

# FETISHISM

## I. DEFINITION

THE word Fetishism has been so misused of late that ethnologists are apt to view it askance and hesitate to employ it in religious classifications. It has been stretched to such an extent in various directions that it has lost the definition and precision necessary for a scientific term. Starting from a humble origin, referring in its native land (Portugal) to the charms and amulets worn 'for luck,' and to relics of saints, 'fetish' grew to such amazing proportions when transplanted to West African soil, that at last there was nothing connected with West African religion to which it was not applied. De Brosses introduced *Fétichisme* as a general descriptive term (8), supposing the word to be connected with *chose jée, fatum*. Comte<sup>1</sup> employed it to describe the universal religious tendency to which Dr. Tylor has

<sup>1</sup> *Philosophie Positive.*

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given the name of Animism (71, chaps. xi.-xvii.). Bastholm claimed 'everything produced by nature or art, which receives divine honour, including the sun, moon, earth, air, fire, water, with rivers, trees, stones, images and animals, considered as objects of divine worship, as Fetishism ;<sup>1</sup> and Lippert (46) defines Fetishism as 'a belief in the souls of the departed coming to dwell in any thing that is tangible or visible in heaven or earth.'

Although Miss Kingsley (39, 139) expresses regret that the word Fetish 'is getting very loosely used in England,' she scarcely helps forward the work of distinction and arrangement when a few lines further on she announces 'When I say Fetish, or Ju Ju, I mean the religion of the natives of West Africa.' Subsequently she overstepped her own definition, describing the secret societies as 'pure fetish' (41, 139), although they 'are not essentially religious,' but 'are mainly judicial.'

The Rev. R. H. Nassau perpetuates this vague use of the word, grouping under the name of Fetishism all native customs even remotely connected, as everything is in West Africa, with religious or magical beliefs, until the ejaculation

<sup>1</sup> *Historische Nachrichten zur Kenntniss der Menschen.*

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uttered when one sneezes or stumbles receives the sounding title, 'fetish prayer' (53, 97).

These 'lumpings' are all the more to be regretted since Miss Kingsley and the Rev. R. H. Nassau are among the chief authorities on West African Fetishism in its most characteristic forms, and a clear definition of the use of the word, with a rigid adherence to its proper meaning, would have done great service in preventing many misconceptions.

The meaning of any word depends upon its definition, and it may be defined in three ways: 1. etymologically; 2. historically; 3. dogmatically.

1. The word fetish is derived through the Portuguese *feitiço* from the Latin *facticius*—*facere*=to do. This shows the original conception at the root of the word.

2. The historical definition shows the growth or evolution of the meaning of the word, starting from its original conception. Dr. Tylor has pointed out how magic has appropriated to itself the derivatives of 'to do,' such as *feitiço* in Portuguese, *fattura* in Italian, *faiture* in Old French, and many more, thus claiming to be 'doing' *par excellence* (70, 135). This tendency is already noticeable even in classical