yet love him.[22]

Having dispensed with the European explorer and Christian missionary, Du Bois replaced their testimony with the awesome indigenous power of Shango, the violent destroyer of cities and compounds, sites of destruction which are tempting to read as colonial cities and native compounds. More powerful than alien gods, Shango—the destroyer, the source of life—registers as the most important indigenous divinity of Africa.

Certainly, Du Bois was not primarily interested here in working out an indigenous African theology. In revising his earlier account of African history, however, he inserted Shango as a deity of destruction, a God that configured the devastating destruction of slavery but also the potential for the liberating destruction of the enclosures of colonialism, slavery, and racist oppression. While Europeans were debating the racial superiority of Aryans or Semites, a debate disguised by deliberations over the history of language, culture, and religion, Du Bois simply

asserted the transcendent power of the African deity, Shango, who soared above their pretensions.

Despite his celebration of the transcendent power of the African God, Du Bois was less confident in *Black Folk* about the historical development of African religion across the Atlantic. Turning to America, he revised his earlier account of transatlantic religious continuity. While he had observed in *The Negro* that slavery had not destroyed the religion of the fetish or the religious role of African priests, in *Black Folk* Du Bois stressed the radical disruption of kinship, community, and religion under slavery.

> The African family and clan life were disrupted in this transplantation; the communal life and free use of land were impossible; the power of the chief was transferred to the master, bereft of the usual blood ties and ancient reference. The African language survived only in occasional words and phrases. African religion, both fetish and Islam, was transformed. Fetish survived in certain rites and even here and there in blood sacrifice, carried out secretly and at night; but more often in open celebration which gradually became transmuted into Catholic and Protestant Christian rites. The slave preacher replaced the African medicine man and gradually, after a century or more, the Negro Church arose as the center and almost the only expression of Negro life in America.[23]

In this revised version, by changing a few words, Du Bois charted the transatlantic crossing not as gradual continuity but as radical change. The cumulative effect of his key terms—disruption, impossibility, transference, bereavement, transformation, transmutation, and replacement—created a sense of complete disjuncture between Africa and African America. His earlier accounts, from 1902 to 1915, had tried to outline a historical development, from the indigenous religion of West Africa to the institutionalized church of Chicago, in which an underlying persistence of religious thematics could be discerned. In *Black Folk*, a revised version of the same story in 1939 emphasized loss.

As a revision of *The Negro*, the text of *Black Folk* bore two substantial erasures with respect to African religion. Besides deleting the testimony of Kingsley

and Nassau, the alien explorer and missionary, as authoritative witnesses to African deity, Du Bois also removed any reference to the persistence of vodou or obeah in America. Although "vodooism" and "obi-worship" had featured prominently in his earlier accounts of the continuity of African indigenous religion in America, they disappeared entirely in 1939. Traces of African heritage, he acknowledged, might be found in customs, literature, art, music, and dance, but further study would be required to establish historical connections. In *Black Folk*, Du Bois no longer seemed confident that the persistence of cultural resources, let alone religious resources, could be established. His language evoked a radical break between Africa and America.

In the case of the Black Church, which he had earlier identified as the "sole surviving institution of the African fatherland," Du Bois in *Black Folk* characterized the Black Church as an American institution that had become "almost the only expression of Negro life in America."[24] Again, Du Bois' language involved a subtle editorial change, but the shift from "sole surviving" to "almost the only," from "African fatherland" to "Negro life in America," hints at a broader shift in his structuring of the historical narrative. Instead of surviving the crossing from Africa, as the "sole surviving institution," animated by the African priest, the fetish, and the material philosophy of Africa, indigenous African religion, whether it is called vodou, obeah, or even Christianity, failed to take root in America. In *Black Folk*, Du Bois represented the Black Church, not as a historical, developmental, or gradual continuity with African religion, but as an American institution, almost the only one that had emerged in America, for the "expression of Negro life."

In his treatment of African religion in 1939, therefore, Du Bois highlighted destruction and discontinuity, the awesome destructive power of the Yoruba God, Shango, and the radical discontinuity between indigenous African religious life and the Black Church in America. Still, his treatment of African fetishism, which he had developed in *The Negro*, remained entirely unchanged in his account of indigenous African religion in *Black Folk*. Surrounded by disputes about whether it represented the absence, origin, or degeneration of religion, the fetish presented a persistent problem in Du Bois' attempts to provide a historical account of indigenous African religion. The fetish might also have posed a dilemma in his thinking about continuity or disjuncture between African religion and the African American religion of the Black Church. Celebrating the material philosophy of the fetish in his earlier accounts of African religious history, by 1939 Du Bois seems to have become

reluctant to assert fetishism as the basis of African religion in America, removing any reference to fetish, vodou, or obeah in the emergence of slave religion or the Black Church in America.

The World and Africa

In 1947, following the destruction of World War II, which signaled the "collapse of Europe," Du Bois returned to the challenge of writing a comprehensive history of Africa. In *The World and Africa* (1947), he certainly devoted less attention to religion than he did in his previous histories of Africa. Nevertheless, if read against the background of his earlier accounts, Du Bois's interventions in the analysis of fetishism, divinity, and transatlantic connections are decisive and important for his historical reconstruction African religion.

Most decisively, in *The World and Africa* Du Bois demolished the fetish as a representation of African religion. By contrast to his earlier attempts in rehabilitating the fetish, Du Bois in 1947 vigorously denounced fetishism as an account of African indigenous religion. Citing the German anthropologist Leo Frobenius, who had observed, "I have seen in no part of Africa the Negroes worship a fetish," Du Bois rejected fetishism as a foreign, alien, and ultimately denigrating and dehumanizing characterization of African religion.[25]

Certainly, Frobenius was a controversial authority, an anthropologist, entrepreneur, and advocate of Africa whose theories and methods were not always accepted by his anthropological colleagues. In retrospect, Frobenius has often been accused of harboring a Germanic romanticism for the purity of languages, cultures, and religions in Africa. Nevertheless, with respect to the fetish, Frobenius displayed a capacity for critical analysis of material relations under colonial conditions. Explicitly, he linked colonial conquest, dispossession, and enslavement of Africans with the representation of Africans as fetishists. As part of the larger colonial, capitalist project of turning Africans into objects for the slave trade, Frobenius suggested, Europeans claimed that Africans were already less than objects since they were subject to fetishism, the worship of objects. According to Frobenius, therefore, the very term, "fetishism," was implicated in European representations of Africans as commodities for the slave trade. The market in African slaves, Frobenius argued, "exacted a justification; hence one made of the Negro a half-animal, an article of merchandise. And in the same way the notion of fetish (Portuguese *feticeiro*) was

invented as a symbol of African religion." Besides challenging the empirical validity of the concept by insisting that he had never witnessed Africans worshiping a fetish, Frobenius observed that European discourse about African fetishism was an integral part of colonizing projects in subjugating, dehumanizing, and commodifying Africans. Under the sign of fetishism, he concluded, "The idea of the 'barbarous Negro' is a European invention."[26]

By embracing and advancing this critique of fetishism, Du Bois recast African indigenous religion as a site of struggle over conflicting representations of materiality and humanity. As recent research on the history of the fetish has shown, the term emerged in West Africa during the eighteenth century within intercultural trading zones.[27] In these mercantile trading networks, Portuguese, Dutch, and English traders in West Africa dealt with African Christians, Muslims, and "fetishists," who, according to the English trader William Smith, "have no religion at all."[28] From this European Christian perspective, fetishists, allegedly lacking any trace of religion, had no stable system of value to assess material objects. They overvalued trifling objects—a bird's feather, a pebble, a piece of rag, or a dog's leg—by treating them as "fetishes" for ritual attention, but they undervalued trade goods, showing a lack of interest in acquiring what European traders were interested in selling. Fetishism, therefore, emerged in the eighteenth century as a European mercantile theory not of the origin but of the absence of religion. In the context of incommensurable values in these intercultural trading relations, Europeans developed the stereotype of "fetishism" to characterize Africans who had no religion to organize the necessary relations of meaning, power, and value between human beings and material objects and thereby to organize relations among human beings in the exchange of objects. The discourse of fetishism, which cast Africans as incapable of properly valuing objects, as Frobenius suggested, could also be deployed to turn Africans themselves into objects, rendering them as suitable commodities for the slave trade.

Instead of representing the authentic origin of indigenous African religion, the term, "fetishism," was implicated in the dehumanizing representations of Africans that had legitimated colonization and enslavement. Du Bois took this insight seriously. Although he referred briefly, in passing, perhaps accidentally, to the fetish at one other point in *The World and Africa*, he erased all of his previous observations about African fetishism. Neither the basis of indigenous African religion nor the link between religious life in Africa and African America, the fetish was a European

invention. When he considered African indigenous religion as an aspect of African history in 1947, therefore, he removed not only the European explorer and missionary but also the European category, "fetishism," that had been deployed as an ideological instrument of African dehumanization and enslavement.

Generally, in *The World and Africa* Du Bois showed much less interest in religion than he did in previous accounts. Within the limited scope that he gave in this volume to reconstructing the indigenous religion of Africa, only Shango remained. However, amplifying on the power of Shango, Du Bois revealed his source, which had been omitted in *Black Folk*, as the German anthropologist Leo Frobenius. In the earlier volume, Shango seemed to appear from nowhere, the African God, more powerful than the Gods of ancient Israel or Europe, but also the God who needed no source, citation, reference, or footnote. In *The World and Africa*, however, the source is duly cited, a citation that only gains force, however, by being linked to the critique of fetishism as a dehumanizing representation of Africans and African religion. Against this background, Du Bois expanded upon the divinity and power of the Yoruba God. In addition to highlighting Shango's destructive force and creative capacity, he emphasized the Yoruba deity's indigenous political role, which had been alluded to in previous accounts, by asserting that Shango is the supreme source of political power, authority, and sovereignty, father of royal rulers, whose "posterity still have the right to give the country its kings."[29] Having rejected the alien construction of fetishism, therefore Du Bois reinforced the indigenous African religious resources supporting independent and autonomous political sovereignty in Africa.

In his African history of 1947, Du Bois seems to have lost interest in the question of continuity or discontinuity with America. Besides the rejection of fetishism and the celebration of Shango, no other reflections on indigenous African religion or African American religion remained. *The World and Africa* did not contain any reprise or revision of the formulations of religious development from Africa to America that had featured in his early historical accounts. Instead, he devoted his attention in *The World and Africa* to actively building a Pan-African solidarity. Du Bois' reconstructions of indigenous African religion, however, were part of the project, sometimes in unexpected ways. For example, the problem of African fetishism, which Du Bois wrestled with from 1915 to 1947, moving from imaginative rehabilitation in *The Negro* to critical rejection in *The World and Africa*,

became a point of departure for the anti-colonial work of Aimé Césaire, who drew inspiration for his *Discourse on Colonialism* from the same passage by Frobenius that Du Bois cited to reject fetishism, "the idea of the barbaric Negro is a European invention."[30] If that inspiration was linked to Frobenius' critique of European inventions of the "barbaric Negro," it was also situated in the struggle to come to terms with the fetish and fetishism that provided the context for Frobenius' statement and Du Bois' transition from rehabilitating to rejecting the fetish as the defining feature of African indigenous religion.

Writing African Religion

It is tempting to locate Du Bois' changing representations of indigenous African religion in relation to his broader intellectual biography, linking his shift from rehabilitating to rejecting fetishism, for example, to his transition from a racialized to a radicalized Pan-Africanism. Although such connections might be established, I want to conclude with methodological rather than biographical observations arising from this brief review of Du Bois' handling of three features of indigenous African religion—fetishism, God, and transatlantic continuity—in his historical writings about Africa.

First, with respect to fetishism, we have seen that Du Bois consistently rejected the two standard accounts that placed the fetish either at the origin of religious evolution or at the end of religious degeneration. Emphatically, he countered the missionary slander of degradation, but he initially seemed to adopt the evolutionary model that emerged in late-nineteenth century anthropology of religion. Although he seemed to defer briefly to an evolutionary progression of religious development from fetishism, through polytheism, to monotheism in *The Negro*, repeating that formulation in *Black Folk*, Du Bois actually did not accept that model's primary premise, which asserted that the origin of religion, fetishism, was essentially a mentality, a primitive psychology, which mistakenly attributed life to inanimate objects. In social evolutionary theories of religion, fetishism was defined as a "frame of mind," as John Lubbock put it in the 1870s, which induced dogs, children and savages to think that objects were alive.[31] As a primitive mentality, according to Edward Clodd, fetishism was the "confusion inherent in the savage mind between things living and not living."[32] Standard evolutionary theories of religion repeated this premise that fetishism was a primitive, childish, or uncultured psychology, a "low

grade of consciousness," as A. C. Haddon proposed, because it imagined that material objects were alive.[33] Arguably, Placide Tempel's "Bantu philosophy," with its spirituality of "vitalism," continued this tendency to cast indigenous African religion as a mentality, psychology, or spirituality that attributed life to inanimate material objects.[34]

By contrast, Du Bois refused to render fetishism as a primitive psychology. Consistently, he wrestled with fetishism as a "material philosophy," from his early attempt to validate an indigenous African logic of material signs of spiritual forces to his later rejection of fetishism as an alien European logic for turning spiritual beings into material commodities. Du Bois seemed to recognize, in William Pietz's phrase, the fetish's "irreducible materiality."[35] Instead of seeing the fetish as the symptom of a primitive African mentality, he focused on material conditions, from an indigenous African "material philosophy" to the alien forces of slavery, colonization, and capitalism, with its own fetishism of commodities, "abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties," as Marx insisted, in which the meaning and value of being human were at stake.[36] By 1947, therefore, Du Bois had realized that fetishism, far from representing a primitive mentality that turned dead objects into living beings, was a term that provided ideological cover for capitalist transformations of living beings into objects. For the history of indigenous African religion, this focus on materiality, rather than spirituality, advanced a critical perspective on the contingent, contested zones of religious production.

Second, with respect to God, Du Bois dealt with African divinity not as a theological problem but as a political problem. By stark contrast to the prevailing religious interests of Christian missionaries, Du Bois was not concerned with establishing theological principles of translation between African and Christian concepts of God.[37] Although, as we recall, he invoked missionary testimony for the existence of an African God, which was supposedly just like the Christian God, in *The Negro* in 1915, that Christian assertion of translatability was erased when the text was revised for publication in 1939 as *Black Folk.* In place of the missionary's claim about the inherent intelligibility of the Christian God in Africa, Du Bois inserted Shango, an African deity with at least three features—locality, specificity, and sovereignty—that could not be easily subsumed in the Christian deity. Instead of representing the vague, generalized "Great Over God," in the explorer Mary Kingsley's phrase," Shango was God of a definite place, with a specific identity, even

a biography, which reinforced the claims of a royal lineage to political sovereignty. By 1939, asserting that Shango was greater than the deities of either European paganism or the Bible, Du Bois suggested that such a deity could not be translated or assimilated into the God of Christianity.

In the missionary literature on indigenous African concepts of God, the overriding concern has been the theological translation of the "unknown God" of Africa into the Christian God. This theological interest only continued to be developed in academic accounts of African deities such as Edwin Smith's *African Ideas of God* (1950), John S. Mbiti's *Concepts of God in Africa* (1970), and Malcolm J. McVeigh's *God in Africa: Conceptions of God in African Traditional Religion and Christianity* (1974).[38] Even in sociological formulations, such as Robin Horton's analysis of the conversion from African "microcosmic" worldviews to Christian or Islamic "macrocosmic" worldviews, the question of theological translatability from local deities to the translocal deities of "world religions" has been prominent in the analysis of the history of African understandings of God.[39] By invoking Shango, however, Du Bois effectively asserted that the problem of God in Africa was political rather than theological. Not a primitive high god, a Christian-like supreme being, or a world religion's macrocosmic deity, Shango was a local deity of political sovereignty, bearing the "right to give the country its kings," who "soars above the legend of Thor and Jahweh," not by transcending the world but by being imminent, situated, and forceful in a specific world.

Third, the question of transatlantic continuity between Africa and African America, of course, also raised the problem of translatability, but with an entirely different valence. Rather than a universal, macrocosmic worldview assimilating a local, microcosmic worldview, the transatlantic passage entailed the challenges of translation posed by transportation, enslavement, and alienation in America. In his earliest formulations, Du Bois identified the indigenous African priest as the nexus of transatlantic translation. Generally, under colonial conditions within Africa, indigenous ritual specialists, with specialized knowledge and techniques of healing, divination, and sacred power, were best equipped to survive the displacements of the religion of the home and the destruction of the religion of the polity that dramatically altered the terrain of indigenous African religion. As Du Bois suggested, the knowledge and power of African religious specialists had a kind of portability that could even cross the Atlantic. By focusing on the African priest, along with the

indigenous religious resources of vodou or obeah, Du Bois advanced the challenging assertion that Christianity did not convert Africans but was actually converted by Africans into indigenous African religion.

Although Du Bois seems to have lost confidence in this formula by 1947, no longer showing an interest in tracing African religion "from the heathenism of the Gold Coast to the institutional Negro Church in Chicago," the second half of the twentieth century witnessed a dramatic vitality of African-American religion with explicitly African roots. Shango, for example, was alive and well in America, flourishing in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Santeria, Brazilian Candomblé, and the Shango movement in Trinidad. Although these religious movements certainly involved translation, identifying Shango with the Christian Saint Barbara in Cuba, with the Christian Saint John in Trinidad, for example, such interreligious translations were obviously not controlled by any Christian orthodoxy.[40] These translations arose, as Du Bois had suggested, out of the portable resources of the African priest, with his or her capacity to heal the sick, interpret the unknown, comfort the sorrowing, and avenge wrongs, but also out of the locality, specificity, and contested sovereignty of an African, American, and transatlantic politics of religion. That religious politics, as Du Bois proposed, operates within the symbols, myths, and rituals that configure the "longing, disappointment, and resentment of a stolen and oppressed people," but can this religious politics also serve political projects against oppression or for liberation from oppression?

This is a difficult question. It must not have an easy answer. Profoundly, the question tests the materiality, locality, and translatability of religion not only in political relations but also in any politics of social, economic, and human transformation. In conventional terms, politicians, even radical politicians, might ask whether indigenous religion is progressive or reactionary. With its material fetishes, its local gods, and its resistance to translation into any universal intelligibility, indigenous religion can easily appear as wild religion, a religion beyond the bounds of any political project. In *Souls of Black Folks*, Du Bois touched briefly on the capacity of this wild religion for rebellion. Drawing on an indigenous African religious inheritance, with its gods and devils, elves and witches, and other spiritual influences, the African in bondage in America could only conclude that evil had triumphed. "All the hateful powers of the Under-world were striving against him," Du Bois wrote, "and a spirit of revolt and revenge filled his heart." Acting out that spirit of revolt, as

Du Bois related, Africans "called up all the resources of heathenism," but those religious resources were rituals, sacrifices, spells, "weird midnight orgies and mystic conjurations."[41] Certainly, these religious practices gave expression to the situation of oppression, even expressing a "spirit of revolt" against oppression, but they did not seem like ingredients in any viable political revolution against oppression.

Du Bois' decreasing interest in transantlantic African religious continuity was perhaps connected to his failing confidence in the efficacy of indigenous African religion, especially wild religion, in serving the goals of any emancipatory political project. Certainly, this political problem of the role of an indigenous African religious heritage was inherited by other African revolutionaries. In the *Wretched of the Earth*, for example, Frantz Fanon largely ignored religion, whether Islam in Algeria or Christianity, Islam, and indigenous African religion in West Africa, but he did reflect on revivals of wild religion, with its "terrifying myths," populated by maleficent spirits, the "leopardmen, serpent-men, six-legged dogs, zombies," that generated an imaginary world of spiritual powers and prohibitions that were "far more terrifying than the world of the settler."[42] As both psychological displacement and political distraction, this wild religion could not be coordinated with a revolutionary political project.

"At the intersection of religious practices and the interrogation of human tragedy," as Achille Mbembe has recently observed, "a distinctively African philosophy has emerged."[43] But that African philosophy of tragedy, with its roots in slavery, colonization, and apartheid, has engaged religion in different ways. Against the radical dismissal of the viability of indigenous religion for revolutionary, national, or postcolonial projects, nativist positions, with their "reenchantment of tradition," have sought to recover the authentic precolonial religious resources of Africa as a foundation for the future. At the same time, these philosophical alternatives, radical and nativist, have had to maneuver within rapidly changing, globalizing conditions, which have transformed religion, even wild religion, within new political economies of the sacred. For example, in the name of an African Renaissance, with its promise of revitalizing an indigenous African heritage, formerly radical political interests can align with the global financial structures of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the European Union, and the United States.[44] At the same time, a devoted African nativist, such as the self-proclaimed Zulu witchdoctor, later sangoma, and now shaman, Credo Mutwa, can establish transatlantic continuity as featured

artist on the website, African.com, "the website of the African diaspora," for depicting the website's patron, the Yoruba God, Shango.[45] As Mbembe has suggested, indigenous African religion, which has not been adequately captured either by radical dismissals nor nativist reconstructions, has to be regarded as a modality of self-writing, self-styling, and self-practice. In writing about the history of Africa, Du Bois was engaged in precisely such a struggle of self-formation, but he was also trying to make sense out of a political project, initially located in the United States, but increasingly global in scope. Writing about indigenous African religion, in this context, was a way of writing not only about a religious heritage but also about a changing world.

[1] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990; orig. ed. 1902), 141-42, 139.

[2] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Negro* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1915), 242.

[3] Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folks*, 143.

[4] Du Bois, *The Negro*, 9.

[5] Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folks*, 143.

[6] Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941); E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Shocken, 1963).

[7] Du Bois, *The Negro*, 124.

[8] Eric J. Shapre, *Comparative Religion: A History*, second edition (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1986), 47-71; Edmund Leach, "Anthropology and Religion: British and French Schools," in Ninian Smart, et al., eds., *Nineteenth-Century Religious Thought in the West*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 3:215-62.

[9] Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

[10] Robert Hamill Nassau, *Fetichism in West Africa: Forty Years' Observation of Native Customs and Superstitions* (New York: Scribner, 1904). See also Stephen Steptimus Farrow, *Faith, Fancies, and Fetich: or, Yoruba Paganism: Being Some Account of the Religious Beliefs of the West African Negroes, particularly of the Yoruba Tribe of Southern Nigeria* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Athelia Henrietta Press, 1996).

[11] Du Bois, *The Negro*, 124. On missionary theories of African religious degeneration, see David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 89-92.

[12] Du Bois, *The Negro*, 125.

[13] Mary H. Kingsley, *West African Studies*, second edition (London: Macmillan, 1901), 107.

[14] Nassau, *Fetichism in West Africa*, 36.

[15] Chidester, *Savage Systems*, 39, 41, 47, 52, 88, 75, 78, 94, 96, 103, 120, 180-81, 190.

[16] Richard Burton, *Lake Regions of Central Africa*, 2 vols. (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1860), 2:341-57; James Augustus Grant, *A Walk Across Africa; or Domestic Scenes from my Nile Journal* (Edinburgh: W. Blackwood, 1864), 145; René Caillié, *Travels through Central Africa to Timbuctoo*, 2 vols. (London: Colburn and Bentley, 1830), 1:303.

[17] Du Bois, *The Negro*, 150. For his overview of Muslim and Christian missions, see 128-30.

[18] Du Bois, *The Negro*, 188-89; Nassau, *Fetichism in West Africa*.

[19] Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folks*, 142; *The Negro Church* (Atlanta: Atlanta University Press, 1903), 5-6; *Economic Co-operation among Negro Americans* (Atlanta: Atlanta University Press, 1907), 24; *The Negro*, 188-89.

[20] William R. Bascom, *The Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1969); *Shango in the New World* (Austin: African and Afro-American Research Institute, University of Texas, 1972).

[21] Maurice Olender, *The Languages of Paradise: Race, Religion, and Philology in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992).

[22] W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Folk: Then and Now* (New York: Henry Holt & Co, 1939): 107-08.

[23] Du Bois, *Black Folk*, 198.

[24] Du Bois, *The Negro*, 189; *Black Folks*, 198.

[25] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The World and Africa: An Inquiry into the Part which Africa has Played in World History* (New York: Viking Press, 1947), 79; Leo Frobenius, *Histoire de la civilization africaine*, trans. H. Back and D. Ermont (Paris: Gallimard, 1936), 79. The 1936 edition is a translation of Frobenius, *Kulturgeschichte Afrikas: Prolegomena zu einer historischen gestaltlehre* (Zurich: Phaidon, 1933).

[26] Du Bois, *World and Africa*, 79; Frobenius, *Histoire de la civilization africaine*, 79.

[27] William Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish, I, II, and IIIa," *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 9 (Spring 1985): 5-17; 13 (Spring 1987): 23-45; 16 (Autumn 1988): 105-23.

[28] William Smith, *A New Voyage to Guinea* (London: Nourse, 1744), 26.

[29] Du Bois, *World and Africa*, 158; Frobenius, *Histoire de la civilization africaine*, 56.

[30] As Robin D. G. Kelley has observed, Césaire, Senghor, and others in the Négritude movement drew inspiration from Frobenius. Kelley, "A Poetics of Anticolonialism," *Monthly Review* 51,6 (1999). See Suzanne Césaire, "Leo Frobenius and the Problem of Civilization," in Michael Richardson, ed., *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean*, trans. Richardson and Krzysztof Fijalkowski (London: Verso, 1996), 82-87; L. S. Senghor, "The Lessons of Leo Frobenius," in E. Haberland, ed., *Leo Frobenius: An Anthology* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1973), vii.

[31] John Lubbock, *The Origin of Civilization and the Primitive Condition of Man*, fifth edition (London: Longmans, Green, 1889), 205-10.

[32] Edward Clodd, *Myths and Dreams* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1885), 13.

[33] Alfred C. Haddon, *Magic and Fetishism* (London: Archibald Constable, 1906), 84-85. For similar renderings, see Frank Byron Jevons, *An Introduction to the History of Religion*, eighth edition (London: Methuen, 1921), 28.

[34] Placide Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, trans. Colin King (Paris: Presence Africaine, 1959; orig edn 1945).

[35] Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish I," 7.

[36] Karl Marx, *Capital*, 2 vols, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1974; orig edn. 1867), 1:81.

[37] On Christian translation, see Lamin Sanneh, "Missionary Translation in African Perspective: Religious and Theological Themes," *Translating the Word: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1996), 157-91; Andrew Walls, "The Translation Principle in Christian History," *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1996), 26-42.

[38] Edwin W. Smith, ed., *African Ideas of God: A Symposium* (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1950); John S. Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa* (London: SPCK, 1970); Malcolm J. McVeigh, *God in Africa: Concepts of God in African Traditional Religion and Christianity* (Cape Cod, Mass.: C. Stark, 1974).

[39] Robin Horton, "African Conversion," *Africa* 41 (1971): 85-108. See Terence Ranger, "The Local and the Global in South African Religious History," in Robert W. Hefner, ed., *Conversion to Christianity: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives on a Great Transformation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

[40] Bascom, *Shango in the New World*; Leonard E. Barrett, *Soul Force: African Heritage in Afro-American Religion* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press, 1974); George

Eaton Simpson, *The Shango Cult in Trinidad* (Rio Piedras: Institute of Caribbean Studies, University of Puerto Rico, 1964); Margarite Fernandez Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, eds., *Sacred Possessions: Vodoo, Santeria, Obeah, and the Caribbean* (Rutgers University Press, 1997).

[41] Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folks*, 143.

[42] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (London: Penguin, 1967), 43.

[43] Achille Mbembe, "African Modes of Self-Writing," *Public Culture* 14 (2002): 239.

[44] Malegapuru William Makgoba, ed., *African Renaissance: The New Struggle* (Tafelberg, South Africa: Mafube, 1999).

[45] The African.Com (http://theafrican.com/AboutUs.htm).