Fetish Again? Southern Perspectives on the Material Approach to the Study of Religion

Abstract: The material turn in the study of religion’s has opened new methodological vistas, rejuvenating the notion of fetish. Scholars in Africa must acknowledge and share in the successes of the material approach. At the same time, they cannot help but recall that in colonial Africa the notion of fetish was, par excellence, the mirror of primitive religion and the denigration of Africans in the missionary enterprise. Fetish was not only the medium for the fall of African religions and the enforcement of colonial authority, but also and especially, the genesis of the theory of primitive religion’s. This paradox looms large when the material turn is re-read from southern perspectives as a call for a radical intra-cultural critique of the epistemological positions and subalternity of knowledge production in Africa.

Keywords: Africa, fetish, material religion, positionality, southern, subaltern

1 Introduction: Re-reading knowledge about the study of religion’s in Africa

Colleagues in the Department for the Study of Religion and Human Values in my university would pounce on me anytime I would provocatively call priests of Ghanaian Traditional Religion “fetish priests.” They would interject with the response, “there is nothing like that!” Those who are more considerate would simply say, “stop it!” Apparently, my colleagues cannot help but be reminded of the name calling processes that underly the ideology of racial differentiation based on the concepts of fetish and fetishism in early anthropological and missionary theorizing of religion’s in Africa.

The trajectory of the scientific study of religion’s reveals convoluted beginnings. This background explains current relentless attempts by the critical theoretical approach of scholars in exploring past and present processes of knowledge production, authentication, and dissemination in the discipline. However, critical theories frequently emanate from centres of Western academy, and while they have great significance, using them in the phenomenal south necessitates a meta-critical analysis, if some inadvertent hierarchical epistemological presuppositions are to be avoided. Metacriticism, according to Henderson and Brown,¹ is simply “a criticism of criticism,” that is the questioning of the theoretical foundations, history, and purpose of the material approach in as far as it relates to the beginnings of the science of religion’s in Africa.

Metacriticism is important in African contexts since the material approach makes central for a contemporary theorizing of religion/s what nineteenth- and twenty-century theories categorized as fetish –

¹ Henderson and Brown, Glossary of Literary Theory, n.p.

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with derogatory connotations. Scholars who study religion in African contexts must, therefore, interrogate the material approach by asking themselves, “how did we get here?” This theme is strongly echoed, for example in the work of the South African scholar of religion’s, David Chidester. When we begin to peel the layers of the beginnings of the study of religions, for instance, the questions that arise resonate particularly well with Chidester’s *Empire of Religion,* popularly acclaimed as a significant contribution to the history of the scientific study of religion’s. Drawing on *Empire of Religion* and *Savage Systems,* I argue that there needs to be metacritique of the “material turn” in the study of religion’s in African setting. The “material turn” or “material approach” in the study of religions refers to contemporary methods and philosophies that emphasize the importance of studying religion as a material phenomenon in contrast to speculative classical methods that concentrate on religious texts and inherent belief systems.

It is not easy to determine how to understand the South as envisaged in the idea of a “southern perspective.” However, South/Southern is used here in the sense of Connell’s southern theory and not as a marker of a geographical space/boundary, though it may be true that in many cases, there is an unfortunate coincidence between the geographical south and the phenomenal south. But aside from this coincidence, the South expresses ideas and experiences such as subalternity, asymmetrical power relations and negotiations, metropolitan and peripheral relations (in the academy), and even inability or disability. Thus, Connell explains the South as “relations – authority, exclusion, inclusion, hegemony, partnership, sponsorship, [and] appropriation – between intellectuals and institutions in the metropole and those in the world periphery.” In addition to this must be added the appreciation of the South as contested space for defining what can be considered as knowledge about the place of humans in the world and the fact that “meaning-making” entails endless processes and mechanisms of power negotiation. In a situation where the winner takes all, there is the risk that power becomes knowledge instead of knowledge becoming power.

From southern perspectives, therefore, the evaluation of the material turn raises a central question about the extent to which the method’s rejuvenation of the notion of fetish also reinstates the African and her religion. Most importantly, reading the material turn would involve a methodological evaluation of how the approach affords a “third space” for developing and sustaining “Africa-centred knowledges” of religion. In line with these considerations, a critical analysis of the material religion approach, which this article aspires to do, seeks to unpack the paradoxes that the epistemological “presup-positions” of the approach pose to the study of religion’s in African contexts. This article seeks to demonstrate, first, that the material turn’s interest in emancipation from Enlightenment boundaries does not mean that it is automatically decolonizing. Second, despite the advancements of the material turn, it does not pose a strong enough theoretical potential for thinking about the major way in which religion has been theorized in Africa, namely as fetish. Problematizing the material approach to the study of religion in this way is in line with Southern and African epistemological philosophies as represented by scholars such as Chidester, Hountondji, and Mbembe. I characterize the meta-critical process envisaged here as a call for intra-cultural critique directed at continental African institutions of higher learning.

The work of Meyer and other scholars is used in this article to sketch an explanation of material religion. It also serves as a foil for problematizing the approach. Chidester’s work, on the other hand,
represents the call for a skilful/radical interpretation of the material approach, using the genesis of the study of religion in Africa as the analytic unit. From this perspective, an intra-cultural critique of the study of religion in Africa becomes a focal element “for the criticism of the criticism” of the material approach. Meyer and Chidester, thus, represent two parallel dialectic cycles that are supposed to show: (a) why viewing religion in a material way may not be an automatic decolonizing approach to the study of religion in African contexts, and (b) why an uncritical/passive application of the approach may, therefore, crystallize self-imposed coloniality or fail to achieve decoloniality.

I will proceed to sketch the main points of the material turn as a method in contemporary studies of religion and the challenges it poses in view of African epistemologies by highlighting the colonial beginnings of the theory of religion in Africa based also on the concept of fetish. Leaning on Chidester, I show how these beginnings of the discipline arouse feelings of epistemological ambivalence among scholars of the South, who seek to share in the benefits of the material religion approach. The article concludes by holding the apathy that is visible in knowledge production about religion in Africa up for intra-cultural criticism and proposes a more proactive approach to the study of religion in African institutions of learning.

2 The material turn: Method in contemporary study of religion

The material approach in the study of religion is part of the recent shift of scholarship away from former speculative approaches to the study of religion that emphasized beliefs and ideas to the neglect of practices and material things. In contrast to this classical idealism, scholars now emphasize that religion can be better studied as a material phenomenon. The idea of turning to material culture as a discipline started in the mid-1970s, developed rapidly and assumed a place of importance in the social and human sciences within a few years through the influential work of scholars such as Daniel Miller. His “idea of relating human and nonhuman worlds turned out to be amazingly powerful.” According to Buchli, material culture can be described as any object that humans use to survive, define social relationships, represent facets of identity, or benefit peoples’ state of mind, social, or economic standing.

From its beginning in archaeology and anthropology, today the material approach is a standard method in the scientific study of religion, having been applied and propagated through the work of scholars such as McDannell, Morgan, Meyer, and Carp. The material turn has opened new vistas in the history and theory of the study of religion. It has rejuvenated the notion of fetish because of its insistence on the agency of things and the importance of a non-anthropocentric epistemology in the study of religion. The approach is also acclaimed as a corrective to the previous fixation on unpacking beliefs in God, gods, or things as the foci of religious studies.

According to Houtman and Meyer, the material turn is motivated by the combination of Derrida’s deconstruction and Foucault’s discourse theories, which have significantly affected the social sciences.
and humanities since the mid-1970s. This school of thought, it is argued, succeeded in disclaiming previous approaches of continental philosophy that focused on defining and ascribing some fundamental characteristics as being intrinsic to particular persons or things. Houtman and Meyer argue that this approach led to “essentializing ideologies and the naturalizing of categories such as gender and other identities.” As Meyer and Houtman rightly observe, peeling-off the masks of such an approach reveals that these essentializing tendencies have not just been fictional but also arbitrary.

Another motivation for the turn to the material is the rejection of “hierarchical and binary modes of thinking that invoke the mind-body, subject-object, nature-culture, and human-nonhuman divides that have dominated the history of Western philosophy.” This means the material approach challenges the objectification of matter into “passive stuff” in a human-centred view of the world that reserves agency to humans only. In the words of Jane Bennett, “The quarantines of matter and life encourage us to ignore the vitality of matter and the lively powers of material.” Bennett insists on the vibrancy of matter, “vital materiality,” with the understanding that material things in their different constellations have “efficacious powers.” Using the vocabulary from earlier work on materiality by Bruno Latour, she describes things as “actants” because of their capacity for agency. Closely related to the theories of Latour and Bennett is the assemblage theory of Deleuze and Guattari. The latter theory proposes an ontological framework in which entities (especially social complexities) exist as relationships of component parts, where such relationships are neither compositionally stable nor structurally fixed. They can take new forms or be transferred to other entities.²⁴ There are several other such philosophical models such as Appadurai’s theory of the social life of things, which emphasizes a shift from classical ways of thinking about the nature of things, their relationship to humans and vice versa.²⁵ The material approach thus engenders new ontologies and challenges dominant Cartesian ontology which separates the animate from inanimate matter and Cartesian anthropo-

logy which compartmentalizes mind, body, and soul.

Apart from these theoretical motivations, Bräunlein also points to important existential issues underlying the material turn. He notes, “the turn to the concrete is taking root in times marked by, on the one hand, a heightened awareness of a global ecological crisis and, on the other hand, a digital revolution that blurs the boundaries between the real and the virtual.” As a result of this contextual impetus, Bräunlein concludes that the material turn is an “intellectual trend” that raises important questions about the authenticity of the place of humans in the “real world.”

The reception of the material approach into the study of religion’s in the West is generally traced to Colleen McDannell and her study entitled Material Christianity.²⁷ She used ordinary, day-to-day religious objects of nineteenth- and twentieth-century American lived religion to reconstruct the history of Christianity in America for over a century. Her approach pointed to the great potential of understanding religion by studying the relationship it has with objects and landscapes of belief. These, in the case of McDannell, were cultivated cemeteries of Victorian culture, Mormon sacred under-clothing, Protestant family Bibles, an array of prints, jewellery, toys, and Catholic letters asking for holy water from the Marian Shrine of Lourdes in France because of belief in its curative powers. By this approach McDannell departed from previous methods of studying American Christianity. She criticized them for overemphasizing textual, ethical, and abstract aspects of religion and shifted attention to religion as it enfolds in the workplace, home, places of Christian burials, shrines, and their associated objects of piety as embodied

19 Houtman and Meyer, “Introduction;” and Bräunlein, “Thinking Religion.”
20 Houtman and Meyer, “Introduction,” 2.
21 Bräunlein, “Thinking Religion Through Things,” 2.
22 Bennett, Vibrant Matter, vii.
23 Ibid., viii–ix; and Latour, Reassembling the Social.
24 DeLanda, “Deleuzian Social Ontology.”
25 Appadurai, “Introduction.”
26 Bräunlein, “Thinking Religion Through Things,” 2.
27 McDannell, Material Christianity.
sites of Christian living. McDannell stopped at human-made/conventional religious materials and did not concentrate on theory, but

she nevertheless opened a new window for the scientific study of religion’s. The tactile, audiovisual, and material side of lived world religion took center stage. McDannell’s study was in equal measures a precursor, a symptom, and a stimulus of the growing interest in the study of material religion.²⁸ After McDannell, the material approach to the study of religion’s developed swiftly, and within a decade, the concept and approach of material religion had become mainstream in the study of religion’s.²⁹ Scholars continue to build on these foundations, expanding the frontiers of the approach. No theory is perfect, and material religion has its critiques, especially from Western philosophical and sociology of religion perspectives. I wish to hold it up for critical review from an African epistemological perspective for its omissions; particularly for its “need [of a] critical theory to assess the political, social and economic uses of ... objects in religions as well as in the comparative study of religions.”³⁰ In addition, three important epistemological inadvertencies are of concern here:

1) Material religion excludes pre-colonial notions of materiality that came to be described derogatorily as fetish, although there are clear indications that African and other primal cultural notions of the fetish foreground or spill over into material religion’s new ontologies such as Bennett’ Neoanimism and the assemblage model of Deleuze and Guattari. Based on Latourian–Bennett ontology, for example Sonia Hazard considers materials to be active and living subjects, insisting that if we would change our anthropocentric habits of thought and perception, the “everyday power of things [will come] into relief.”³¹ This view relates thoroughly well with an African notion of materiality. Bennett came close to acknowledging a cross-cultural primal ontology by illustrating “vibrant matter” as “a version of [an] idea [that] already found expression in childhood experiences of a world populated by animate things rather than passive objects.”³² But she stopped short of extending the idea to related views in African cultures.

2) On the average, material religion does not engage non-anthropocentric epistemologies beyond Western sources. Cosmocentric epistemologies such as African (Charles Nyamiti) or Asian (Raimon Pannikar) cosmotheandrism have not yet found reception in material religion; and if African cosmotheandrism (the notion that the cosmos is an enchanted world of complex networks of humans, things, divinities, and the yet unborn) receives any attention at all, it suffers from exoticism and obscurantism. Thus, there is little collaboration between continental Africa and the metropole in thought, resource, and personnel. Meyer does fieldwork in Ghana and collaborates with some Ghanaian scholars, graduate students, and postdoctoral academics. But even in such exceptional cases, much of the knowledge production in this collaborative circle sinks its roots into the Western philosophical traditions from which material religion originated.

3) Though material religion did not begin as a decolonial theory of religion’s, nor as a revival of African religions in the first place, it problematizes the disavowal of the fetish as a cross-cultural category, but it does not clearly show the way out of colonial processes of othering in the study of religion’s in Africa. As Chidester rightly notes, colonial attitudes towards Africans and their religions depend to a great extent on the contrasting positions of Africans and Europeans to the material.³³ If so, material religion approach, from African epistemological perspectives, must not only deconstruct Cartesian binaries of mind and matter, but also reconstruct “African bodies” and embodiment of things as resources for a perspectival shift from prescriptivism and passivity in knowledge production.

²⁸ Ibid., 5–6.
²⁹ Meyer et al., “Material Religion’s First Decade;” and Strijdom, “The Material Turn in Religious Studies.”
³⁰ Strijdom, “The Material Turn in Religious Studies,” 2.
³¹ Bräunlein, “Thinking Religion Through Things,” 15, citing Hazard, “The Material Turn,” 65.
³² Bennett, Vibrant Matter, vii.
³³ Chidester, Savage Systems.
3 Dilemmas: Materiality and the beginnings of the study of religion’s in Africa

Scholars of material religion such as Meyer, Morgan, Paine, and Plate reiterate the direct connection between the kind of materiality in the approach and “indigenous religious traditions which long featured as prime instances of ‘animism’ or even ‘fetishism’.” Unfortunately, they equally repeatedly attribute the denigration of such religions to a “post-Reformation Protestant perspective” or some form of a turn in European cultural history or thought. As a result, these scholars only narrowly, if at all, explore the complex colonial trajectory of the fetish as an epistemological category at the onset of the study of religion’s in Africa. Thus, while the thesis of fetish for Meyer et al. is pre-Enlightenment Western traditions and its antithesis the Enlightenment–Reformation dematerialization of religion, the thesis of fetish for Chidester is pre-colonial indigenous (African) primal cultures and the antithesis the colonial denigration and humiliation of African peoples and their cultures.

It is not possible to presume that one would find a uniform meaning of the term fetish in the long list of works that deal with religion’s in Africa. The concept is simply ambivalent, controversial, and with hindsight, rather imprecise or bankrupt, particularly as regards its origins in the history of the study of religion’s in Africa. Hence, though the idea of fetish is receiving renewed multidisciplinary interest after it had fallen out of anthropological vocabulary because of its embarrassing history, there are today some scholars who insist that the term must be completely eradicated. This conceptual ambivalence is indicative of the challenges posed to scholars of religion in Africa in their attempt to use the material approach as a research method.

Notwithstanding the variations in meaning and disagreement about the term, it is now commonly accepted that the term fetish has come to us from the Portuguese feitico, making its course from Latin roots – factitious, meaning “manufacture.” Pietz, after an extensive study of the history of the term, explains that fetiso, the pidgin rendition of the Portuguese feitico, “meant in the late Middle Ages ‘magical practice’ or ‘witchcraft’ performed, often innocently, by the simple, ignorant classes.” He notes that the term has gone through several transformations in its reception into European languages. Meyer, on her part, putting together ideas from her research, suggests “the term fetish refers to objects that have been made by human hands and yet are held to have some life of their own.”

Pietz, Meyer, and Chidester agree with contemporary research that fetish is a cross-cultural creation, occurring initially “in actual commercial and cultural exchanges between [West] Africans and Westerners.” In that context, fetishes were no more than embodiments of intangible experience and “material” mediations of “immaterial” presence and reality. The term’s later development in meaning as a marker of savages and their religions was the result of colonial Christianity and evolutionary anthropology. This development laid the foundations for the study of religion’s in Africa.

The foundation of today’s fully developed discipline of the scientific study of religion’s is inextricably linked to the annals of mission and the notes of armchair anthropologists in Africa. Both groups had

34 Meyer et al., “Material Religion’s First Decade,” 210.
35 Ibid.
36 Pietz, “The Problem of the Fetish I,” 5–17.
37 Ibid., 5.
38 Aston, “Fetishism,” 894–8; Böhme, Fetischismus und Kultur; both sources also cited in Meyer, Mediation and the Genesis of Presence.
39 Pietz, “The Problem of the Fetish I,” 6.
40 Meyer, Mediation and the Genesis of Presence, 15.
41 Pietz, “The Problem of the Fetish I;” Meyer, Mediation and the Genesis of Presence; and Chidester, “The Church of Baseball.”
42 Meyer, Mediation and the Genesis of Presence, 15.
43 Ibid., 7.
44 Evans-Pritchard, Theories of Primitive Religion; Beidelman, O. W. Robertson Smith and the Sociological Study of Religion; and Chidester, Empire of Religion.
different approaches, but they shared the evolutionary mindset and the binoculars that characterized their day. For them, religion was essentially European Christianity as expressed in its doctrines and practices. In this regard, early missionary and anthropological theorizing of religion in Africa made fetish and religion antithetical. In other words, as we shall soon consider more closely, in missionary and early anthropological theorizing of religion, the manifestation of religion through African cultural objects had led to the conjecture about the inferiority of the African mind, which ascribed African practices to the category of primitive religion. The cultural psychological ramifications of this initial theorizing of religion and the politics of difference they engendered may well be part of the ambivalent reaction of African academics in their rejection of the concept of fetish as a misnomer and wrong point of departure in the search for knowledge about religion in Africa. Today, it is widely accepted that these colonial missionary and anthropological narratives, as noted earlier, were essentializing manoeuvres in a politics of difference for the sake of European dominance.⁴⁵

Against the background of the beginnings of the discipline, therefore, while the scholarly study of religion in Africa must acknowledge and share in the successes that the material turn has attained in a relatively short period,⁴⁶ it cannot help but also recall that in colonial Africa, the notion of fetish was, par excellence, the mirror of primitive religion and the denigration of the people of the continent. The concept of fetish was not only the medium for the rise of mission Christianity, the fall of African religions, and the enforcement of colonial authority, but also and especially, the genesis of mission theory of religion.⁴⁷ The material approach to the study of religion’s, with its focus on the notion of fetish, therefore, presents a double binding situation when the approach is appreciated from a southern perspective.

My interest is not to belabour the point about negativities of the theorizing that arose from the concept of fetish, since this unfortunate history of the academy in relation to the study of religion’s in Africa has been told time and again. Nevertheless, a restatement of aspects of this history is needed to provide the context of the contentions about the use of fetish, which, therefore, call for circumspection when producing knowledge about religion in Africa through the material method. A recap of how the notion of fetish disaggregated Africans is also necessary to illustrate that theorizing religion from the perspective of materiality is incomplete, unless it includes “a systematic critique of power relations that are at work in the ... comparative study of religions.”⁴⁸ Finally, and most importantly, I argue, based on what became of Africans and their religions through the theories of primitive religion, that even the return to fetish in scholarship does not automatically eliminate the risk of dusting missionary mirrors of (primitive) religion and making of the history of religion into a religion of history. By religion of history, I am referring to the non-logical, but firmly held belief in the spurious conjecture of the “primitive” upon which their explanations of the evolution of religion are based.

4 Fetish: Disavowing the cross-cultural in primitive religion

William Aston’s introduction to the entry on fetishism in the Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics cites Mary Kingsley’s West African Studies with the following report: “The Portuguese navigators who rediscovered West Africa, noticing the veneration paid by Africans to certain objects – trees, fish, idols, and son on – very fairly compared these objects with the amulets, talismans, charms, and little images of saints they themselves used.”⁴⁹ There is a strong suggestion here that the Portuguese navigators themselves were fetishists, who had no trouble naming a similar practice among their West African hosts. They most likely had no

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45 Chidester, Empire of Religion, xii; and Mudimbe, “Discourse of Power and Knowledge,” 55–60.
46 Houtman and Meyer, Things.
47 Ludwig and Adogame, “Introduction,” 1–22; Chidester, Savage Systems; and Beidelman, Colonial Evangelism.
48 Strijdom, “The Material Turn,” 1.
49 Aston, “Fetishism,” 894; citing Kingsley, West African Studies, 44.
politics of culture in mind and, as Kingsley points out, it was just “fair” for them to have “compared” their own objects and practices with those of others. This mercantile comparative religion at the grassroots is hardly recognizable in the theories of primitive religion that developed later. For example, despite his remarkable reference to Kingsley’s report, Aston concluded his introductory article as follows:

Fetishism – taking the word in its most comprehensive signification – rests on two principles. The first is what, in modern phrase, we call the immanence of Deity; the second is the necessity which there is for the spiritual to be expressed in terms of the physical. But the savage’s conceptions of them are crude and inadequate, and his unintelligent application of them has resulted in a profuse outgrowth of gross superstition.\(^5^0\)

Aston is at pains to delineate the two principles of fetishism as a contribution to a “comprehensive” interpretation of the “signification” of the concept of fetish. A comprehensive(?) explanation was needed because the disavowal of fetish and fetishism as cross-cultural phenomena had developed through the crudeness and folly of the savage. As a result of this savage corruption of an otherwise logical cross-cultural practice, Aston suggests there exists the illogical conclusion of generations of scholarship that, contrary to what it signifies, fetishism means “gross superstition.” Fetishism, then, is that which is practiced by the savage and the savage is one who practices fetishism. This vicious and lingering circuitry of narrative about religion in Africa is not difficult to find in the literature relating to fetish and fetishism in the history of the study of religion’s.\(^5^1\)

The main sources of information for these beginnings of the way that religion was theorized in Africa were missionaries, merchants, colonial administrators, and European travellers. The famous examples that Chidester mentions include Willem Bosman, the Utrecht-born young man, known to have sailed to the then Dutch Gold Coast at 16 years of age about 1688, the American Robert Hamill Nassau (1835–1921), who is said to have spent four decades in West Africa, and the French writer Charles de Brosses.\(^5^2\)

The study of religion’s from the perspective of fetish is largely traced to these three men, and others like Cornelius Donovan. Brosses’ Du Culte des Dieux Fétiches of 1760 (recently translated into English for the first time) contributed to the skewed understanding of fetish as the cult of worldly objects, including cultic practices of certain tribes such as oracles, amulets, and talismans, which are believed to be endowed with spiritual power. Similarly, Bosman’s text Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea, written at the beginning of the eighteenth century, “provided the image and conception of fetishes on which Enlightenment intellectuals based their elaboration of the notion [of fetish] into a general theory of primitive religion.”\(^5^3\) Chidester goes further to observe that these beginnings of theories of religion based on fetishism developed to become part of phrenology (the measuring of the size and mass of skulls) as a “science” for the study of religion’s.

In his chapter on “Animals and Animism,”\(^5^4\) Chidester recalls how Donovan (c. 1820–1872), one of the famous phrenologists of the period, believed that the shape of a person’s head was indicative of their veneration ability. He claimed that veneration was an “innate, inalienable, [and] natural ... instinct whose highest object is the Deity.”\(^5^5\) Chidester goes on to inform us that Donovan believed that “long heads” were most capable of veneration. To illustrate this view of the actual relation between skulls and religion, Donovan used the images of Pope Alexander VI, Martin Luther, and Philipp Melanchton. He must have copied these images from Johan Spurzheim’s phrenology textbook, Phrenology, in Context with the Study of Physiognomy (1826), because Spurzheim had a curious idea about them. According to him, Luther’s skull showed more brain, Melanchton’s extraordinary brain, while Alexander VI’s revealed “cerebral organization [that was] despicable in the eyes of a phrenologist. ... Such a head is unfit for any employment of a superior kind, and never gives birth to sentiments of humanity.”\(^5^6\)

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50 Aston, “Fetishism,” 898.
51 Ludwig and Adogame, “Introduction.”
52 Chidester, Empire of Religion.
53 Pietz, “The Problem of the Fetish I,” 2.
54 Chidester, Empire of Religion, 91–124.
55 Ibid., 92.
56 Chidester, Empire of Religion, 92; citing Spurzheim, Phrenology, 71, 154, 160.
This and other such excerpts lead to two important conclusions. The first is that the skulls were viewed as indicators of the humanity of the three personalities in view. The second is the fact that phrenology as a science of religion was basically connected to “Protestant polemics against Catholics” that was subsequently exported to Africa with the view to differentiating civilized from savage skulls. Citing Bank, Chidester points out that “such scientific research was undertaken in British colonies, collecting and measuring skulls to infer mental and moral qualities of ‘savages’ and other ‘uncivilized races’.”

While Donovan may have fallen into oblivion, E. B. Tylor has remained alive and active, especially in the lecture rooms of Departments of Religion in African universities. Tylor was a compatriot of Donovan with whom he attended the Conference of the Ethnological Society in London on April 26, 1870, at which both presented papers. Chidester notes that unlike Donovan,

[Tylor’s] minimal definition of religion as animism or ‘belief in spiritual beings’; his theory of the origin of religion as an attempt to deal with the anomalies posed by dreams and death; and his focus on basic intellectual or cognitive processes in dealing with these dilemmas [are] all of ... features of Tylor’s theoretical work [that] have persisted in the academic study of religion.56

In short, the discourse on fetish as a generalized theory of primitive religion developed in the frontiers of domination and resistance, “a product of power relations ... between Africans and Westerners,” and a clash between Christianity and “heathendom.”59 The theory of primitive religion was in part the fruit of the transportation to Africa of European Protestant versus Catholic polemics, the politicization of Enlightenment science, and the production of knowledge from the privileged position of European cultural ascendancy and power. Fetish in this Eurocentric discourse came to mean an awkward belief in the spiritual power or value of natural or human-made things and objects; a belief that is unintelligible or neurotic. From northern perspectives of the nineteenth century, fetish was a primitive stage of religion, low psychosocial development, or an economic enigma. Meyer puts it succinctly: “Fetish is just ‘bad’; it places first in the category of ‘bad objecthood’.”60

No wonder, then, that some scholars dismiss fetish as “a corrupt genus that obscures the true meaning of the socioreligious practices and artefacts of various non-Western societies.”61 Pietz, for example, would even disagree with Rattray’s suggestion that the word suman of “the Akan-speaking African [should be] substituted altogether for ‘fetish’” as a legitimate way of “reclaiming stigmatized colonial-era ethnographic texts ... back into the native terminology of the particular society being described.”62 Pietz premises his disagreement on the fact that the approach denies the multicultural contexts for the development of the term fetish. At this point, it becomes necessary to ask if the material approach, from southern perspectives, is methodologically fruitful for rehabilitating Africans and their religion’s.

5 Debriefing the material turn in the study of religion’s in Africa

As hinted earlier, the material approach has proven to be a great methodological contribution in a short period of time. There is enough reason, therefore, to answer the question about the usefulness of the material approach in the affirmative. The concept of fetish is a fertile point of departure for material religion. It is a “hybrid term...[indicating] a scandalous blend of ‘human-made thing’ and ‘spirit’; a proverbial rock of offence to challenge and transcend the idea of ‘material religion’ being an oxymoron.”63
To illustrate the point, Meyer recalls two important findings from her research on the “encounters between missionaries of the Norddeutsche Missionsgesellschaft and the Ewe in the 19th and early 20th century.” She found that while material and practical attitudes to religion separated the missionaries from their converts, contemporary African Pentecostal tradition conspicuously benefits from detailed attention to African material worldview and concrete mediation of religion. Based on these findings, Meyer explains that the idea of material religion is neither about materialism nor theism of the nineteenth century. Rather, it is to emphasize the inalienable connection between religion and the material which compels the placing of the very concrete ways through which humans “fabricate... a sense of the presence of something beyond” at the heart of academic studies of religion. She proposes that this can be done through the theoretical frame of mediation by “mobilizing texts, sounds, pictures, or objects, and... engaging practices of speaking, singing, being possessed and so on.”

I agree with Meyer and other scholars who propose the material turn, with its focus on the concept of fetish as a fruitful methodological approach for transforming the scientific study of religion’s. However, I differ on an important presupposition of the approach. It is the presumption that by redressing the Enlightenment and Western Protestant ratiocinations of religion, the material approach also rehabilitates Africans and their religion’s. The power negotiations between Africa and the West in the development of the primitive theory of religion produced systemic subalternity in Africa that cannot be limited to the cognitive level only. It would seem to have had lasting cultural psychological implications too. When the material turn is used for knowledge production from an African epistemological position, which frequently coincides with the phenomenal south, it must explicitly address the experience of subalternity in order to deal with the intra-cultural concerns for the study of religion’s in Africa.

Unless the production of knowledge about religion in the global south is tied to a clear analysis of power relations, it is likely to solve the problem of methodology only halfway. The risk is that the study of religion’s in Africa will continue on a path of passivity which gullibly propagates Western constructs of epistemological emancipation in African institutions of higher learning. Yet, scholarship of religion’s in African contexts must promote proactive knowledge production rather than disguised continuities of metropolitan and dominant epistemes. Uncritical (or over-) reliance on Western-developed critical theories creates “comfortable epistemological positions” that cannot produce “Africa-centred” knowledges. With sufficient cultural–historical introspection, scholars in African contexts can make the subaltern speak by going beyond the first step of analysing power relations to developing positive theories and methods that represent decentred and just epistemes.

Subalternity, more than describing subordination, represents a tapestry of the lack of consciousness, strength, and resources, which disenables a group of people from knowing how to progress from “primitivism.” Therefore, colonial theorizing of religion in Africa on the basis of materiality, as illustrated in this section, can be described as a way of knowledge production that drove Africans into subalternity. Today, even while scholars in the global south are more than aware of this narrative, it is not completely clear if the production of knowledge in the scientific study of religion’s has moved from subalternity to Africa-centred knowledges. According to Cooper and Morrell, Africa-centred knowledge arises in a “creative third space [between] Eurocentrism and Afrocentrism.” They explain:

Africa-centredness is premised on an understanding of the African continent as multiple, global and dynamic. It is a concept that assumes that knowledge, wherever and by whomever it is produced, is available for transgressive, emancipatory and counter-hegemonic use, even as it will necessarily be contradictory, contested and fluid. Africa-centredness insists that unless we are aware of our tools and concepts and the politics to which they are linked, we will invariably reproduce old forms of oppressive power and new orthodoxies.

64 Ibid., 17.
65 Meyer, “There is a Spirit in That Image,” 100–30; and Meyer, “Pentecostal and Neo-liberal Capitalism,” 5–28.
66 Meyer, “Mediation and the Genesis of Presence,” 20.
67 Cooper and Morrell, “Introduction,” 1–20.
68 Gramsci, Selections from the Prison Notebooks; and Guha and Spivak, Selected Subaltern Studies.
69 Cooper and Morrell, “Introduction,” 2.
The point of Cooper and Morell expresses a position that many postcolonial and critical theorists in Africa can identify with. All texts, regardless of their origin, especially when they purport to explicate African life and thought, must be subjected to a “hermeneutic of suspicion.”⁷⁰ A hermeneutic of suspicion works strongly in a situation of cultural identity crisis by helping to reinterpret existing narratives of a people’s experience. A hermeneutic of suspicion is therefore a strong tool for intra-cultural critique and for addressing subalternity. The point is that, today, the perpetration of the binaries of primitive versus civilized, native versus cultured, European versus African cannot be billed to scholars from the global north alone, but also to scholars and practitioners of religion (especially Christianity) in the global south themselves. In Africa, which frequently coincides with the phenomenal south, higher institutions of learning and, in particular, popular (Christian) religious culture are two important sites for observing this self-imposed continuation of the essentializing epistemologies arising from earlier Eurocentric theories of religion that made fetish their point of departure. I will illustrate this point using examples from Ghana, beginning with popular religious culture.

In Ghana, popular religious culture is significantly shaped and transformed through Pentecostal ministries on TV and social media.⁷¹ Since such programmes are highly patronized, they constitute a good site for exploring the vestiges of the psychology of the primitive theory of religion. One of such TV programmes features the ministry of Rev. Kwabena Andrews, popularly called Osofo Kyiri Abosom. In the December 2020 presidential elections in Ghana, Rev. Andrews stood as an independent candidate. The key reason for his fame among his followers and TV audience is his show of “power” in the demolition of Ghanaian Traditional Religious materials such as shrines, statues, amulets, and idols. He believes that these materials are fetish, understood in the Euro-Christian sense of evil, satanic, or at best meaningless superstition and anti-Christian. This understanding is probably insinuated in his designation as Osofo Kyiri Abosom, literally “the (Christian) pastor who hates fetishes.”

Elsewhere, it has been found that this ambivalence of the realization of African Christianity finds expression through the demonization of African traditional religious practices and beliefs while at the same time building on the materialized worldview underlying Traditional Religion as a prism for the practice of Christianity.⁷² Thus, African Christianity, especially, in its Pentecostal-Charismatic forms, has made tremendous success by paying attention to the materialized religious worldview in Ghana. The problem with this ambivalence, however, is its tendency to transform the primitive versus civilized binary into an “evil versus holy [Spirit] binary” in the differentiation of Christianity from Traditional Religion. In this context, the use of the material approach to study religion’s cannot be presumed unless it is also directed towards finding how the present ambivalence of religion precipitates and transforms previous binaries of the negative usage that was made of fetish to theorize religion in Africa.

The second example of an illustration of self-imposed crystallization of essentializing epistemologies that developed with fetish is closely related to the first. It has to do with the same ambivalence, this time not in popular religious culture, but in higher institutions of learning. The anecdote about the irritation that the expression “fetish priest” causes among my colleagues at the Department for the Study of Religion and Human Values is a case in point. It seems to bring to the fore a certain cognitive confusion regarding the semantic content of fetish and the psychological processes it generates. But over and above this is the fact that the material approach shares in a paradox that southern theorists challenge in postcolonial knowledge production. Connell, citing Paulin Hountondji, explains that the paradox finds expression in the fact that “the colonies became a field for the collection of raw material—scientific data—that was sent to the metropole where theory was produced.”⁷³ In this connection, the material approach is to be admired for its disavowal of a dichotomizing Eurocentrism of yesterday and today, because it is unjust and because it does not sustain contemporary heuristics of science. Yet, the approach, like other postcolonial theories, is

⁷⁰ Appiah, “The Challenge,” 260; citing Martey, African Theology, 56.
⁷¹ Witt, “ Television and the Gospel,” 144–64.
⁷² Larbi, Pentecostalism; Meyer, “Pentecostal and Neo-liberal Capitalism.”
⁷³ Connell, Southern Theory, 104; citing Hountondji, “Producing Knowledge,” 1–10.
strongly hosted in the academic metropole and barely known to colleagues in Ghana and other parts of the continent where much data gathering has been done for its development.

In this regard, there is a sense in which continental scholarship in the study of religions lags behind diasporic scholarship, where decoloniality and engagement with colonial history of religions find excellent scholarship. The studies of Matory and Johnson are two examples of such scholarship in recent times.\(^74\) Similar to Chidester, Matory explicates *fetish* as a trope, a way of comparing European social, political, and economic practices to what resonates with a European audience’s imaginings of the foolishness of African religious practice. This metaphor of alterity, according to Matory, produced the Marxist and Freudian abnegation of the *fetish*. But overcoming the subalternity created by Marxist and Freudian social theory, Matory reconstructs the category of *fetish* as a resource for thinking about the social and cultural conditions in which Western social theory developed. Matory argues:

> In fact, a comparison between the circumstances that generated the similarities and differences between psychoanalytical and Afro-Atlantic thinking is likely to teach us a great deal more than these two types of fetish could teach us separately about the nature and management of ambivalence in social relations.\(^75\)

Compared to the vibrancy of scholarship on the category of *fetish* in Western and diasporic academies, there are questions regarding the extent to which the material turn has been successful in addressing “relations [of] authority, exclusion, inclusion, hegemony, partnership, sponsorship, [and] appropriation between intellectuals and institutions in the metropole and those in [continental Africa].”\(^76\)

### 6 Conclusion: Vistas of knowledge production in Africa in the study of religion’s

In the movement from subalternity to non-hegemonic knowledge production and dissemination, one may not expect that the processes would be smooth or unilinear. They will sometimes be “stationary, dynamic, chaotic, even catastrophic.”\(^77\) This means that doing things in the same old ways may not necessarily yield the results we expect. Since criticism usually precedes and fosters creativity, the rejection of hegemonic epistemologies has led to bold initiatives in some countries, where scholars have been working to “de-essentialize” knowledge production. This, for instance, is the case in India. Faculties of the humanities have done something “chaotic” in response to their situations of essentializing epistemologies by introducing what is now called “Subaltern Studies,”\(^78\) masterminded by a group of South Asian scholars who sought to research into their colonial/imperial past. It is established that part of these studies proceeds from action research to understand societies or groups, who through processes of othering are denied participation in dominant power structures. These may be past or contemporary structures put in place through socio-economic, patriarchal, linguistic, racial/cultural, or colonial and neo-colonial systems of domination.

What is the situation in African universities? While it may be argued that they have produced the best of scholars and scholarship in the humanities, African departments for the study of religion’s have not yet “rocked the boat” sufficiently to overcome the binaries of a failed generalized theory of religion’s. Since theory emerges from social experience and the experience in many African societies includes intense engagement with the material (read fetishism), need African institutions of learning wait any longer to introduce “Fetish Studies” in Departments for the Study of Religion’s? It is obvious that something of this kind is likely to destabilize contemporary “exteriorized,” that is curriculum-dependent, approaches of

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\(^74\) Matory, *The Fetish Revisited*; and Johnson, *African American Religions*.
\(^75\) Matory, *The Fetish Revisited*, 118.
\(^76\) Connell, *Southern Theory*, viii.
\(^77\) Mbembe, “African Modes of Self-Writing,” 66.
\(^78\) Guha, “On Some Aspects,” 1–8.
knowledge production in the African academy. But the commotion is most likely needed to initiate a “third space,” which is neither Eurocentric nor Afrocentric. The idea may seem to many a Ghanaian scholar remote; but much is happening in this direction already, except that here again, the initiative is from the academic metropole. In this regard, one may consider, for instance, Rosalind Morris and Daniel Leonard’s *The Returns of Fetishism: Charles de Brosses and the Afterlives of an Idea*. The idea of Fetish Studies or some such discipline could potentially serve as a “gadfly,” forcing an examination of the comfortable epistemological positions from which knowledge is produced in the popular religious culture, and in many institutions of learning in Africa.

African scholars can advance the use of the material method in universities on the continent by developing it into a system of knowledge production that can restore the phenomenon of fetish to its original status as a genuine cross-cultural category and general notion of religion from the perspective of material culture. Such a method will, among other things, consist of the re-reading of the earliest sources to isolate the culturally hierarchical epistemologies they rely on and develop new ways of conceptualizing religious phenomena in more cross-culturally relevant ways. In this connection, using the material approach for research into religion’s in the African academy cannot be another methodological importation, but a process of borrowing, sifting, and adaptation into what we might call critical history of religion’s. A reading of colonial sources in a manner that reveals their flaws and repudiates them for their derogatory vision of Africans and their cultures is quite well-represented in academic discourse. But colonial sources can also be read to excavate from the rabbles they left of African peoples and cultures those clues about the general notions of religion that emerge from fetish, which, because they were considered too primitive, were ascribed to “savages,” and denied general scientific validity. Consider, just for the purpose of illustration, the following excerpt from d’Alviella on fetish:

> All I maintain is that ... man, having been led by different routes to personify the souls of the dead on the one hand, and natural objects and phenomena on the other, subsequently attributed to both alike the character of mysterious superhuman beings. Let us add that this must have taken place everywhere, for there is not a people on earth in which we do not come upon these two forms of belief side by side and intermingled.

The argument that the idea of God must have developed from the attribution of superhuman qualities to the deceased and natural objects is d’Alviella’s inference based on his study of anthropological and missionary sources. In this regard, he was a child of his day, who sought to understand religion’s through an evolutionary prism. But, at the same time, he found that for his supposition to be logical, there could be no bypassing of the evidence suggesting its extension to every “people on earth.” His belief about how humans arrived at the idea of God may be controversial, but the claim that fetishism is cross-culturally generic is a point worth pursuing in research.

To make the valuable contributions of the material turn in the study of religion’s useful in the African context, I propose that it is important for scholars to pay close attention to those domains in which attempts to theorize religion from the perspective of its concrete embodiment could end up in showing that power is knowledge. It is in this regard that the call of Cooper and Morrell⁸ to a rigorous awareness of our tools, concepts, and politics of scholarship in Africa finds their application.

I conclude this article by arguing that re-reading the material turn approach to the study of religion’s yields a radical intra-cultural critique of scholars of religion’s who are concerned to develop knowledges from the perspective of the global south. The study of religion’s from the perspective of fetish reveals that religion is as much about how to construct the distinctly human just as it is about the metaphysical and the divine. From this perspective, the material turn can benefit, in terms of its advancement from the south, from the consciousness that fetish opens to a variety of domains in the study of religion’s. It frees the foundations of the discipline from mainstream approaches, resets the balance of epistemology of religion,

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79 Membre, “African Modes of Self-Writing.”
80 d’Alviella, *The Hibbert Lectures*, 82; also cited in Aston, “Fetishism,” 894.
81 Cooper and Morrell, “Introduction,” 2.
creates opportunity for studying continuity in the manifestations of religious ideas and practices, reduces ideology in the explanation of such ideas and practices, and examines the constructs of power behind the epistemology of religious thought and practice.

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