Fetissoes by Kialy Tihngang

Expanded Exhibition Text

In the 16th century, Portuguese explorers were the first Europeans to make contact with Africans on the shores of modern-day Sierra Leone, setting off a chain of events that led to the transatlantic slave trade. These explorers considered Sierra Leonians to be 'idolaters and sorcerers …ruled by witchcraft, placing their faith in oracles and demons'[1], and deemed their religious objects such as masks, statues, and staffs to be 'the heathen equivalents of the little sacramental objects common among pious Christians'[2]. They called them 'fetissoes', or fetishes: objects believed to have powers - idols worshipped by the Africans due to their 'lack of abstract thought'[3].

During the Middle Passage, slave traders often threw enslaved African people off the ships due to illness, lack of supplies, or, as in the case of the 1781 Zong Massacre, simply to claim reimbursement from insurance companies. However, it appears that many enslaved people jumped overboard of their own volition, choosing to succumb to the unknown waters of the Atlantic Ocean rather than remain in captivity. Their motivations are ambiguous; it could be read as a defeated last resort, or as a final act of resistance against their enslavers.

'Fetissoes' is concerned with diasporic African mythology that explores the latter interpretation, particularly the myth of the Flying Africans. This arose after a group of enslaved Igbo people were transported to Georgia in 1803 and enacted mass suicide by walking into a creek and drowning. In Gullah myth, the Africans grew wings and were able to fly back home across the Atlantic Ocean.

Due to her Cameroonian heritage and childhood years in the Ivory Coast, Kialy's upbringing was scattered with casual references to traditional African water deities like Mami Wata, a beautiful, deadly spirit akin to a European mermaid. During family visits to Cameroon, she watched masked juju processions with the fear and awe of both a British-born interloper and a child. Her time in the Ivory Coast was filled with Nollywood movies that depicted these deities and their often ill-fated interactions with mortals. As an adult in Britain, she catches glimpses of these films at the hairdressers, on obscure TV channels, and on social media.

These traditional African water deities are often demonised by Euro-Christian colonialists, and the religious objects used to venerate them are often simplified and infantilised by art historians. Many of these priceless fetishes were looted, dispersed, and hung in European museums as pieces of decorative art rather than instruments of worship. Kialy is

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[1] William Pietz, 1987, 'The Problem of the fetish, II: the origin of the fetish' Res 13: 23–45

[2] William Pietz, 1987, 'The Problem of the fetish, II: the origin of the fetish' Res 13: 23–45

[3] Iris Hahner, 2005, 'Spirits Speak: A Celebration of African Masks'

interested in the interior lives of these objects, packaged and transported overseas with more care than the enslaved people that were also looted from Africa.

The Benin Bronzes, unpolished and splayed on the British Museum's sterile white walls, seem particularly frozen in time, raring to spring into action. The press in 1897 were "Intrigued and perplexed that work of such technical expertise and naturalism had been found in such quantities in Africa"[4], and throughout the 20th century this attitude has manifested in pseudo-archaeological theories attributing these skillfully crafted objects to Egyptian or Portuguese craftsmen, ancient underwater civilisations, and aliens, amongst others. This assumption of Black African intellectual inferiority directly reinforces the "lack of abstract thought" required for the so-called 'idol worship' of fetishes. Divorced from their former magical lives and hung up by corrupt custodians as pieces of 'primitive' art, Kialy questions whether these fetishes are in a dormant state, patiently awaiting their return to ritual use.

In 'Fetissoes', Kialy speculates that a group of enslaved Africans have jumped overboard a slave ship; in the water they encounter the masters tools[5]: European maritime technology such as periscopes and diving suits. With these materials they build fetishes for traditional African water deities. These take the form of wearable, 2 metre tall periscope suits. They invoke the deities' power and protection by ritualistically wearing the suits and, in a subversion of the Flying Africans myth, are able to re-cross the Atlantic underwater and return home.

The wearable sculptures hanging in the Main Gallery are failed, defective, prototype versions of the periscope suits, discovered at the bottom of the ocean and hung in a museum-like space rather than repatriated to their countries of origin. In this speculation, no physical evidence of the successful periscope suits exists, only stories passed down through word and song, in keeping with traditional African religions. This will leave the deities' existence, the extent of their powers, and their intentions, ambiguous.

> "The majority of African masks have closed eyes – closed to this world, but open, inwardly, to another"[6]

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[4] Annie E. Coombes, 1996, 'Ethnography, Popular Culture, and Institutional Power: Narratives of Benin Culture in the British Museum, 1897–1992'

[5] Audre Lorde, 1984, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." 1984

[6] Iris Hahner, 2005, 'Spirits Speak: A Celebration of African Masks'