

Chapter 7

Gifts, Value and the Fetish: Testing the Roles of Offerings

This chapter focuses on the relational roles of gifts (coded as offerings) given to the Virgin of Alcala and the Glastonbury Goddess and continues the discussion from the last chapter with regards to materiality and its relational/ontological possibilities. Offerings, materiality, aesthetic and display presents us with tangible, visible clues that aid in understanding how gift giving facilitates relationships with statues and consequent ontologies in contemporary religious contexts in England and Spain. Further, this investigation has required a more detailed re-interrogation of the fetish as material and conceptual means through which to test both the concepts relationality and the roles of value and materiality (of both offerings and statues) in Western discourses. Through a discussion of value, offerings and fetishism, this argument builds on the last chapter's discussion of Western animist relationality, personhood, perspectives, and aesthetics. It is, finally, through the phenomena of giving gifts/objects to artefacts/objects that fetishism and animism merge, and how we know we are dealing with relationality.

The Roles of Value

Although the concept of value can be understood in several different ways in Western culture, within our dominant modern discourses, value is often intimately related to capitalism, economics and commodities. As will be demonstrated in this chapter, however, both value and the offerings used in exchange situations with the statues of the Virgin and the Goddess are relational, an assertion that is best addressed through a discussion of Mauss's (2006) 'gift'.

In Western economic discourses, value is generally found to be inherent in some objects while it is represented in others. It can be sentimental, devotional, economic, political, magical and/or spiritual and it does not easily conform or cohere to the dominant constructs and dualisms set out by either capitalism or modernity. Based on findings from studying literature about Polynesia, Melanesia, and the American Northwest, Mauss (2006: 5) made the distinction between two types of social relations: gift relations and commodity relations. Commodity relations, as would be found in the 'Euro-centric' West, illustrate the 'strict distinction' between 'things and persons' during exchange situations (Mauss, 2006: 61). The acceptance of a gift by one person gives the giver power over that person (Mauss, 2006: 11). Gift relations, in pre-capitalist societies, illustrate how those involved in gift exchange are linked, i.e. magically, socially, morally, and culturally. The crux of Mauss's contrast between societies lay in the idea that class societies have forgotten the transformative and ambiguous value of the gift. It is not, however, that relational value does not exist in Western European culture, it is simply not as acknowledged. This is because our dominant capitalistic discourse generally encourages people to believe that money can buy freedom and anonymity from social ties. He writes, 'It is our western societies who have recently made man an 'economic animal'. But we are not yet all creatures of this genus (2006: 98). Strathern says that although our Euro-American cultural capitalistic construct appears to be 'free-standing', in actuality, it is not (1997: 307). People cannot be separated from the material world within which they live, conduct business, trade, give gifts, and interact. Strathern says: 'No one is really an isolate' (1997: 195). The value of objects is just as contextual and relational in the West as it is in other cultures. It is based not only on broad cultural valuations, but on unique relationships specific to time and location.

In both the literature review and the last chapter the fetish was introduced, defined and discussed in terms of its etymology and relational possibilities. How the fetish relates to modern concepts of value and then the relational materiality of offerings will now be discussed. The dominant discursive ways in which religious offerings and other objects are valued in our modern culture of capital can begin to be better understood through examples of how European traders encountered the materiality of, first, the African fetish, i.e. for something to be valuable it must be economically viable in terms of European value systems. These ‘budding materialists’ as Graeber calls them (2005: 431) were the forefathers of the modern culture of capital’s current identity. The nature of European value perception is, however, far more complex than this one sided and somewhat simplified statement. Since early colonial encounters differing cultural concepts of value have confounded scholars, traders, explorers and missionaries. What one cultural valuation found attractive and worthwhile, another would find vulgar, disgusting and worthless. This clash of cultures brought the very essence of what cultures find valuable into question, and these questions are directly related to religion and belief. Graeber writes,

Confronted with abundant evidence of the arbitrariness of value, they [Europeans] instead fell back on the position that Africans themselves were arbitrary: they were fetishists, willing to ascribe divine status to a completely random collection of material objects (2005: 424-425).

So when European traders encountered African fetishes, ‘free-standing’ detachable economics (which was a form of exchange little known to Africans until later on) encountered a world where gifts and other objects and interactions were loaded with social significations. Yet Western tendencies to categorize and label objects through the lens of non-relational economics stopped European traders from seeing the complex social value of the fetish. Regardless of the

detached buy and sell interactions that Europeans thought they were taking part in (for their part), they, too, were entering into social relations with Africans whether they thought these relations were purely free standing economics or not. Graeber compares Marx's fetish with that which came about from European/African encounters to explain this social zone of relating. He writes,

In the European accounts social relations tend to disappear. They were simply of no interest. For them there was therefore virtually nothing in between God and the world of material objects. But the Europeans could at least compliment themselves that, unlike Africans, they managed to keep the two apart. Of course they were wrong; the whole thing was largely a projection; they were in fact already well on the way to the kind of fetishism described by Marx where social relations, for the very reason that they are made to disappear, end up getting projected onto objects. All this was in dramatic contradistinction with the Africans, for whom social relations were everything (Graeber, 2005: 432).

Relationships with persons, space, objects and place were, however, always taking place, whether European traders, Enlightened thinkers, and/or colonists had a context within which to understand those ideas or not, and relationships with statues were taking place in 16th and 17th century European cultural discourses as they are today. This is relevant because many of our culturally constructed ideas about how value works are reflected in the accounts and dealings of European traders and colonial encounters.

Contemporarily, and despite modernist Western scholarly distinctions found when, for example, relics are kissed or touched, or when statues are knelt before, the ways in which value

works in vernacular religion at grassroots level differs to how it has been generally understood in the academy. Stallybrass says,

We are squeamish about that process everywhere outside the area we have defined as “the economic.” Our squeamishness is indeed inscribed in our attempts to separate economics from cultural valuation, persons from things, subjects from objects, the “priceless” (us) from the “valueless” (all the rest of the we might imagine as the detachable world) (Stallybrass et al., 2000: 3).

Some scholars might, for example, find offerings such as cow skulls, locks of framed hair, and ‘sentimental objects’ grotesque, or remnants of a pagan past or “primitive” alterity. Or they might find the valuing and venerating of relics, or pieces of cedar and woven willow branches, to be irrational. It can be suggested here that Stallybrass is referring to the fact that scholars might feel uncomfortable when people, or devotees, enter into relationships with materiality because relationships are often the stuff of unpredictability. In the relational zone, offerings, gifts and even commodities are as individualized and personal as the fingerprints of the persons involved in their creation and/or exchange. Each relational event is private and unique whether or not it follows the ‘rules’ or ‘protocol’ set out by the religions within which it takes place. As mentioned in the introduction this unpredictability can be associated with the ways in which the feminine has been typically stereotyped, i.e. uncontrollable, wild, emotional, and irrational. Further, relationships, relating and communication are classically understood as the realm of female action and interaction. They challenge relationships/relationality in ways that further highlight the problem of materiality and the Protestant fear of matter (*mater*, mother). Relationships are a continual occurrence and the ways in which objects are valued is also in a

constant state of flux and change. This challenges the ways in which Western scholars typically reproduce concepts of relationship-free ‘detachable’ commoditized value.

Building on this last assertion, a certain amount of unpredictable value can be found in many of the materials used in the creation of religious objects (statues and offerings) which have no intrinsic, or what Appadurai prefers to call ‘prime value’ (due to there being no such thing as universally ‘intrinsic value’) (1986: 159). How, for example, offerings are valued can reflect the nature of how devotees value their relationships with statues. The objects that contain or represent this form of personalized value are capable of having personhood. We must therefore look at the biographies of *individual* objects and their relationship to time, space, location, and agent to better understand the kind of devotional value studied here. Renfrew (1986) says,

The specific history of an individual object, which is of no particular interest because of its raw material or its workmanship, can also afford it a generally agreed value – for instance, a memento of Queen Elizabeth or of George Washington, or the Stone of Scone. The same is relevant to the reverence accorded objects of religious veneration, whether they are supposed relics of an actual person, or images that command respect, even when the constituent material is not prized – fetish in the original sense. This may derive in part from the specific history of the object, and part from an implied use-value, since the image may be believed to have active powers (1986:158-159).

Renfrew is correct in his assertion that individual objects have to be looked at accordingly, i.e. on an individual basis, even if the actual materials used have no culturally intrinsic value. The value of objects must be regarded in terms of how they are individually treated and related to/with instead of only in terms of widely accepted cultural valuations. I disagree with Renfrew

about the creation or craftsmanship of an object being of little importance. As Marx would have agreed, labor is an important factor in the creation of religious objects, a subject explored in the previous chapter in relation to statues. Marx (1967 [1867]: chp. 2) was aware of the oversimplification and problems that accompany the idea of the ‘free-standing’ economy of the West. This understanding led to his creation of the idea of the ‘fetishism of commodities’. Marx asserts that humans cannot be alienated from the things that they create, buy, exchange, or have in their possession and/or environment. However, the way in which religious objects are valued differs greatly to how ‘everyday’ things are valued, even though both object types (if there can be types) can aid in creating and informing our immediate worlds. This extends to the creation and aesthetic of offerings and the individual relational zones within which they inhabit.

The relational nature of value can be best reflected in religious objects and offerings. Within the shrine and temple of the Virgin of Alcala and the Glastonbury Goddess, gift giving and exchange can be seen in different ways that surpass our modern cultural capitalistic norms. It is within these contexts that objects openly and acceptably have values that signify or contain something other than commoditized value. How, then, is value ascribed to offerings? Is the value of offerings found in the intentionality with which they are given? Do they bear the essences of their givers? The answer to these questions is that offerings are highly personal, which makes them capable of containing many different types of value. For example, an offering can function as a type of currency, but its value is not commoditized and detached from the giver. The act of making gifts to statues creates relationships that generally do not bear the mark of a cold, detachable capitalism. Instead, through personal relationships with the divine in statue form, something mystical, mediating, supernatural and intercessory is generally sought in terms of worldly manifestations. In these situations, exchanges with the divine in statue form resemble

more of that which has been described in the general gift exchange of the indigenous contexts described by Mauss (1997) and Strathern (1997) where relations are constantly being created, maintained and negotiated. Gifts are passed through non dualistic, transformational, relational zones and a myriad of ontological possibilities emerge.

The roles of offerings

Having initiated a general discussion about value, this chapter now turns its attention to offerings, their composition, and the different ways in which they are valued specifically.

Research has found that offerings given to the Virgin and the Goddess illustrate the concept of relationality for two reasons: first, because statue persons emerge with each relational encounter, i.e. it is through the act of giving objects to objects that we know we are dealing with relational engagement. Second, as will be elaborated upon in great detail in this chapter, because the role of objects given in shrines and temples, such as rings, bracelets, even money, are transformative.

Sometimes offerings are relational tools with which one can negotiate with the divine.

Sometimes offerings serve as the basis of contracts ('If you do this for me, then I will give you a lock of my hair'), and sometimes offerings are made in moments of devotional praise and celebration. Whatever the performance or the reason for the performance may be, a type of gift economy is set in motion when devotees make offerings to statues. Kay Turner (1999) refers to 'the economy of the altar' as the 'model of the exchange critical to the productivity of any relationship, human or divine' (1999:107). Turner is right. At the altar, personal problems are laid bare, and promises, sacrifices, pledges and deals are made in ways that reflect the personal relationships experienced between devotee and divine.

The petitions, promises, and requests made to the Goddess and the Virgin share many similarities, as do the nature of the venerative process involved. Yet interviews have found that

in both contexts, devotees seek out and employ the divine for help with issues such as healing of self and/or family, infertility, and/or economic hardship. Offerings also signal thanks for favors done. There are, however, three general reasons why offerings are made:

1. Something good has happened in the devotee's life where the person feels that it has been "Her" (the Goddess or the Virgin) who has provided it for them and they want to show their gratitude in the form of an offering, so offerings are made in thanks.
2. A gift or offering is given with or before a promise or pledge, i.e. 'If you do this for me, I will build a temple in your name, bring you a lock of my hair, a gold ring, or build you new patio, give you a cow, or its skull when it is dead, etc.'
3. An offering is made as votive act of love or veneration without asking for anything in return, i.e. no direct motivation, but the reinforcement of commitment, relationship and devotion.

Further, the types of negotiations entered into with the Goddess and the Virgin point toward the relational roles of offerings. What offerings transmit and mediate for devotees is personal and contextual and it does not always reflect their material composition or value as it is understood within the boundaries of Western capitalistic norms. This is where understanding what is valuable to each religiosity, the cultures within which they exist, and the individual biography of objects is a worthwhile pursuit.

Gift giving to the divine promotes, ensures and facilitates relationships. The value of the gift can also reflect the nature of the relationship as well as the cultural valuations from within which the gift is being given, i.e. devotees want the Virgin to have what normative economic value system by which they live considers to be the best. Schrift says,

Where commodity exchange is focused on a transfer in which objects of equivalent exchange value are reciprocally transacted, the actual objects transferred are incidental to the value of the relationship established (1997: 3).

According to this, the act of making an offering of economic value to the Virgin, for example, would reflect the nature and worth of the relationship had with her, thereby increasing the possibility of earning deeper relationships and acts of reciprocated value or more. Likewise, offering the best of what one has in terms of personal or sentimental value, i.e. that which is most important to a devotee is also a gift of great worth; one that is almost, but not entirely, freed from commoditization. Schrift's analysis is based on the idea that gifts are being exchanged between two human persons; however, the point is clear. In the gesture of gift giving, gifts are given that are considered of great worth and this is a gesture which reflects the worth of the relationship to one or both parties involved in the exchange.

Significant to this discussion of worth, the Virgin of Alcala and the Glastonbury Goddess receive donations and monetary offerings. My first instinct with this research was to ignore the fact that money is left in shrines. For me, money is not very interesting in terms of materiality, i.e. it appears to be lacking in color and creativity. However, as I discovered, it makes up a very large part of the offerings given in both case studies and is a key illustration to my argument. Like the relational roles of other offerings, the value of money and its trajectory change substantially in moments of devotion and giving. Hence, money is a culturally fetishized 'thing', and its presence in temples and shrines and on offering plates makes it just as mediatory as other offerings, but it differs from other offerings in that it has direct attachments to the state, i.e. money connects its agents to the culture of capital. Thus Western animist and fetishist relationality include the use of money and this use of money is a direct reflection of how

modernity (or Westerners attempts at being modern) operates side by side with religion and performance. Lastly, money cannot be ignored because without it, the religiosities examined in this thesis would not be in existence, i.e. both rely on donations for survival and continuation.

Wood, silver, bone and stone

The materials used in the composition of offerings given to the Goddess and the Virgin vary from precious metals such as gold and silver to sentimental things and easily found natural objects such as wood, a pouch of earth, bones, or a hazelnut. As will be addressed further on, these materials and their uses have similarities to those of the fetish. Devotees of the Goddess, for example, will find materials occurring in nature, such as wood, bone, stone, or acorns, to be suitable gifts worth using to create objects, or simply given unrefined, to the Goddess. They will also find things they have created with the Goddess in mind to be of great worth. Animal skulls and other types of bones are commonly seen on the altar and in Temple, or an acorn picked up en route to the Goddess temple by a devotee, for example, will have value because it is indigenous to the land around Glastonbury, and this land is said to have been re-territorialized by the Goddess and her devotees.

As discussed in the previous chapter, how the statues are treated is an indication of their relational status, and in the shrine of the Virgin of Alcala and the temple of the Glastonbury Goddess, statues are treated as divinity. This is exemplified in the use of precious metals as offerings. The statues are given gifts of jewelry and other things that demonstrate their relational, even royal, status. Spanish and English temple and shrine gold is multi-faceted. It is economically valuable, and valuable in many other ways, too. As seen from the ethnographies, gold plays an extraordinary role when examining the gifts/offerings given to the Spanish Virgin.

For example, the Santero said that they have a backlog of jewelry to be placed on the body of the Virgin, and he changes each ring on her fingers out for other ones at least once a week. Father Marco also told me that a large amount of gold passes through the shrine yearly. He used the example of there being enough gold to melt down and immerse the statue of the Virgin completely. Gold is the most common theme for religiously and economically precious offerings throughout Spain.

Both the Virgin of Alcala and the briefly touched upon examination of Our Lady of Glastonbury are 'acknowledged statues' that have been crowned by the Vatican with crowns of gold that had been melted down from the jewelry of devotees. These crowns exemplify their status as royal, special, honored guests. The gold used contains economic and sentimental value simultaneously as it was the material of family heirlooms. This fact transforms the gold's value as it bears/bore essences of family members, thus further perpetuating relationships between family lineages of devotees with the statues, and rooting the statues further into their communities. This is another way in which the highest of economic and spiritual value is on display. In the crowns there are elements of sacrificial value, curative value, and things given in need or gratitude. The value of the gold threaded mantles of the Virgin is also an indication of the value she has for her devotees. In the Goddess Temple, too, there are objects of economic value. Much more silver than gold is left in the temple. This is perhaps due to the fact that silver is worn more by people in the 'alternative' scene than gold and represents a set of values found in the counter culture where this religiosity exists.

Creativity is relational, and creatively constructed objects made by devotees of both case studies are often of great worth, regardless of the materials used. For example, devotees of the Virgin will make promises to her, cut and frame locks of hair or bandages, make needlework

images and other objects relating to either the promise made, or to the miracle prayed for/granted, and the divinely inspired process of creation is the height of celebration of the Goddess. Turner says

Obviously, the altar's economy of spiritual "riches" does not refer to market value, but to great symbolic value, freely accruing in an environment of full and dynamic creative independence (Turner, 1999:109).

This 'creative independence' is, however, double sided and as mentioned previously, money, gold, and other items with 'market value' and they cannot always be isolated from the creative, symbolic 'spiritual riches' discussed by Turner. Offerings are often creative, spontaneous reactions of moments of devotion, faith, and need, and that can entail any number of readily available environmental elements, economically valuable or not.

Sentimental Value

Another of the common themes that run through the types of offerings left in the temple and the shrines is that offerings given to the Virgin and the Goddess have sentimental value. Renfrew says,

Often the term "sentimental value" is used to refer to the estimation that a specific person accords an object when the high estimation is not widely shared (1986: 158).

In the cases discussed here, the value of objects is personal and not widely shared. Hence, sentimental value deals with two things: objects that contain the essences and identities of their owners, and objects that have 'unknowable' value to any person or object person outside the parameters of the individual, private, and votive act. That is, unless the objects also carry some

type of commoditized exchange value. Objects/offerings of sentimental value exemplify the fact that offerings are relational in their own way which differs from the relationality of statues. Let us now look at the role that objects of sentimental value play specifically.

Sentimental objects bear personhood in a way that is unique to objects. They are loaded with memory, essences, identity, and history, whether of places, experiences or social relations. Sentimental objects also have stories ‘attached’ to them. In essence, individual things, as Kopytoff (1986) says, have biographies. *Ex voto* pictures, for example, tell the stories and personal narratives of everyday people’s gratitude following their return to good health. The Virgin of Alcala receives extremely personal items such as locks of plaited hair, jewellery or bandages worn by devotees, heir looms, or photos of loved ones ill or deceased. Baby items are also commonly left in the shrine of the Virgin of Alcala, as was pointed out previously one of her most famous roles is that of curer of infertility, much of which was once worn by the babies that were born to the mothers who visited the shrine seeking help with conception and fertility. This is why one often sees baby shoes, baby dummies, baby pictures and photos of babies in the shrine. As mentioned before, the jewellery left as offerings in the shrine were melted down to make the crown that sits on her head, much of which contained sentimental familial value. The Goddess is also famous for healing, and photos, jewellery, and other highly personal items of sentimental value are also found. The point of cohesion within the Goddess and Virgin case studies is that value is negotiable, indeed, relational in moments of giving and/or active relating. What is special about sentimental objects is that they have the ability to facilitate personal relationships with statues.

The understanding of religious offerings (especially *sentimental* objects) as extensions of the self is worth discussing insofar as it aids in understanding their flexibility and value as agents

of devotion. It also points toward a discussion that will be engaged further where the discourse of the fetish helps in better understanding the relational roles of offerings. Strathern (1997) says (to something that is also a valid statement for Westerners in general)

As I understand it, what Euro-Americans call gifts in the late twentieth-century consumer culture, whether body substance or merchandise, are regarded as extensions of the self insofar as they carry the expression of sentiments (1997: 302).

While gifts, or offerings to the divine, might ‘carry the expression of sentiments’, they are also capable of maintaining their own biographies, as suggested by Renfrew (1986: 159). For example, if an object is considered an extension of a devotee (something that is worn or carried for many years such as a piece of rose quartz or grandmother’s ring), that object will contain the utmost value to him or her for many possible reasons. Those reasons might include the context in which the object came to the bearer, or perhaps there is an attachment that has grown with time spent with the object. That particular object may or may not be of *sentimental* value, but might also be capable of carrying, for example, the *essence* of the bearer, as with a picture, for example. This is especially true in terms of the value of *healing*. When the Virgin of Alcala or the Glastonbury Goddess are approached and negotiated with so that either the person doing the approaching or a loved one can be healed, the question arises: what price or object can be or should be paid or given in return for healing? In some instances, the act of curing a body of some form of illness is not something that can be bought. Hence, that which mediates between this world and the supernatural (offerings and statues) is sought for such feats and a devotee might want to give the most precious thing that he or she has in exchange for granting this favor. These ‘things’ that are given are often family heirlooms or things of sentimental, personal value and would have their own particular biography that would add to their ‘specialness’ in terms of

making an offering. If, for example, the individual path of one of the gold rings given at the shrine of Alcala is followed, one might see that it went from the extraction of gold from the earth, to production, then to an 'everyday' thing that was bought and sold (like those discussed by Miller, Latour, Appadurai and others) and given half heartedly to someone who in truth, did not like it. Then, let us assume that the ring went to a pawn broker where it sat for a year and collected dust before someone came along and bought it for a betrothal. After the betrothal, the betrothed wore it for 45 years until she died, leaving the ring to her daughter. Then the ring, out of desperation for the resolution of difficult circumstances makes it by the hand of the daughter to the shrine of the Virgin. Here, the ring is offered in absolute belief, prayer, confidence and meditation that said request will be answered, but allowing for the possibility that the Virgin or the Goddess knows best which might result in the request not being granted. The ring is then placed on the wooden fingers of the statue where it stays for a week before being sent to the *hermandad's* treasure store where it might stay for many years, or until it is melted down to make something special for the Virgin, such as an additional ornament to the crown (or as the parish priest said, before the Virgin gets immersed and plated in gold). This ring whose material came from the earth, then was mixed with other metal hardeners, was at one time something mundane (*mundial*, or from the earth), and it was *alive*. Then, apart from its humanly imposed value as precious gold, it became something of sentimental value. From here, it became a gift given to the divine in exchange for some type of aid in the form of supernatural intervention. It became something of sacred/relational value, i.e. something worthy of negotiations with the divine. In its biography, it was living and of the earth, then a commodity. Then it became something that was not a common commodity (at least to the person who wore it). It (and its value) was transformed in moments of manipulation and performance and in accordance with the

relationships and use value that persons and object persons were having with it at any given time. The sample ring mediates between statue and devotee, and relationships are consequently created and maintained. Hence, it follows, that if the same object (the rose quartz crystal or grandmother's ring) is given in devotion, it contains a multitude of possibilities, i.e. it can be a devotional agent whereby sentimental value (part of the identity of the giver) is transferred to the divine, it can be understood to contain the essence of the bearer, or it can have its own independent purpose for being.

Value, miracles and veneration

As demonstrated in the shrines of the Virgin and the Goddess, value must then take on a whole new set of rules: a baby dummy is just a baby dummy to the common observer, but a baby dummy offered in response to the 'miracle' of fertility is something more. It is transformed into a 'thank you', a physical part of the devotee extended in thanks, or a votive offering of praise to the Virgin who cured a woman's infertility. The presence of a baby dummy in the shrine testifies to miracle performed and gives hope and faith to other women or couples who make pilgrimages to the shrine to ask for the blessing of fertility. In a sense, the presence of the baby dummy is also an extension of the Virgin and her reciprocated relationship with the devotee. It links both Virgin and devotee to the answered prayer, miracle or blessing. To a Goddess devotee, a chestnut is not 'just a chestnut', but a thought of remembrance to the Goddess that may have wanted to be picked up by the devotee and taken to the altar. The chestnut is also a subject capable of transmitting praise or celebration to the Goddess who is responsible for not only creating it and the devotee, but for the world, life and its cycles. Therefore ontologically, different worlds are revealed in the things that are considered valuable and given in thanks or exchange inside the workings of the creative relational tensions that hold the economy of offerings together. The

‘things’ that are left behind by devotees go beyond meaning, representation, symbolic, social, and economic both in theory and in practice. They exist on the outskirts of capitalism and they have a pass to enter into the mainstream when and how they please. Offerings, like statues, operate within the relational, fetish zone.

Offerings and the fetish

Now that value and offerings have been addressed in the case studies, a final discussion about the fetish and how it relates to the offerings given in the shrine and temple of the Virgin and the Goddess will be initiated. First, in order to embark on this examination effectively, it must be first reasserted that Goddess Pagans and vernacular Catholics are not ‘fetishists’ in the traditional sense of the word, nor is it the intention of this thesis to make this implication. Understanding the epistemological and cosmological differences between fetishists and vernacular Catholic and Goddess Pagan statue devotees are significant factors in understanding the roles of matter in each context. These things acknowledged and clarified, if the actual materiality, function and roles of offerings, compared with the materiality, function and roles of the fetish are considered, there are definite similarities as well as differences.

From the ‘arbitrariness of value’ (Graeber, 2005: 424-425) to the materials used, surveying the similarities found between offerings and fetishes aid in testing the roles of matter in Western cultural discourses. These examinations are based upon the ways in which both offerings and fetishes are relational, i.e. they both have the ability to transform, mediate, seal contracts and challenge modern concepts of value. Fetishes can be created from many things such as materials of economic value such as ‘fetish gold’ or they can be things of animal tails, bone, shell, or *whatever else might be present in the moment of their own creation*. The fetish is a collaborative project. It is a contract that serves to seal agreements (the consequences of which are punishment

by the fetish if agreements are broken). Fetishes can be bits of wood, bibles, beads, feathers and bones. A fetish might serve its creator in a similar way to how the Bible serves its adherents for the swearing of oaths in a court of law. Like Catholic rosary beads and amulets, the whole of the components of the fetish can be considered talismanic. It can offer protection. Like offerings (and specifically the images and cast moldings of limbs found in the form of *ex votos* in the shrine of Alcala), it can also be an extension of the fetishist. Like statues of the Goddess or Mary, sometimes the fetish is dressed, fed, or housed. The fetish is sometimes treated as a god, and destroyed by the people who created it. The fetish exists under negotiated terms. Its status is always in a state of flux. It is not fixed. As with the roles of offerings, subjects and objects cohere with the fetish. It is the beginning and end of devotion and it has the power to traverse worlds and boundaries, to heal, to protect, to make magic, to punish, and to bind agreements. Offerings, like the fetish, are relational tools and the roles of offerings are not all together different from those of the fetish as described by Graeber, Pietz and Johnson.

Can the roles and materiality of religious offerings be considered ‘fetishistic’? Yes. Once divorced from the ‘problem of the fetish’, the ‘problem of materiality’ and the commonly accepted dualities discussed throughout this thesis, offerings can be considered fetishistic. This assertion is best illustrated when working from the previously mentioned etymology of the word which is, ‘that which is made’ (Johnson, 2000: 229) and understand that the fetish is thing of creative relational engagement whose role is ever changing. This can be exemplified through looking again at the roles of sentimental objects. Johnson says,

In sum, if one means of reclaiming the fetish is tracing its etymology and usage, the other is by changing its arrow of valuation from denoting that which is Other to that which is right under our noses. That is to say, there may be social/cultural phenomena that are

most usefully understood under the rubric of the fetish—phenomena whose primary criterion is their materiality and condensed signification. Obvious examples named above include a wedding ring or a photo of the beloved (2000: 252).

Using Johnson's example of a wedding ring or a photo of a loved one, the phenomena of the giving of offerings such as family heirlooms can now be considered. Building on this chapter's discussion of sentimental value, objects such as these are fetishized in that they are also extensions of their givers. The gold jewelry that was melted down to go into the crowns of Our Lady and the Virgin of Alcala will, for example, hold the essences of those who had previously wore the gold that was melted down. Those essences may only be recognizable to those family members of the person who donated the rings and other jewelry, or those essences might forever be present in the crowns. It is not possible to know for certain. Sentimental/fetishistic value does not, however, stop with jewelry. As mentioned before, animal bones, earrings, carved pieces of wood, feathers, locks of hair, cloth, bandages, war medals, cigarettes, dummies, plasters, sea shells, stones, ribbons, corn dollies, pictures, necklaces, flowers, little statues, bracelets, and all the personally relational materials used in acts of devotion in these settings are found in the temple and the shrine. The ways in which these things are valued, their purposes and their creative functions point to the similarities of those found within the discourse of the fetish.

In terms of creation, protocol and purpose, offerings and fetishes also sometimes differ. Unlike the fetish, the before mentioned aesthetic and protocol surrounding that which is considered acceptable to be left as offerings do not exist in the same way for the fetish. The fetish is diverse and spontaneous and can be made from the materials present in the moment of, for example, a contractual agreement between two or more human persons (a contract that the fetish witnesses and is capable of punishing parties who do not maintain their part in the

agreement). Although offerings can also be spontaneously ‘picked up’ in route to the temple or shrine, offerings are not as ‘free’ as fetishes. An example of this lies in the fact that the fetish is not limited to the aesthetics involved (especially the Goddess religiosity) in maintaining color coding and other material elements of the ritual year. The materiality associated with the ritual year strongly influences shrine and temple creativity and thus affects the roles and function of the offering when discussed using the rubric of the fetish. The creation of the fetish does not have religious/liturgical restrictions. Another difference between the creativity of offerings and the fetish is that devotees are influenced by that which they think the Virgin and Goddess will want them to bring to the temple. The ‘desires’ of the deities, whether divinely inspired, inspired by doctrinal and/or aesthetic protocol, or both, shape how offerings are created and ultimately what is given. So although offerings are contractual and sometimes created in moments of divine inspiration, unlike the fetish, offerings cannot be gods who punish if contracts or promises are broken. Statues, however, are a different story.

Like Mauss’ (2006) idea of gifts, the fetish is contractually constructed in order to help build social relations between two human persons. Yet the kinds of contracts that are made in the Goddess Temple and the shrine of the Virgin take place between statue persons and human persons. It is an act of negotiation that depends on faith and belief. Offerings are often left before and/or after promises are made, and in some cases they testify to promises that have been kept. As demonstrated in the ethnographic accounts, promises are negotiations and contracts with the divine found in the example of words such as, ‘If you do this for me, I will buy you a new roof for your shrine’. Here, offerings serve as contractual, mediating currency whereby the economy of gift giving is maintained and continued. This type of promise is conceptual instead of material, but it is current and contractual just the same. So what are the dynamics that take place

when statues of the Goddess and Virgin are contracted for purposes of healing? Promises made in the form of offerings in return for healing are a commonality found in each case study. The *Santero* says about the Virgin in cases of healing, 'If she does not want it to happen, it will not happen'. Further studies might address what happens when the Virgin or the Goddess does not fulfill a promise. This might put an end to the promise of exchange and reciprocity. Might the devotee who enters into their bargain with the deity/saint retract their offering, pledge or promise? This is a question leads me to the next phase of this chapter: power relations. Yet *ex votos* line the walls of the shrine. Like the closing of an open ended circuit, paintings are commissioned for promises that have been 'completed' as they say in Spain. This attribution of absolute power to the Virgin can be likened to Pels 'spirit of matter' where power is not thought to be transcendent, but inherent in the statue, both despite and in congruence with, doctrinal implications. So whereas the materials used and the ways in which they are valued in the creation of the fetish are often similar to that of offerings, the roles that statues play are sometimes more fetishistic than those of offerings.

Power Relations and Perspectives

Surveying the types of relationships that devotees have with the statues (and vice versa) leads to explorations into the power relations that take place between the two, an issue that both engages and challenges Maussian (2006) and other generally accepted ideas of gift exchange and reciprocity where, bound by social obligation, gifts are given between human persons who seek reciprocal ends. In shrines and temples, there is a form of gift exchange that, like Strathern found in Melanesia, creates long lasting relations with the divine. However, applying Mauss' 'gift' to the religiosities that surround the Virgin and the Goddess is not an easy task. The difficulty encountered here is that the statue persons and human persons involved in gift exchange have

different ‘corporeal’ perspectives, or points of view located within their bodies (Viveiros de Castro, 2004a). It is, however, through surveying this phenomenon of giving objects coded as offerings to other objects (statues) that we know that we are dealing with Western animist relationality.

How this works in more detail will now be examined. There is a type of gift giving and reciprocity that takes place at the altars of the Goddess and the Virgin, but it is not the type of gift exchange or reciprocity discussed by Mauss (2006: 13) where gifts are social representatives being given and received by two human-person participants who share law, or a set of socially agreed norms. In these contexts, objects are given to objects and the giver is the human agent. Devotees ‘perform’ before statues and make offerings/give gifts. How, then, are these gifts received? How are they accepted, if at all? The Virgin and the Goddess share culture with their devotees, but can statue persons and human persons share etiquette of gift exchange? It was toward the end of my thesis that I began to stumble upon the significance of these questions, hence, further studies will need to address these questions in greater detail, and more. In the meantime, offerings are here considered using the discourse of the fetish. Graeber argues that the ‘fetish’ was born out of pure improvisation between peoples (in this case human persons and statue persons) who did not understand one another yet who had desires regarding what they wanted to ‘get’ from the world and from each other. Graeber writes,

This is what one might expect in a world of almost constant social creativity; in which few arrangements were fixed and permanent, and, even more, where there was little feeling that they really should be fixed and permanent; in which, in short, people were

indeed in a constant process of imagining new social arrangements and then trying to bring them into being (2005: 27).

Gifts serve as relational tools and exchange currency that ensures the fulfillment of the concerns (worldly and other than worldly) of those who give and receive them. Persons (human and other than human) are brought together under those desires.

In terms of reciprocity and exchange, statues must give something back. In the case studies discussed here, my informants say that they do. The Goddess and the Virgin are said to grant wishes, protect, and cure illnesses and infertility. These statues/deities can be negotiated with to make these things happen. Statues are said to listen, empathize, and they can, depending on the encounter, play either intercessory roles to greater supernatural powers, be immanently powerful, or both. They must do this if they are to maintain their perspectives of power, i.e. their divine, royal status and ties with devotees.

Mauss' (2006) research among the Maori found that the giving of gifts pivots on factors of human exchange where objects can be enchanted by the giver, be poisonous, magical, or have good or bad will (2006: 13). Human persons do not usually have supernatural powers, but statues of the divine feminine do (or else they are said to). This does not denote equality. If the giving of gifts, according to Mauss (2006: 18), is about achieving balance through obligation and reciprocation, then statue devotion to the Virgin and the Goddess do not quite fit into this equation. Gifts are, however, given nonetheless. Like the fetish, the power of the Goddess and the Virgin is thought to be able to punish, to destroy enemies, and protect devotees and entire parishes from disasters. In this way, statues have more power than devotees. Gift giving to statues also maintains the peace with statues whose power can be so unpredictable and unruly that offerings must be made to satisfy that whose power is, in actuality, other and therefore

unknowable and potentially dangerous. Devotees can, however, have power over the Virgin and the Goddess, too. For example, should the statues stop fulfilling their roles and duties, those who maintain their positions (through maintenance and belief) could potentially rebel. Guardians and care takers could simply let the statues fall into ruin in terms of restorative processes, or in the case of the Goddess, they could be left to decompose instead of being ceremonially burned in a way that is suitable to divine royalty. So when Graeber (2005: 411) writes of social creativity in terms of statues that we create and then fall down and worship, perhaps this is better understood as a *creative tension* between persons who are not and cannot be social in the same way, but who are mutually dependent upon one another and share culture in terms of religion.

Mediation

As a final but by no means lesser point to the thesis, the creative tension that exists between devotees and statues can be momentarily reconciled through both the offerings themselves and the act of giving offerings. Viveiros de Castro says,

The exchange model of action supposes that the other of the subject is another subject, not an object; and this, of course, is what perspectivism is all about subjectification (2004a: 477).

Whereas the act of giving offerings is transformational for both human persons and statue persons, i.e. both become subjects in moments of active relating, despite what the differences in perspective or power might be, offerings are mediators who resolve power conflicts and tensions between two different ‘bodies’ who have different capabilities. Just as Bourdieu (1997: 231) is concerned with what happens in exchange situations in the stages that pass between giver and

receiver, I am concerned with the transformational process that occurs when offerings are in route to the divine. Building on Pels' idea that the fetish refers to objects of 'abnormal traffic' (1998: 94), offerings also frequent the relational zone and the pathways of magic, mysticism, the so called irrational, and the religious. They have a tool-like use value that renders them capable of conveying messages to statues who are perceived by devotees to a) have supernatural powers and influence and who b) sit on the frontier between this world and beyond. Mediation must occur in these moments to build bridges between two types of persons, i.e. human persons and object persons. Offerings also mediate between Western concepts of value, i.e. economic and non-economic. Here, everyday, or 'secondary' relational objects can be transformed or converted into gifts and/or relational tools (primary relational things), and their relational status changes depending on the intentionality of the giver or the ontological possibilities contained by the object. This is not to say, however, that offerings are not capable of supporting their own discourses and intentionality. Like Harvey's discussion of stones (2005b: 36), offerings are just as capable of personhood as any other object, plant, animal or human depending on relational engagement and further, the co-creative, co-relational process of exchange that occurs between devotees and statues. These so-called objects are far from normal, common commodities, but they can have their humble origins there, too.

Conclusion to Chapter 7

With the help of the discourse of the fetish, this chapter has established that in both the Goddess Temple and the shrine of the Virgin of Alcala, offerings both encompass and go beyond Western concepts of value while simultaneously performing the role of mediators between gift giver and receiver, i.e. human persons and object persons. It is through these exchanges that relationships are facilitated and maintained and how power relations are kept in balance between statues and

devotees. The transformational roles of offerings given in shrine and temple settings reflect the undercurrent of the nature of the culture of capital, i.e. that objects and subjects can seldom be separated, or to use Marx's analogy, *alienated* from one another. Therefore the roles that offerings play are demonstrative of roles that objects play in Western culture. Further the flexibility of the relational nature of offerings points toward the flexibility that accompanies the uniqueness of animist relational encounters and the ontologies that consequently emerge as a result.