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# The White Peril and *L'Art nègre*: Picasso, Primitivism, and Anticolonialism

Patricia Leighton

*An awareness on the part of Picasso and his circle of the colonial exploitation that brought African art into the domain of French culture suggests additional levels of meaning in modernist uses of primitivism. The popular image of Africa in pre-World War I France (embraced by modernists as an imagined primal spiritism), the response on the left to French colonial theory, and the inflammatory debates in the press and Chamber of Deputies in 1905-6 following the revelations of abuses against indigenous populations in the French and Belgian Congos, form an inextricable part of the power of an allusion to "Africa" in the period 1905-9 and reveal that the preference of some modernists for "primitive" cultures was as much an act of social criticism as a search for a new art.*

"Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask and he will tell you the truth."

Oscar Wilde, *The Artist as Critic*

Africanism as a movement in early twentieth-century art in France is by now well known; its artists, their paintings, sculptures, and "influences" are documented and catalogued. But the generative impulse for this self-conscious undermining of French tradition is not yet well understood: primitivism as an avant-garde gesture, as a provocative rather than merely appreciative act, with social as well as stylistic consequences. An understanding of the political context of left-wing avant-gardism in pre-World War I Paris fundamentally alters the aesthetic view of much modern art, nowhere so tellingly as in the Africanism of Picasso and his circle.<sup>1</sup> This essay will consider the concept of primitivism in prewar France by examining the historical and political context of its role in modernist aesthetic radicalism, with special focus on Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'A-*

*vignon* of 1907 (Fig. 1). Criticism of the exhibition "'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art" at the Museum of Modern Art in 1984 rightly suggested the need to look at the larger cultural context of the enthusiasm for *choses nègres*;<sup>2</sup> this essay will consider the approbation and appropriation of African art on the part of modernist artists as they extend to a larger social and political view of the people who made that art and, consequently, to a larger view of the social and political implications of primitivism.

It is well recognized that romantic attitudes toward so-called "primitive" peoples had a history in modern Europe going back at least to Rousseau, and that Gauguin's primitivist model appealed strongly to the next generation of modernists;<sup>3</sup> but it is not yet understood that a compelling nexus of political events and attitudes during the *avant-guerre* additionally — and inescapably — informed the response to African art and the motives of Africanizing artists. Picasso had long moved his work toward simplification and crudity under the influence of the Barcelona

<sup>1</sup> A shorter version of this essay was presented at the College Art Association Annual Meeting of 1989, San Francisco, and is part of a larger study, *Art and Social Radicalism in France, 1900-1914*, on which I am currently engaged. Initial stages of research on this project were aided by a J. Paul Getty Fellowship in the History of Art and the Humanities in 1985-86, and grants from the American Philosophical Society in 1985, the University of Delaware in 1987, and the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1989, for which I would like to express my gratitude. I am additionally grateful for a Samuel H. Kress Senior Fellowship at the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts, where I completed the final research and writing of this essay. I would especially like to thank Mark Antliff, Jody Blake, Suzanne Preston Blier, and Jeffrey Weiss for discussions on various aspects of this subject.

<sup>2</sup> For considerations of Picasso and Africanism, see R. Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Painting*, New York (1938), rev. ed., 1967; J. Laude, *La Peinture française (1905-1914) et "l'art nègre"*, Paris, 1968; W. Rubin, "Picasso," in Rubin, 241-343; and Y.-A. Bois, "Kahnweiler's Lesson," *Representations*, Spring 1987, 33-68. Bois's article, pp. 38ff, valuably distinguishes between Picasso's initial "morphological-expressionist" interest in

*l'art nègre* and his "structural" interest beginning in 1912; my study is concerned with Picasso's first period of involvement, looking here at African art as a cultural allusion whose meanings reverberated in the surrounding milieu.

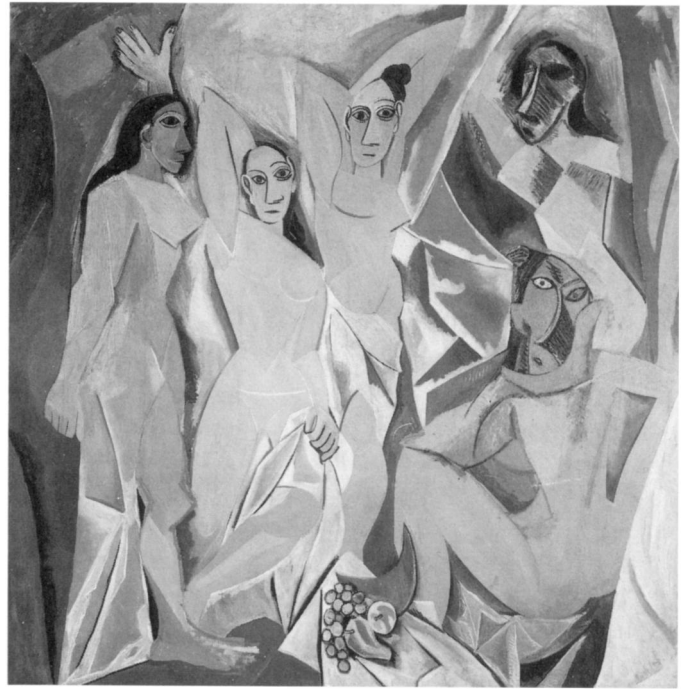
For the lengthy debate over the "'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art" exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, see J. Clifford, "Histories of the Tribal and the Modern," *Art in America*, April 1985, 164-177 and 215; Y.-A. Bois, "La Pensée sauvage," *Art in America*, April 1985, 178-188; T. McEvelley, "Doctor Lawyer Indian Chief," *Artforum*, Nov. 1984, 54-60, and the ensuing debate in "Letters," *Artforum*, Feb. 1985, 42-51; and M. Peppiatt, *Connaissance des arts*, Sept. 1984, 84-95.

<sup>3</sup> For the French views of "Africa" and traditions of primitivism, see C. Miller, *Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in France*, Chicago and London, 1985, and F. Connelly, "The Origins and Development of Primitivism in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century European Art and Aesthetics," Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1987. For Gauguin and primitivism, see K. Varnedoe, "Gauguin," in Rubin, 179-209.

*modernistes*, who already admired Iberian and Catalan Romanesque art in the 1880s and nineties;<sup>4</sup> and he first introduced Iberian forms in his work during 1906. What is new in Picasso's work of 1907 is not only his more brutally primitivizing style, but resonances of the popular view of Africa and its relation to the French Empire. The "dark continent" captured the imaginations of artists and writers working in an anarchist vein as a result of scandals and fiery debates over French colonial policy in Africa that took place in 1905-6 and the resulting outcry of anticolonial opposition from anarchists and socialists. These revelations broke upon the world in 1905-6, in the same period that Picasso, Vlaminck, Derain, and others were inspired to "discover" an African art that had been visible in Paris since at least the 1890s.<sup>5</sup> The anarchist backgrounds of Picasso, Maurice Vlaminck, Kees van Dongen, Guillaume Apollinaire, Alfred Jarry, and many in their larger circle meant that everything to do with Africa, and especially France's colonies in West and Central Africa, became charged with political meaning during the *avant-guerre* and lent special force to their primitivism.

Yet the modernists did not extend this social criticism to a radical critique of the reductive view of Africans that was promoted for colonial justification. Instead, they embraced a deeply romanticized view of African culture (conflating many cultures into one), and considered Africa the embodiment of humankind in a precivilized state, preferring to mystify rather than to examine its presumed idol-worship and violent rituals. The modernists self-consciously subverted colonial stereotypes, both of the right and the left, but their subversive revisions necessarily remained implicated in the prejudices they sought to expose, so that modernist images now appear no less stereotypical and reductive than the racist caricatures they opposed. The modernists' method was to critique civilization by embracing an imagined "primitiveness" of Africans whose "authenticity" they opposed to a "decadent" West. This subject is therefore a difficult one for us, since it separates us profoundly from a generation that much criticism has domesticated to a comfortable neutrality and with whose modernity it has been inviting to identify. But if we are to understand early modern art, it is crucial to understand both this reductive impulse and its manifestation among the modernists: they wanted to subvert Western artistic traditions — and the social order in which they were implicated — by celebrating a Nietzschean return to those imagined "primitive" states whose suppression they viewed as having cut off a necessary vitality. Equally, we must recognize how profoundly these artists misunderstood African art and how utterly Western and *moderniste* were the terms of their admiration.

Elsewhere, I have demonstrated how Picasso's anarchist background and concerns informed his choice of the newspaper texts he incorporated into his collages of 1912-13, importing into his art demotic materials and themes directly relevant to political events and passions of the day.<sup>6</sup> I am making a parallel argument here, given the politically charged atmosphere of Paris beginning in 1905, with the



1 Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J.)*, 1907. New York, Museum of Modern Art, Lillie P. Bliss Bequest (photo: Museum)

public and government still reeling from disclosures of atrocities against the native populations in the French and Belgian Congos. In this period, to evoke scarified African masks was to evoke a larger Africa, and all its associations with colonial exploitation, legalized slavery, and resistance to French rule, associations that enrich and complicate other meanings in such works. Picasso's primitivism is part of a cultural discourse in which "Africa" conveyed widely accepted meanings that cannot be extricated from allusions to its art and people. Far from only wanting to borrow formal motifs from African forms, Picasso purposely challenged and mocked Western artistic traditions with his allusions to black Africa, with its unavoidable associations of white cruelty and exploitation.

The image of Africa that the artists inherited mingled both the noble and the savage. For the French people at this time, two colonies popularly exemplified these two notions and illuminate separate aspects of the popular image of the continent. From Dahomey in French West Africa came tales that obsessed the French popular press — of human sacrifice, animism, fetishism, and witchcraft — forming a frightening image of Africans as mysterious, primeval spirits. From the French and Belgian Congos in Central Africa, on the other hand, came revelations of the white colonialists' systematic destruction of tribal life in the in-

<sup>4</sup> See Leighten, 78-84.

<sup>5</sup> See J. Paudrat, "From Africa," in Rubin, 125-175, for a discussion of what was available in Paris at this time.

<sup>6</sup> P. Leighten, "Picasso's Collages and the Threat of War, 1912-13," *Art Bulletin*, LXVII, 1985, 653-672.

terests of exploitation and of white atrocities, which caused an international outcry and public scandals in Brussels and Paris. Both sides of this "Africa" informed the ways Picasso and his circle thought of the African art in the Musée d'Ethnographie (now the Musée de l'Homme) in the Trocadéro. Likewise, this mythology inevitably informed the ways their audience understood the appearance of "tribal" forms in their art. Thus we need to look at the history of French popular perceptions of Dahomey and the French and Belgian Congos to understand modernist appropriation of things African.<sup>7</sup>

It was their anarchism that prepared Picasso and many in his circle to adopt anticolonial postures, which are abundantly evident in the political cartoons made by central modernist figures. After examining French views of Africa and the anticolonialist rhetoric, I will consider the satires on colonialism by Picasso's friend and mentor Jarry, the influential absurdist playwright, and, finally, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*.<sup>8</sup> This discussion will, I hope, help illuminate the concept of primitivism, which extends far beyond the confines of those works of 1907-08 that actually quote African art and provides a clearer idea of the larger modernist project of this avant-garde circle.

In a recent book, I delineated the importance of anarchist thought and the anarchist movement for Picasso and his artistic and political milieu in early twentieth-century Paris.<sup>9</sup> The overlapping avant-garde and political bohémias of Barcelona and Paris were especially attracted to the most extreme, individualist rhetoric of destruction, since art could metaphorically express those acts of violence known as *la propagande par le fait*, or "propaganda of the deed." For the modern artist to pursue strategies of primitivism and spontaneity in both art and life was to rebel against bourgeois morality and bourgeois art. An unshakable tenet of anarchism was antinationalism; thus the anarchists found anathema the Colonial Party's assertion of France's national destiny and her *mission civilisatrice* to the "undeveloped" peoples of Africa and Asia. One of the major sources of ideas and images of Africa shared by *la bande à Picasso* came from anarchist and socialist anticolonial rhetoric.

In addition, the modernists, along with the rest of France, were influenced by popular sources of information about Africa. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, the Jardin d'Acclimatation, a zoo in the Bois de Boulogne, and international expositions in Paris concocted displays of colonial peoples in live exhibits, purporting to show the French how "exotics" really lived. Prior to 1906, individual Africans, supplied by wild animal importers, were regularly exhibited. For Picasso's generation, the best-known such spectacle in Paris was held at the Exposition Universelle of 1900, which mounted enormous ethnographic exhibits, including "re-creations" of Dahomean and Congolese villages complete with "pikes on which were stuck the actual skulls of slaves executed before the eyes of Bahanzin," last king of Dahomey, and reenactments of "the rites of fetishism, performed by haggish witch-doctors and priests in their native costumes," as one guidebook advertised (Fig. 2).<sup>10</sup> Part of the aim of these government-sponsored exhibits was to propagandize for French colonial possessions around the world and to rationalize their cultural transformation, each colony having its own section of the Exposition.<sup>11</sup> Picasso may well have visited this part of the Exposition on his first trip to Paris since he was exhibiting a painting in another building.

The major source of images and information about Africa was the popular press, itself influenced by prejudice, fantasy, and political interests that predated actual French contact with urban and tribal populations in Africa and were reinforced by novels and accounts by soldiers, missionaries, and explorers, often accompanied by lurid and fantastic illustrations.<sup>12</sup> To this were added the exposés of forced labor and terror in the two Congos, which dominated discussion in late 1905.<sup>13</sup> These elements necessarily mingled in the modernists' minds, inspiring both political outrage and hard-boiled, yet still essentially romanticized, notions about instinct and "fetish" worship.

The French presence in Africa was of long standing. In 1670 France signed a "Treaty of Commerce and Friendship" with the king of Dahomey, the first step toward what would become an enormous French empire in West and Central Africa by the end of the nineteenth century, constituting

<sup>7</sup> Miller (as in n. 3), 5, has analyzed this paradigm in more general terms: "Africa has been made to bear a double burden, of monstrosity and nobility, all imposed by a deeper condition of difference and instability (Pliny's 'newness'). The result is a European discourse at odds with itself. . . . The gesture of reaching out to the most unknown part of the world and bringing it back as language . . . ultimately brings Europe face to face with nothing but itself, with the problems its own discourse imposes."

<sup>8</sup> John Richardson, currently engaged in writing what will likely be the definitive biography of Picasso, noted (at the Picasso/Braque seminar held at the Museum of Modern Art, 10-13 November 1989) that he no longer believes Picasso met Jarry, though he affirmed to me in conversation that he nonetheless considers Jarry enormously influential on Picasso. I look forward to reading the reasons for his new judgment, but meantime must depend on those memoirs recording various events at which Picasso and Jarry were both said to be present, such as Max Jacob's *Chronique des temps héroïques* (Paris, 1956, 48-49).

<sup>9</sup> Leighton. See also D. Egbert, *Social Radicalism and the Arts: Western Europe, A Cultural History from the French Revolution to 1968*, New

York, 1970, 45ff.

<sup>10</sup> J. Boyd, *The Paris Exposition of 1900*, Chicago, 1900, 449-450; my thanks to Jody Blake, who kindly brought this reference to my attention.

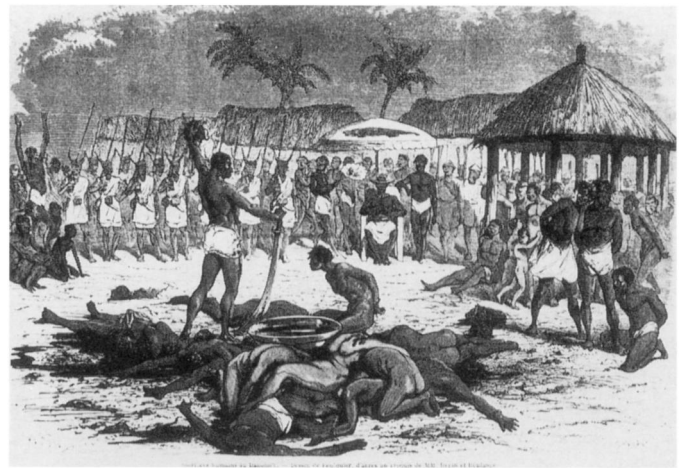
<sup>11</sup> For example, an enormous book, L. Brunet and L. Giethlen, *Dahomey et dépendances (Exposition Universelle de 1900 — Les Colonies françaises)*, Paris, 1900, accompanied the Dahomean exhibition, detailing Dahomey's history and its current — i.e., French — organization, administration, ethnography, production, agriculture, and commerce, all in the most glowing, propagandistic terms.

<sup>12</sup> For example, N. Baudin, *Fetichism and Fetich Worshippers*, New York, Cincinnati, and St. Louis, 1885 (trans. of French original). See Cohen, 258ff; Miller; Connelly; and Schneider. For a highly readable history of the imperial procedures of this period, see E. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire 1875-1914*, New York, 1987.

<sup>13</sup> See Suret-Canale, 34-36; and M. Loutfi, *Littérature et colonialisme: L'Expansion coloniale vue dans la littérature romanesque française, 1871-1914*, Paris, 1971, 119.



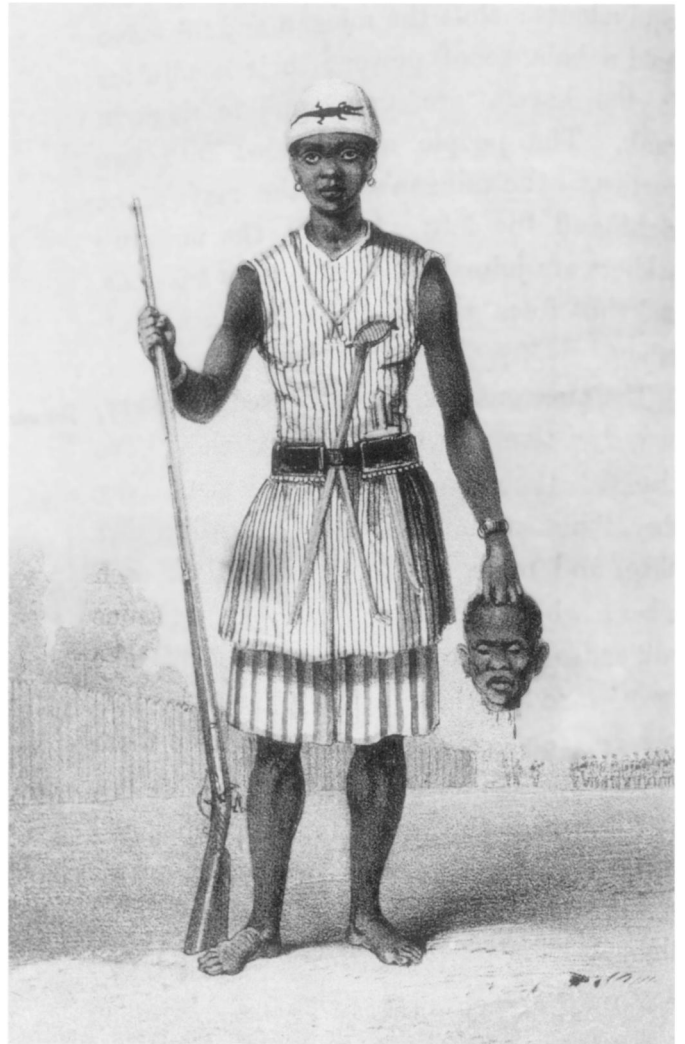
2 International Exposition of 1900, pavilion of the French Congo (from V. Champier, *Chefs d'oeuvre of the Exposition Universelle 1900*, v, Philadelphia, 1900)



3 "Sacrifices humains au Dahomey" (from Dr. Répin, "Voyage au Dahomey," *Tour du monde*, vii, 1863)

some 1.8 million square miles.<sup>14</sup> In the Dahomean Wars of 1890 and 1892, during the European scramble for colonies, the French conquered Dahomey. Travelers who ventured into the interior earlier in the nineteenth century had frequently returned with sensational and fanciful tales of human sacrifice, cannibalism, despotism, and anarchy that were made much of in the French press. Such mass illustrated magazines as *Le Journal illustré*, *L'Illustration*, and *Le Tour du monde* and the illustrated supplements of the newspapers *Le Petit Journal* and *Le Petit Parisien*, emphasized the purported savagery of customs they misconstrued in accordance with their preconceptions.<sup>15</sup> For example, in a "Scene of Human Sacrifice" published in *Le Tour du monde* in 1863 (Fig. 3), the Dahomeyan king watches from beneath a canopy while the priests sacrifice his chosen victims, holding their heads aloft. The female warrior illustrating Frederick Forbes's account of 1851 seems to represent similarly bloodthirsty impulses, if more dispassionately (Fig. 4).<sup>16</sup>

During the Dahomean Wars, the French popular press played up such hair-raising tales, as part of a quite successful attempt to justify French conquest. The press followed the wars only superficially, concentrating instead on the legendarily grotesque practices of the natives and illustrating their accounts with uncredited and rather free copies of earlier engravings.<sup>17</sup> Figure 3, for instance, accompanies a text whose author confesses that he himself had only witnessed the sacrifice of a hyena.<sup>18</sup> The impli-



4 "An Amazon in the Dahoman Army" (from F. Forbes, *Dahomey and the Dahomeans*, London, 1851)

<sup>14</sup> Général Duboc, *L'Épopée coloniale en Afrique Occidentale Française*, Paris, 1938, 395; and J. Fage, *A History of West Africa*, Cambridge, 1969, 175. For Dahomey and French West Africa, see J. Webster and A. Boahen, *History of West Africa: The Revolutionary Years — 1815 to Independence*, New York and Washington, D.C., 1970; and R. Cornevin, *Histoire du Dahomey*, Paris, 1962.

<sup>15</sup> See V. Champion-Vincent, "L'Image du Dahomey dans la presse française (1890-1895): Les Sacrifices humains," *Cahiers d'études africaines*, vii, 1967, 27-58; Fage (as in n. 14), 199-200; Cohen, 257-260; and Schneider, 97-109.

<sup>16</sup> Plate from F. Forbes, *Dahomey and the Dahomans*, London, 1851.

<sup>17</sup> Figure 4 originally appeared in Dr. Répin, "Voyage du Dahomey," *Tour*

*du monde*, vii, 1863, 65-110, and was reproduced, at the beginning of the French conquest, in *Le Journal illustré* on 9 March 1890, and in *Le Petit Parisien* a week later, neither with any indication that the engraving was nearly thirty years old; see Schneider, 97-109.

<sup>18</sup> Cohen, 258.

cation of cannibalism in these rites was likewise asserted and popularly believed. Though all the tales of cannibalism did not actually come from the Dahomean Kingdom, so little distinction was popularly made between various tribes and regions of Africa that such images resonated around the word "Dahomey." It goes without saying that such accounts were given lurid coverage in the popular press, and in a remarkably short time Dahomey came to represent in France all that was most thrillingly barbaric and elemental on the "dark continent." It was precisely the grotesquery popularly associated with the "tribal" that attracted Symbolists and modernists in these years, an extremely important feature of modernism to understand.<sup>19</sup>

The French and Belgian Congos summon the other side of the image of Africa, which mixed in telling ways with the Dahomean. The scandals following government inquiries into events in both the French and Belgian Congos aroused fiery socialist and anarchist opposition, inspiring a heated debate of which modernist writers and artists could not possibly have been unaware, even had they been uninterested. Indeed, members of Picasso's circle reveal their attitudes toward events in the Congo in political cartoons made in these very years. The Belgian Congo represents the most staggering instance of brutality, but the French Congo closely followed the Belgian model and inspired the equal censure of the left wing.

The Congo Free State — all of which land became the "personal property" of King Leopold of Belgium — was legitimized by the General Act of the Berlin Conference of 1885, which attempted to direct the European powers (or represent them as directed) toward development, rather than exploitation, of the colonies.<sup>20</sup> Article VI read: "All the Powers exercising sovereign rights or influence in these territories pledge themselves to watch over the preservation of the native populations and the improvement of their moral and material conditions of existence, and to work together for the suppression of slavery and of the slave trade."<sup>21</sup> King Leopold freely interpreted the charge enacted here, to which Belgium and France were signatories, and in 1898 defended his rather ominous view of Belgium's "civ-

ilizing mission":

The mission which the agents of the State have to accomplish on the Congo is a noble one. They have to continue the development of civilisation in the centre of Equatorial Africa, receiving their inspiration directly from Berlin and Brussels. Placed face to face with primitive barbarism, grappling with sanguinary customs that date back thousands of years, they are obliged to reduce these gradually. They must accustom the population to general laws, of which the most needful and the most salutary is assuredly that of work.<sup>22</sup>

The Force Publique, or military arm, of the Congo Free State at first enjoyed popularity in Europe for its destruction of the Muslim slave trade, still flourishing in the early 1890s.<sup>23</sup> But soon there were reports of rapacious economic exploitation of the natives and of the land. As King Leopold's agents struggled to establish control of the vast region, eighty times the size of Belgium,<sup>24</sup> Africans were forced into labor for their new rulers and into the Force Publique. Requisitioned from village chiefs, the new slaves had iron rings locked around their necks, in the so-called "national collar," and were chained together to prevent escape.<sup>25</sup> Between 1892 and 1914, 66,000 blacks passed through the ranks of the Force Publique, which constituted for many Congolese their major contact with the West.<sup>26</sup> In the French Congo, too, colonial laws imposed forced labor so many days a year — legally fluctuating between ten and eighty — upon all males between the ages of eighteen and sixty, a practice not discontinued until 1946.<sup>27</sup> In Leopold's Congo, across the river, forty hours per month were required, beginning in 1903.<sup>28</sup> Very often the conditions of labor were appalling, and workers approaching the end of their servitude all too frequently found their "contracts" renewed.

Rumors of these abuses came periodically to Europe and America from the beginning, but more (and more appalling) details were published after the turn of the century, growing by 1905 into a scandal that rocked Western Eu-

<sup>19</sup> Dahomey, ruled from the central city, Abomey, had a truly urban social structure by the 18th century, another aspect of the African culture that modernists distorted and misunderstood in their admiration; see R. Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*, New York, 1983, and M. Fried, *The Notion of the Tribe*, Menlo Park, 1975. C. Diop, *Precolonial Black Africa, A Comparative Study of the Political and Social Systems of Europe and Black Africa, from Antiquity to the Formation of Modern States*, trans. H. Salemson, Westport, Conn., 1987, 72-75, discusses the extent to which this was true for all of Africa.

<sup>20</sup> On the Belgian Congo, see Gann and Duignan; and Anstey.

<sup>21</sup> A. Doyle, *The Crime of the Congo*, New York, 1909, 8.

<sup>22</sup> Trans. in J. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness (Norton Critical Edition)*, ed. R. Kimbrough, New York, 1971, 86.

<sup>23</sup> Gann and Duignan, 55-58.

<sup>24</sup> Anstey, 4.

<sup>25</sup> As one witness, G. Burrows, wrote and published in 1903 (*The Curse*

*of Central Africa*, London, 1903, 22 and 174-175): "As the State established its authority . . . a regular system of recruiting was instituted, each district being called upon to furnish a certain number of conscripts. . . . The *commissaires de district* have orders to see that their quotas are promptly forthcoming, and each naturally enough delegates the duty of recruiting to his *chefs de zone* who, in their turn, call upon the more subordinate *chefs de poste* to levy upon the local chiefs for the men required. The native chieftain usually makes his selection from the worthless and recalcitrant slaves of the village, who, when they reach the station, are promptly placed in the chain, or 'collier national' as the Belgians call it, so that they cannot escape." Guy Burrows was a former district commissioner of the Congo Free State, whose book exposed many abuses of Leopold's rule; though he presents such evils in a heated and occasionally exaggerated form, his book is considered reliable; see Gann and Duignan, 77.

<sup>26</sup> Gann and Duignan, 79; Burrows (as in n. 25), 92-93.

<sup>27</sup> Webster and Boahen (as in n. 14), 271.

<sup>28</sup> Anstey, 5.



La lettre du Ministre.

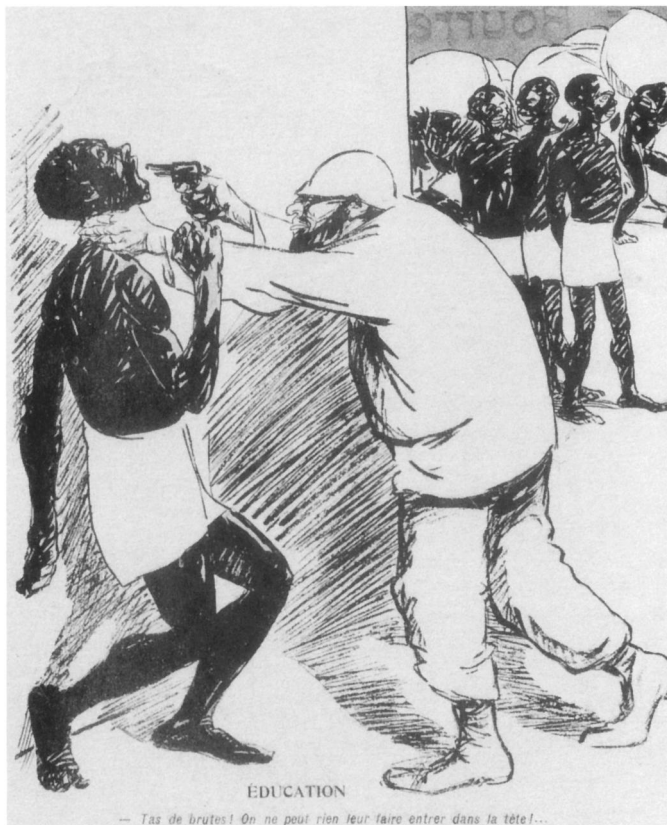
« Cher ami, ici l'on a raconté que vous vendiez des nègres, quelle infamie! Dans tous les cas, d'ici au 14 Juillet, ne faites que de simples échanges et je vous garantis que vous le serez. Agrérez, etc. »

5 Caran d'Ache, "La Lettre du Ministre," *L'Assiette au beurre*, 4 January 1902 (photo: Morris Library, University of Delaware)



... il est souvent sublime.

7 Auguste Roubille, "... il est souvent sublime," *L'Assiette au beurre*, 21 January 1905 (photo: Morris Library, University of Delaware)



ÉDUCATION

— Tas de brutes! On ne peut rien leur faire entrer dans la tête!...

6 Anonymous, "Éducation," *L'Assiette au beurre*, 11 March 1905 (photo: Morris Library, University of Delaware)

rope. Parisian artists responded strongly, as can be seen in a series of cartoons from *L'Assiette au beurre*. In a special issue of 1902 on the distribution of French Government medals (Fig. 5), Caran d'Ache depicts, in front of a huddled mass of underfed Africans, a vicious dog and a whip-wielding, well-fed brutish overseer reading the following letter from the minister: "Dear Friend, here people have reported that you have sold blacks, what slander! In any case, between now and July 14, just barter them and I guarantee you [your decoration]." <sup>29</sup> An unsigned cartoon of 1905 (Fig. 6) illustrates with brutal irony the racial contempt of the French colonial officer who exclaims about "education," pointing his gun into the mouth of a helpless African: "Pack of brutes! One can get nothing into their heads!" <sup>30</sup> In a special issue of *L'Assiette au beurre* of 1905 (Fig. 7), Auguste

<sup>29</sup> *L'Assiette au beurre*, 4 Jan. 1902: "Cher ami, ici l'on a raconté que vous vendiez des nègres, quelle infamie! Dans tous les cas, d'ici au 14 Juillet, ne faites que de simple échanges et je vous garantis que vous le serez. Agrérez, etc."; trans. in S. Appelbaum, *French Satirical Drawings from "L'Assiette au Beurre,"* New York, 1978, 10. This cartoon is the more interesting since Caran d'Ache was generally conservative, but was here moved to attack the government.

<sup>30</sup> Leighten trans. *L'Assiette au beurre*, 11 Mar. 1905 (special issue on "Les Bourreaux des noirs"): "Education: — Tas de brutes! On ne peut rien leur faire entrer dans la tête!"

Roubille uses a powerful image of murder, fire, and starvation to illustrate a bourgeois thought that, "If the worker is sometimes vile [when he strikes and rebels in France] . . . he is often sublime [when he commits 'legal' atrocities in the army]."<sup>31</sup>

By far the worst abuses in the Congo involved the collection of rubber from the wild vines that grew in the forest regions. Rubber was the most valuable export from Central Africa, and, though conditions varied greatly throughout the Congo,<sup>32</sup> the delegation of this labor to the Force Publique and its mercenaries was common. Armed by the State, they were allowed to pillage and massacre so as to "encourage" the natives to furnish rubber. Administrators and company agents received, in addition to their salaries, bonuses for rubber collected under them, which invited coercion and violence.<sup>33</sup> Profitable procedures included taking women and children as hostages, as well as simpler forms of brutality such as mutilations and executions, sometimes on a large scale. Nominally, most, though not all, of these methods were illegal, but in practice considerations of profit remained a sufficient rationale for what amounted to a system of atrocity. This system was criticized by the Report of the Congo State Commission of Inquiry that Leopold had been forced to initiate, a document published in the *Bulletin officiel* in Brussels in September-October 1905.<sup>34</sup> For example, the famed "Casement Report," sent to the British Foreign Office in 1903 and published in 1904, recorded the bizarre accounting system the Belgians used to keep track of ammunition: they required a human hand, the right one, as "proof" of an unwasted bullet. (This was to prevent the soldiers from using their ammunition to hunt game, though many reports noted that soldiers often did hunt animals, then simply used another method to obtain the requisite hand.) Roger Casement, sent to investigate by the British government, reported that the State, in one six-month period, had used six thousand bullets and concluded, "this means that 6,000 people are killed or mutilated. It means more than 6,000, for the people have told me repeatedly that soldiers kill children with the butt of their guns."<sup>35</sup>

In addition to the scandalized political realms, the artists of Montmartre took such events and accounts to heart, as is again illustrated by cartoons in *L'Assiette au beurre* and *Les Temps nouveaux*. Juan Gris, a neighbor and close friend

of Picasso's at this time, suggests in a special issue on Turkish despotism of 1908 (Fig. 8) that the infamously cruel Turks can learn cruelty from the French, whose deeds — as outlined in the Casement Report — he illustrates. In words that echo the rationale of the Colonial Party, the caption reads: "Guided by a need for expansion proper to every civilized nation, the Turks will go into the savage lands to bring civilized ways."<sup>36</sup> Another figure especially close to Picasso, the poet and journalist André Salmon, worked on a special issue of *L'Assiette au beurre* in 1904 devoted to Leopold's Congo (Fig. 9), for which he wrote the captions and the following song parodying the Belgian national anthem:

Ignorant of your happiness, in order that Cabourg and  
Co. prosper,  
Work with a boot in the rear, Belgians of color!  
Grumble no more, poor devils, the price of rubber will  
rise again.  
Inscribe on your banners: King, Law and Liberty.<sup>37</sup>

Kees van Dongen (like Gris, a neighbor and close friend of Picasso's before 1909) and František Kupka, both openly anarchist, condemned colonialism through their attacks on Christianity and its missionaries. Kupka's special issue on religions in *L'Assiette au beurre* of 1904 includes the work "Christian Heaven According to the Blacks" (Fig. 10), in which white devils (one grasping a chain in his clawed fist) and a black God the Father, an avenging angel, and seraphim neatly constitute a color-inverted Heaven avenging the devilish cruelties of whites in Africa.<sup>38</sup> Van Dongen, in Jean Grave's anarchist newspaper *Les Temps nouveaux* in 1905 (Fig. 11), simply and eloquently calls Christ "The White Peril," as he stands possessively and smiles with idiot complacency over cities, factories, armies, cannons, and ships sailing off to exploit exotic lands.<sup>39</sup>

Neither was this political indignation inconsistent for the modernist's vision of the imagined ferocity of dark-spirited "fetish" worship among the Africans on whose behalf they drew attention to injustice, as is demonstrated by another cartoon from Kupka's special issue on religions (Fig. 12). Here a tropical African frenziedly drives spikes into a rigid hieratic statue in order — as the caption satirically states — to get his god's attention.<sup>40</sup> A sinister allusion to human

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 21 Jan. 1905: "Quant à l'ouvrier, s'il est quelquefois ignoble . . . il est souvent sublime."

<sup>32</sup> Gann and Duignan, 104.

<sup>33</sup> Anstey, 4-5; Gann and Duignan, 136.

<sup>34</sup> Cited in Anstey.

<sup>35</sup> F.O. 10/806, Casement to Lansdowne, 11 Dec. 1903, 20-21; cited by Anstey, 7.

<sup>36</sup> Leighton trans. *L'Assiette au beurre*, special issue on "La Turquie régénérée" (with text by anarchist leader Charles Malato), 29 Aug. 1908: "Guidés par un besoin d'expansion propre à toute nation civilisée, les Turcs iront dans les pays sauvages, porter les procédés de civilisation."

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 17 Sept. 1904 (text by André Salmon): "Ignorants de votre bon-

heur,/Pour que Cabourg et Cie prospèrent,/A coups de pied dans le derrière/Travaillez, Belges de couleur!/Ne vous plaignez plus, pauvres hères,/Le caoutchouc va remonter./Inscrivez donc sur vos bannières:/Le Roi, la Loi, la Liberté."

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 7 May 1904.

<sup>39</sup> *Les Temps nouveaux*, 30 Sept. 1905.

<sup>40</sup> *L'Assiette au beurre* (as in n. 38): "Dieux Nègres: ils sont obéissants comme des Saint-Guirec dont notre catholique Bretagne est pourvue. Pour que son Dieu s'occupe de lui, il le lui fait sentir à sa façon." In fact, nails were driven into power images precisely to get the god's attention, after which an oath was attached to the new nail (my thanks to Emily Hanna for discussion on this subject).





Guidés par un besoin d'expansion propre à toute nation civilisée, les Turcs iront dans les pays sauvages porter les procédés de civilisation.

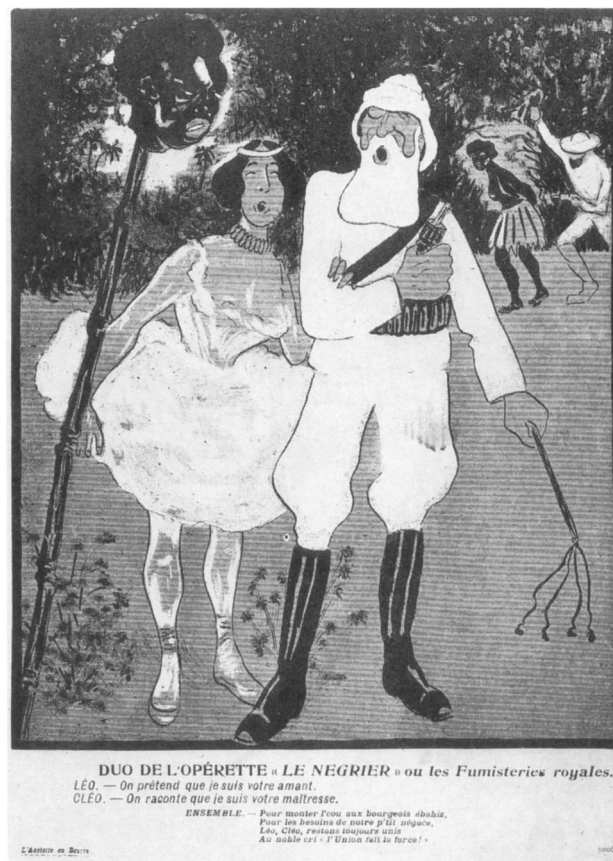
8 Juan Gris, "Guidés par un besoin," *L'Assiette au beurre*, 29 August 1908 (photo: Bibliothèque Nationale)

sacrifice appears in the skulls rolling around the statue's feet. What Kupka attacks in his whole issue is superstition itself, in all religions, and the ways it serves various oppressive power structures; he thus adopts the familiar anarchist strategy of inversion, leveling "savage" and "civilized" in much the way that Picasso does three years later in an Africanizing work such as his *Mother and Child* — a picture based on traditional Madonna with Child compositions and complete with the halo and blue robe of Heaven — though Picasso goes much further than Kupka in trying to bring such maneuvers into his painting.<sup>41</sup>

The Belgian government's so-called "red-rubber" policy destroyed whole areas of the Congo and did more to depopulate the region than the twin ravages of sleeping-sickness and smallpox that followed the break-up of tribal life. Casement and others noted "the great reduction observable everywhere in native life"; for example, in a typical region of the Congo Free State, the population dropped from about two thousand to two hundred between 1898 and 1903.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>41</sup> In the Musée Picasso, Paris; I have discussed this work at greater length in Leighton, 92. This question of the different forms and strategies of anarchist artists in prewar Paris, including those of Picasso and Kupka, will be taken up in the book of which this essay is a part.

<sup>42</sup> *La Domaine de la couronne*, cited in Anstey, 8.



9 d'Ostoya, "Duo de l'Opérette 'Le Négrier,'" *L'Assiette au beurre*, 17 September 1904 (photo: Bibliothèque Nationale)



10 František Kupka, "Ciel chrétien aux Nègres," *L'Assiette au beurre*, 7 May 1904 (photo: Bibliothèque Nationale)

The system of rubber collection was quite similar if slightly less grotesque in the French Congo, where tax collection also proceeded on an incentive basis, resulting in abusive methods, including the taking of women and children as hostages and outright extermination of "lazy" and uncooperative natives. As a result, village life was almost completely destroyed in the rubber-producing areas of both Congos, resulting in widespread famine and depopulation. Altogether somewhere between eight and twenty million Congolese died in the red-rubber period.<sup>43</sup> Such were the stories that first trickled and then flooded out of Africa.

Simultaneous with the revelations of the Belgian inquiry into Leopoldian excesses (and inefficiencies) mentioned above, a scandal broke in France that resulted in a government inquiry — called the Brazza Mission — into conditions in the French Congo. Numerous arbitrary executions and grotesque murders by the French government administrators Gaud and Toqué were described in the press and commented upon in the inflammatory *L'Assiette au beurre's* special issue of 11 March 1905, on "The Torturers of Blacks." The most famous case of brutality, illustrated by Bernard Naudin (Fig. 13), was the dynamiting of an African guide (as a sort of human firecracker) on Bastille Day, 1903, an atrocity whose stated, and doubtless successful, purpose was to "intimidate the local population."<sup>44</sup> And in an image that could have come straight out of *Heart of Darkness* (written following Conrad's trip up the Congo River in 1890),<sup>45</sup> Gaud and Toqué were also accused of forcing one of their servants to drink soup they had made from a human head. Maurice Radiguez imagines this hideous scene (Fig. 14), with the dissipated Toqué's contemptuous justification to the horrified African: "You'd perhaps like veal better? Well, it's plenty good enough for pigs like you!"<sup>46</sup> In the same issue, Naudin and Aristide Delannoy suggest, depicting "hunts" and enormous piles of bones, that such methods were rather more systematic than spontaneously patriotic (Figs. 15 and 16).<sup>47</sup> Indeed Toqué's confession, reported in *Le Temps* in 1905, lays the blame on French colonial policy:

It was a general massacre, perpetrated in order to make the service work . . . Toqué, under examination, described the procedure employed to obtain porters before setting off for the outpost. Raids were made on the vil-

lages. The women and children were carried off; they were hidden in small huts so that passers-by should not see them. These women and children often died of hunger or smallpox; the women were raped by the local police. These hostages were not set free until the porters arrived. The same method was employed for tax collections.<sup>48</sup>

Though the scandal was eventually hushed up, the report of the Brazza Mission suppressed, and the perpetrators released after a short time in prison, there was widespread outrage expressed in the newspapers and numerous fierce debates in the Chamber of Deputies. The Socialist leader Jean Jaurès, with Joseph Caillaux and Gustave Rouanet, led a joint attack on the forced labor system, though eventually all that resulted was minor juridical reform, and essentially the same methods continued. André Gide saw scenes of coercion identical to those described above during his trip up the Congo in 1926.<sup>49</sup> King Leopold, however, lost his private kingdom. After the international outcry and the inquiry that he was forced to establish, his domain was reluctantly taken over by the Belgian government in 1908, though again the methods of economic exploitation changed little, and often the agents and administrators themselves stayed on.<sup>50</sup>

Since much of the substance of the debates both in and out of the Chamber during the Gaud-Toqué Affair in 1905-6 would have been of special interest to the modernists and their political circle, it is important to consider the rhetoric marshalled against the justifications of the influential Colonial Party.<sup>51</sup> The arguments of the so-called anti-colonialists ranged from critics who wanted a colonial empire, but one that was both more humanitarian and more efficient, to those who refused to recognize the right of France to impose its will, even in the name of civilization, upon other people.<sup>52</sup> Jaurès, for example, during the 1890s and the early part of the twentieth century, accepted the concept of France's "civilizing mission," which he saw as benevolently spreading Enlightenment principles and, eventually, socialist egalitarianism. In 1903, he said to the Chamber of Deputies: "If we have always combatted the politics of colonial expansion by war, the politics of armed expeditions and of violent protectorates, we have always seconded and we are always ready to second the peaceful

<sup>43</sup> See R. Daigre, *Oubanghi-Chari, témoignage sur son évolution (1900-1940)*, Issoudun, 1947, 113-117; and Suret-Canale, 24-34.

<sup>44</sup> *L'Assiette au beurre* (as in n. 30), accompanied by an excerpt from the press.

<sup>45</sup> Joseph Conrad wrote *Heart of Darkness* in 1898-99, and first published it serially in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1899; it first appeared in a separate volume in 1902.

<sup>46</sup> Leighton trans. *L'Assiette au beurre* (as in n. 30): "Le Bouillon de Tête: — Vous aimeriez peut-être mieux du veau? . . . Mais c'est bien assez bon pour des cochons comme vous!"

<sup>47</sup> Both are from *ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Le Temps*, 23 Sept. 1905, trans. in Suret-Canale, 35.

<sup>49</sup> A. Gide, *Voyage au Congo*, Paris, 1927. Gide dedicated his book "To

the Memory of Joseph Conrad."

<sup>50</sup> Opinions on this vary; see Gann and Duignan, 214ff, and Anstey, whose whole book addresses this question.

<sup>51</sup> The best discussion of French colonial theory is R. Betts, *Assimilation and Association in French Colonial Theory, 1890-1914*, New York and London, 1961; see also C. Andrew and A. Kanya-Forstner, "The French Colonial Party: Its Composition, Aims and Influence, 1885-1914," *Historical Journal*, xiv, 1971, 99-128; and R. Girardet, *L'Idée coloniale en France de 1871 à 1962*, Paris, 1972.

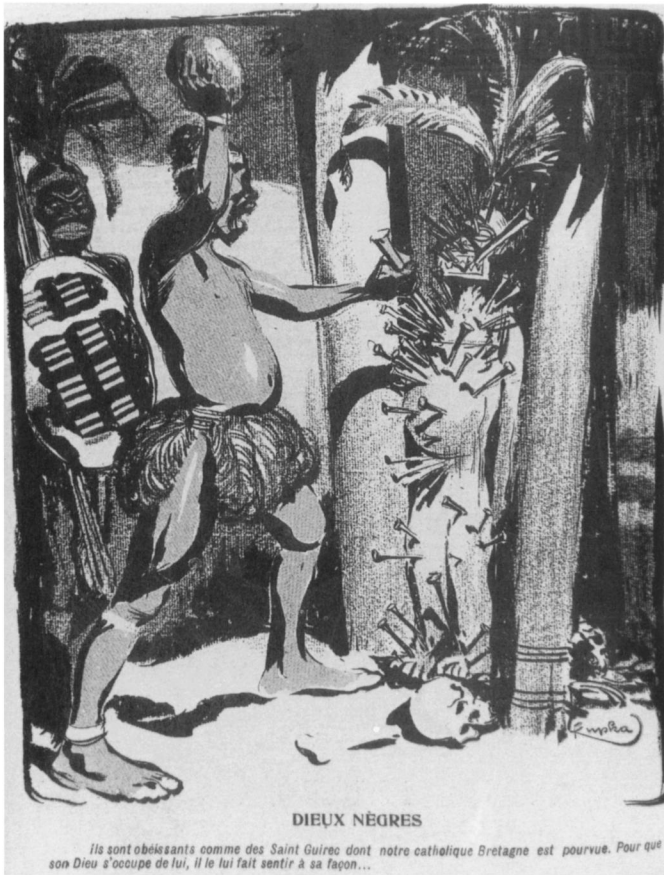
<sup>52</sup> On anticolonialism, see H. Brunschwig, *Mythes et réalités de l'impérialisme colonial français, 1871-1914*, Paris, 1960, 173-184; C. Ageron, *L'Anticolonialisme en France de 1871 à 1914*, Paris, 1973; and R. Jeaugeon, "Les Sociétés d'exploitation au Congo et l'opinion française de 1890 à 1906," *Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer*, XLVIII, 1961, 353-437.



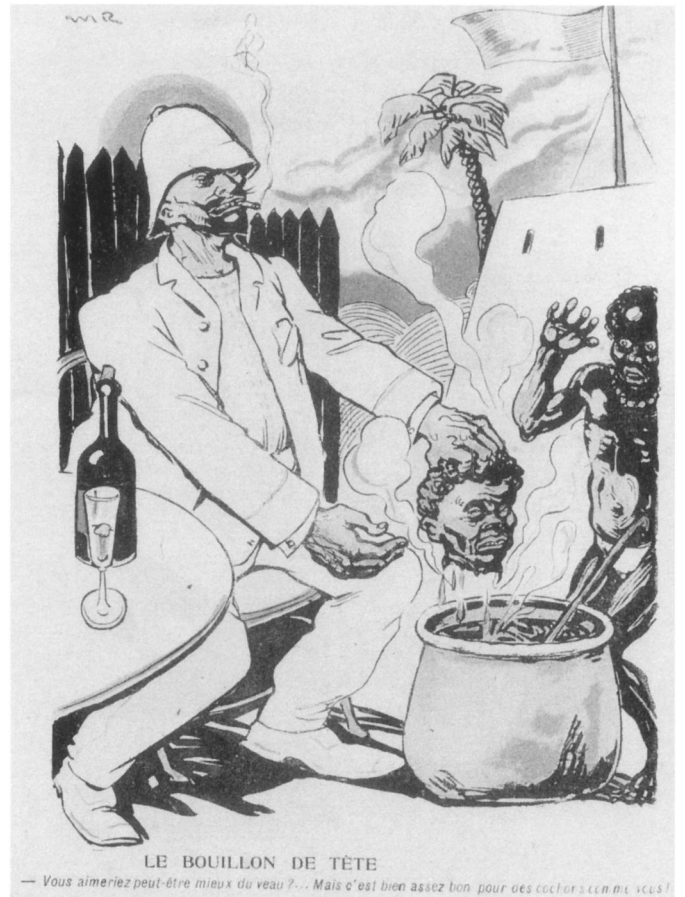
11 Kees van Dongen, "Le Péril Blanc," *Les Temps nouveaux*, 30 September 1905 (photo: Butler Library, Columbia University)



13 Bernard Naudin, "La Fête du 14 Juillet à Brazzaville," *L'Assiette au beurre*, 11 March 1905 (photo: Morris Library, University of Delaware)



12 František Kupka, "Dieux Nègres," *L'Assiette au beurre*, 7 May 1904 (photo: Morris Library, University of Delaware)



14 Maurice Radiguet, "Le Bouillon de Tête," *L'Assiette au beurre*, 11 March 1905 (photo: Morris Library, University of Delaware)



15 Bernard Naudin, "Ces Messieurs s'amuse," *L'Assiette au beurre*, 11 March 1905 (photo: Morris Library, University of Delaware)



16 Aristide Delannoy, "Gaud, ancien pharmacien," *L'Assiette au beurre*, 11 March 1905 (photo: Morris Library, University of Delaware)

expansion of French interests and of French civilization."<sup>53</sup> By 1905, Jaurès had fundamentally altered his position on colonialism and especially its relation to the larger social system and the threat of pan-European war over competition for new markets and new colonial possessions.<sup>54</sup> His outrage at the information emerging from the French Congo was scathing, and his newspaper *L'Humanité* — in an unrelenting series of articles by Gustave Rouanet — played the major role in exposing the scandals in 1905 and 1906.

In a more explicitly humanitarian response, Charles Péguy — beginning to shift from his early socialism to his later nationalism — used his *Cahiers de la quinzaine* to publish exposés of conditions in the two Congos by Pierre Mille and Félicien Challaye, who had been a member of the Brazza Mission and whose reports the leading newspaper *Le Temps* had refused to publish.<sup>55</sup> Though Péguy declared his devotion to "the liberty of peoples," like Mille and Challaye, he called for reform rather than withdrawal. When the pacifist Challaye published an expanded form of this pamphlet in 1909, he wrote: "Colonization is a necessary social fact. . . . But justice demands that the domination of the whites should not involve the worst consequences — slavery, robbery, torture, assassination — for the blacks. Justice demands that the natives should derive some advantages from our presence among them."<sup>56</sup> Challaye and Mille also supported the *Ligue pour la Défense des Indigènes du Bassin Conventionnel du Congo*, whose mouthpiece was *Le Courrier européen*, founded in 1904 under the patronage of Edmund Morel, an English opponent of the economic system operative in the two Congos.

On the more revolutionary side, the socialist Paul Louis wrote an analysis of the evils of the colonial enterprise in *Le Colonialisme* of 1905, which came to be well known, asserting (with some naïveté) that,

The working class will not let itself be taken in by the mirage of words, the seductions of humanitarian phraseology. It must recognize that there is no peaceful colonization, that all colonization is based on violence, war, the sacking of towns, sharing out of the loot, and slavery, however well or thinly disguised. Its authority is already sufficient to make its solidarity with the oppressed native population effectively felt, in reclaiming for the latter their essential rights, safeguarding existence and subsistence; it will profit from all debates held anywhere with the aim of frustrating overseas conquests,

<sup>53</sup> See Jaurès's speeches in the *Chambre des Députés*, *Journal officiel*, Mar. and Dec. 1895; and H. Goldberg, *The Life of Jean Jaurès*, Madison, Wis., and London, 1968, 202-203.

<sup>54</sup> See Goldberg (as in n. 53), 348.

<sup>55</sup> See F. Challaye and P. Mille, *Les Deux Congos: Devant la Belgique et devant la France*, Paris, 1906; and F. Challaye, *Le Congo français*, Paris, 1906.

<sup>56</sup> F. Challaye, *Le Congo français*, Paris, 1909, 313; trans. in Suret-Canale, 127.

and pointing out the logical consequences of imperialist expansion.<sup>57</sup>

And the socialist Léon Bloy uncompromisingly warned that any Christian who participated in the colonial system was working for the Devil.

Among the anarchists, the deputy and former colonial doctor Paul Vigné d'Octon attacked colonialism both in the Chambre des Députés and his book, *Les Crimes coloniaux de la IIIe République* of 1907, which was published by the revolutionary socialist Gustave Hervé, in whose journal, *La Guerre sociale*, Vigné d'Octon also kept up a stream of articles. In the preface to *Les Crimes coloniaux*, Vigné wrote:

I had this dream: at last there existed on this earth justice for all subject races and conquered peoples. Tired of being despoiled, pillaged, suppressed and massacred, the Arabs and the Berbers drove their oppressors from North Africa, the blacks did the same for the rest of the continent, and the yellow people for the soil of Asia.

Having thus reconquered by violence and force their unconquerable and sacred rights, ravished from them by force and violence, each of these human families pursued the road of its destiny which for a time had been interrupted.<sup>58</sup>

The Comité de Protection et de Défense des Indigènes was formed, which from 1905 to at least 1910 held protest meetings and published numerous pamphlets with such inflammatory titles as "Les Illégalités et les crimes du Congo, meeting de protestation (31 octobre 1905)" and "Voeux adoptés par le comité dans sa réunion du 13 juin 1907, en faveur de l'application des lois de la guerre aux indigènes des colonies et des pays de protectorat."<sup>59</sup>

At the protest meeting of 31 October 1905, called jointly by the Comité and the influential Ligue des Droits de l'Homme, speakers included the economist and ardent pacifist Frédéric Passy; the socialists Francis de Pressensé and Gustave Rouanet, who was exposing the scandals in the

party organ *l'Humanité*; and Pierre Quillard, a well-known anarchist and close friend of Alfred Jarry's. At this meeting, an ex-colonial doctor, M. Barot-Forlière, discussed the criminality of those who came to work in the colonies, saying that he had seen all the effects of debt, alcoholism, syphilis, and malaria, as well as violence, cruelty, and the abuse of power. "There is no point in accusing the men," he concluded to cries of approbation, "but it is above all necessary to accuse our colonial system."<sup>60</sup> Paul Viollet argued against all colonialism: "The martial power of Western nations came, thanks to destructive inventions, to make enormous progress, at the moment when half of the world, until then ignorant, was opened to our little Europe. All those who did not have our weapons, savage or civilized, were enslaved, were crushed. A completely new kind of conquest was created: the colony."<sup>61</sup> In milder conclusion, the meeting voted to publish the following statement: "The Assembly, profoundly moved by the exposé of illegalities and by the recital of iniquities and crimes which have occurred in several colonies, beseech the government to respect in all the extent of the colonial domain the fundamental principles of Justice and of Law, to refer to tribunals all crimes committed against the natives in colonized lands, in protected lands and in explored lands."<sup>62</sup>

Quillard is especially interesting since he knew members of Picasso's circle well. Referring to an earlier speech of the evening, he inflamed the crowd with his radicalism: "Just now we were told that there is in the French press an indifference to colonial issues, an indifference to the crimes that were committed in the Congo and elsewhere. There is no indifference, there is something worse, there is vindication, there is glorification of these crimes." Quillard addressed his speech, as he pointed out, not to the white men and women in the audience but to the blacks; and he concluded not with pity for their "savagery" but with a most unusual recognition of their humanity: "It is as a man of a race calling itself superior and advanced that I want here to make . . . a sort of public confession, and to ask my brothers of another skin and another color to please forgive us for the crimes that we have committed against them."<sup>63</sup>

<sup>57</sup> P. Louis, *Le Colonialisme*, Paris, 1905, 109; trans. in Suret-Canale, 125.

<sup>58</sup> P. Vigné d'Octon, *Les Crimes coloniaux de la IIIe République*, Paris, 1907, 8; trans. in Suret-Canale, 139.

<sup>59</sup> Published by the Comité de Protection et de Défense des Indigènes in Paris; see also "Abus financiers dans les colonies," "Au Congo: Les Considérations d'un arrêté du Conseil d'état," and "Projet de statuts d'une union internationale pour la protection et la défense des indigènes (adoptés par le comité dans sa séance du 4 février 1908)." The Comité may have published more pamphlets, though I have not been able to find any further record.

<sup>60</sup> Leighton trans. "Discours de M. Barot-Forlière," *Les Illégalités et les crimes du Congo (Comité de Protection et de défense des Indigènes — Meeting de protestation 31 oct 1905)*, Paris, 1905, 46: "Il ne faut pas trop accuser les hommes, mais qu'il faut surtout accuser notre système colonial (Approbation)."

<sup>61</sup> Leighton trans. "Discours de Paul Viollet," in *ibid.*, 9: "La puissance guerrière des nations occidentales venait, grâce à des inventions destructives, de faire de gigantesques progrès, lorsqu'une moitié du monde,

jusque là ignorée, fut ouverte à notre petite Europe. Tous ceux qui n'avaient point nos armes, sauvages ou civilisés, furent asservis, furent broyés. Un genre de conquête tout nouveau se créa: la colonie."

<sup>62</sup> Leighton trans. "Ordre du jour," in *ibid.*, 70: "L'Assemblée, profondément émue par l'exposé des illégalités et par le récit des iniquités et des crimes dont plusieurs colonies sont le théâtre, Adjure le gouvernement de faire respecter dans toute l'étendue du domaine colonial les principes fondamentaux de la Justice et du Droit, de déférer aux tribunaux tous crimes commis contre les indigènes en pays colonisés, en pays protégés et en pays explorés."

<sup>63</sup> Leighton trans. "Discours de Pierre Quillard," in *ibid.*, 54-57: "Tout à l'heure on nous disait qu'il y a dans la presse française une indifférence pour les choses coloniales, une indifférence pour les crimes qui se commettent au Congo ou ailleurs. Il n'y a pas d'indifférence, il y a quelque chose de pire, il y a l'apologie, il y a la glorification de ces crimes. . . . c'est en tant qu'homme d'une race soi-disant supérieure et évoluée, que je voulais ici faire . . . une sorte de confession publique et demander à mes frères d'autre peau et d'autre couleur, de bien vouloir nous pardonner les crimes que nous avons commis envers eux (Applaudissements)."

Whether this speech was heard by Picasso or his friends that night, such rhetoric reappeared in the daily papers and would have been repeated in the highly politicized circles in which they moved in these years. The debates and scandals brought a new and heightened awareness of France's African colonies and, for a politicized avant-garde, concentrated a range of politically charged meanings on everything to do with "Africa."

For Alfred Jarry, as for Quillard, "Africa" had long been a special preoccupation. Although the larger milieu of Paris's artistic and political bohemia confirmed in Picasso the anarchist aesthetics that he had already absorbed in Barcelona, Apollinaire, Jarry, and Salmon were especially important since they became his closest friends and strongest influences, and had their own anarchist histories.<sup>64</sup> Jarry — absurdist playwright, master of black humor, and anarchist artist par excellence — is of particular interest since he made colonialism one of his major targets, at the same time that he summoned up in his works an irrational world of "Dahomean" intertribal slavery and cannibalism. The whole range of colonial debate stayed within the confines of Enlightenment principles, swinging between an image of the black as noble savage (a state out of which whites had long ago evolved) and an image of the black as degenerate savage (from which condition the native must be saved). In contrast to this, Picasso and Jarry implicitly reject both positions by pointedly reveling in ethnic difference, by evoking "tribal" life and art, which they saw as irrational, magic, and violent, and by embracing precisely the symptoms of its so-called degeneracy. Unlike the rationalist Kupka, their works play with the idea that it is these very qualities that make African superior to European culture, especially as it is represented by Jarry.

Jarry was the quintessential anarchist artist, whose political satire was unmistakable to his contemporaries. I have elsewhere discussed his work in relation to anarchism and Picasso; here I would like to focus on Jarry's frequent anticolonialism.<sup>65</sup> In *Ubu colonial* of 1901, Dr. Gasbag meets Père Ubu on his return from a self-described "disastrous voyage of colonial exploration undertaken by us at the expense of the French government"; like the bloated, self-satisfied bourgeois that Ubu represents, seeking profits for himself at the public's expense, he brags of his adventures in terms that illuminate the colonial mentality:

Our first difficulty in those distant parts consisted in the impossibility of procuring slaves for ourself, slavery having unfortunately been abolished; we were reduced to entering into diplomatic relations with armed Negroes who were on bad terms with other Negroes lacking means of defense; and when the former had captured the latter, we marched the whole lot off as free workers. We did

it, of course, out of pure philanthropy, to prevent the victors eating the defeated, and in imitation of the methods practiced in the factories of Paris.<sup>66</sup>

This anticolonial theme — with its parallel between the exploitation of poor workers at home and the search for even cheaper labor abroad — recurs frequently in Jarry's work. Inverting what he saw as the fiction of Western cultural and racial superiority to "primitive" peoples, Jarry tells of a black who fled from a bar in Paris without paying for his drinks; not at all a criminal, he asserts, the man must have been an explorer from Africa investigating European life and caught without "native" currency.<sup>67</sup>

For Jarry, satire served the high purpose of debunking the past and ruthlessly exposing the venality of the political present. In a piece of vicious "nonsense" in the conclusion of *Ubu colonial*, Ubu in his disingenuous way attacks Dr. Gasbag for failing to appreciate the black as a completely different animal from the Frenchman:

PA UBU: We had been rash enough to put up a notice outside our house saying: No dumping; and since the Negro takes pleasure only in disobedience, they came running from every corner of the town. I remember a little pickaninny who arrived each day from a distant part of town just to empty a lady's chamber pot under the windows of our dining room, presenting the contents for our inspection with the remark:

*Hey you folks look heah: me black me make yellow crap, ma mistress she white she make black crap.*

Dr. Gasbag is thunderstruck:

GASBAG: This would merely prove that the white man is simply a Negro turned inside out like a glove.

PA UBU: Sir, I am astonished that you should have discovered that all on your own. You have clearly profited from our discourse and deserve advancement. Possibly, when turned inside out in the manner you have described, you may suitably replace the specimen of black slave.<sup>68</sup>

Jarry here confronts and manipulates colonial stereotypes and rhetoric as reflected in the French press, revelling in a deliberate vulgarity satirizing the prejudices of French colonials. His stunningly offensive play with the theme of anticolonialism is the other side of his primitivism: the worship of puppets, instinct, violence. By giving a political context to the African figures in such works as these, Jarry refuses to trade in the essentialized, timeless image of the noble savage. Instead, he contextualizes it, acknowledging in his treatment of the theme the political realities that have brought the Oceanic and African "fetishes" into the view of the avant-garde. And, like a good modernist subversive,

<sup>64</sup> See n. 8.

<sup>65</sup> See Leighton, 63-69 and 135-139.

<sup>66</sup> A. Jarry, "Ubu colonial," *Almanach illustré du Père Ubu*, Paris, 1901; trans. in Jarry, *Selected Works of Alfred Jarry*, ed. R. Shattuck and S.

Taylor, New York, 1965, 53-54.

<sup>67</sup> Cited by R. Shattuck, *The Banquet Years: The Origins of the Avant-Garde in France, 1885 to World War I*, New York, rev. ed., 1968, 237.

<sup>68</sup> Trans. in Jarry, 1965 (as in n. 66), 59.



17 Pierre Bonnard, illustration for Alfred Jarry, "Ubu colonial," from *Almanach illustré du Père Ubu*, Paris, 1901

he plays off the political oppressions foisted on the natives by men like Ubu against an image of the African as a cannibal rather than as a mere innocent, combining the "Dahomean" with the "Congolese" image of the black. He likewise satirically celebrates a whole range of other racist (and furtively titillating) stereotypes that colonial rhetoric traded in: nudity, rampant sexuality, and lack of inhibition of all sorts, as Bonnard confirms in his illustration for *Ubu colonial* (Fig. 17). (Another early modernist hipster, André Salmon, likewise trades on this image in the black slave dancer who figures prominently in his novel, *La Nègresse du Sacré-Coeur*, which was written in 1907-8 and set in a "plantation" in Montmartre.<sup>69</sup>)

<sup>69</sup> A. Salmon, *La Nègresse du Sacré-Coeur*, Paris, 1920. For a discussion of this rhetoric, see G. Brooks, "Artists' Depiction of Senegalese Signares: Insights Concerning French Racist and Sexist Attitudes in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of the Swiss Society of African Studies*, 1979, 77-89.

<sup>70</sup> G. Kahn, *Premiers poèmes*, Paris, 1897, 24; trans. in E. Herbert, *The Artist and Social Reform: France and Belgium, 1885-1898*, New Haven, 1961, 54.

<sup>71</sup> J. Flam, "Matisse and the Fauves," in Rubin, New York, 212, rightly points to the way African art allowed Picasso and the Fauves to escape "history and inherited cultural traditions," though the resonances of such

"In shattering a fragment of the artistic façade," the Symbolist poet Gustave Kahn wrote in 1897, the artist "touches the social façade."<sup>70</sup> Parallel to Jarry's destruction of theatrical forms and traditions, Picasso's attack on inherited artistic conventions implied an attack on "the social façade." For the modernists, primitivism became a method for revolutionizing style; more, this formal radicalism often served, depending on the attitude of the artist, to present an alternative — mingling concepts of authenticity, spontaneity, freedom from the repression of bourgeois constraints, and *amour libre* — to currently entrenched social and aesthetic forms. The primitivism of Picasso and Derain most notably, like that of Gauguin before them, gestured toward cultures whose transformative powers they admirably offered as escape routes from the stultification of French culture and academic art.<sup>71</sup> Picasso's Iberian period, for example, simultaneously cast the human form in a Spanish version of archaic Greek sculpture and summoned images of arcadia into play.<sup>72</sup> In addition to these familiar forms and associations of primitivism, Picasso was able in his works of 1907 to summon up disturbing images of Africa, with its now unavoidable associations of exploitation and white — as well as black — savagery.

The "discovery" of African sculpture by the Fauves and the date of Picasso's first encounter have been much debated by scholars; most recently Paudrat, using a careful reading of all the artists' and witnesses' statements, as well as a visual study of the artists' paintings, has proposed autumn 1906 as the date of the first real impact of African art on Vlaminck, Derain, and Matisse.<sup>73</sup> Scholars currently agree that Picasso would have seen the African works at this time, and Rubin rightly points out that it was not until June 1907 that African influence appeared in his work. But all these artists' familiarity with African sculpture may predate their interest in it — and its influence on their work — by an even longer time, given the presence of the "fetishes" from the colonies in Parisian junk shops and the Musée d'Ethnographie since the nineteenth century. Thus Picasso and others may well have been familiar with, but not more than mildly interested in, African objects until events brought the whole subject of Africa to their notice, in a pointedly political way. Picasso himself said nothing about it for almost thirty years, except for his facetious remark in 1920, "L'art nègre? Connais pas!"<sup>74</sup>

Picasso's allegiance to concepts of primitivism that date back to his Nietzschean period at the turn of the century

"acts" among these artists vary. See also J. Lee, "L'Enchanteur pourrisant," *Revue de l'art*, LXXXII, 1988, 51-60, for Derain's more generalized primitivism in the service of his Symbolist religious themes.

<sup>72</sup> See Leighton, 78-84.

<sup>73</sup> See Paudrat (as in n. 5), 137-141; Rubin, 248, and Flam (as in n. 71), 216-217, concur in this date, though Flam has suggested more recently, if I read him correctly, in *Matisse: The Man and His Art, 1869-1918*, Ithaca and London, 1986, 173-174, that Matisse's first purchase was in spring of that year.

<sup>74</sup> "Opinions sur l'art nègre," *Action*, III, Apr. 1920, 26.

and his parallel anarchism would have made the Congo revelations and debates of interest to him and may well have led him and others, especially the self-proclaimed anarchist Vlaminck, to look freshly at what already existed around them. Vlaminck, by his own account, had looked at African art with Derain at the Musée d'Ethnographie several times before his "revelation" — at the time of the scandals — in the bistro in Argenteuil, the revelation that resulted in his first acquisition of masks.<sup>75</sup> Further, this delayed "discovery" parallels Picasso's incorporation of Iberian sculpture into his art in 1906, sculpture that he, and all the Barcelona *modernistes*, had known since the 1890s,<sup>76</sup> and it perhaps explains why he incorporated largely African — and not Oceanic — forms into his art in 1907-8, despite Salmon's claim of Picasso's equal formal interest in African and Oceanic sculpture, and despite the fact that he collected both kinds of art.

At least as early as 1905 Picasso was conscious of Africa's tribal and colonial setting. A drawing in a sketchbook of that year (also containing studies for the *Family of Saltimbanques*) shows an African native in front of a grass hut, two palm trees, and a river with a tiny figure in a canoe (Fig. 18). The African is emaciated, mere skin and bone, with an overlarge and crudely simplified head, his arms on his hips forming a diamond shape. This drawing testifies, à la Jarry, to Picasso's interest in Africa as a place both culturally fascinating and politically oppressed. The insistence on the symmetry of the diamond-shaped posture of the upper body and its repetition in the strange skirt(?) below possibly suggest forms reminiscent of the Kota reliquaries from the French Congo visible in the Musée d'Ethnographie from the 1880s (Fig. 19). Indeed, this may represent Picasso's first effort to combine an image, more nearly Expressionist than either elegantly mannered or geometrizing, with an echo of African sculpture; if so, the idea retreated until he conceived its more potent manifestation two years later.

In 1907, reference to African art not only allowed Picasso to "primitivize" the figures in his works, as in, for example, *Head* (Fig. 20), but it allowed him to introduce Africa into his work as an allusion, or "iconography," whose associations for his French viewers (whether an actual or imagined public) were extraordinarily complex. Conflating his figures with recognizably African forms — such as the Kota reliquary or André Derain's Fang mask from the French Congo (Fig. 21) — violently subverted the formal treatment of the human figure. As several have pointed out, the search for the "right" mask is misguided, since Picasso synthesized

aspects of various African works rather than copying any single one, though they were certainly all from various parts of the French Empire.<sup>77</sup> It was the idea of Africa that Picasso sought, and his synthesis valorized the products of native culture while it accused the French of "hypocrisy" and "bankrupt" artistic traditions during the intense political debate on colonial brutality.

African sculpture offered a model of conceptualizing simplification based on folk traditions that go back into prerecorded history, representing to modernists authentic "primitive" expressions of thought and feeling. Additionally, as Frances Connelly has demonstrated, French culture as far back as the sixteenth century connected concepts of the "grotesque" in two dimensions with caricature, ornament, and the fantastical, while the "grotesque" in three dimensions was connected with the monstrous and the horrific, and specifically associated with Africa.<sup>78</sup> African sculptures, especially, were viewed as "idols" and "fetishes," and to Europeans represented manifestations of the "irrational, mute, and fearful world" in which they imagined the "primitive" to live. Conversion to Christianity routinely involved destruction (or exportation) of such too-powerful three-dimensional art, and the shock felt by eighteenth-century Europeans gradually took on shades of sarcasm and contempt as colonialization proceeded.<sup>79</sup> Thus, any prewar French artist or audience thoroughly identified an imagined primal savagery with images of African sculpture and references to it. Their appearance in Picasso's already "grotesque" painting echoed inherited images and evoked associations of superstition, irrationality, darkness, and horror, adding to the artist's considerable arsenal of anticlassical devices.

In *La Jeune Peinture française* (1912), Salmon records Picasso's stated interest in Oceanic and African objects as "raisonnables," usually interpreted as "conceptual";<sup>80</sup> this was generally cited as Picasso's whole relationship to African art in the first half of the century. Given the absurdist spirit in which Picasso "authorized" facetious disinformation about his art,<sup>81</sup> it is useful to ask what "reasonable" might mean in regard to the African art that he would have seen. The Kota reliquary reproduced here (Fig. 19) was acquired by the Musée d'Ethnographie in 1883; and the Grebo mask from the Ivory Coast (Fig. 22), whose formal influence was felt on his *Guitar* of 1912, was acquired by the Musée d'Ethnographie in 1900. If such works — altered by ritual use, incorporating the most "unartistic" materials from the traditional Western viewpoint, and as far from illusionistic in style as Picasso could ever have seen — can

<sup>75</sup> M. Vlaminck, *Portraits avant décès*, Paris, 1943, 106.

<sup>76</sup> The impetus in this case, however, came not from a political event but probably from the exhibition of the Osuna reliefs in the Louvre in the spring of 1906; see Leighton, 79-81.

<sup>77</sup> See Rubin, 274-278. See also J. Donne, "African Art and Paris Studios, 1905-20," in *Art in Society: Studies in Style, Culture, and Aesthetics*, ed. M. Greenhalgh and V. Megaw, London, 1978, 105-120, for a discussion of the exclusively colonial origins of the African art that Picasso was able to see.

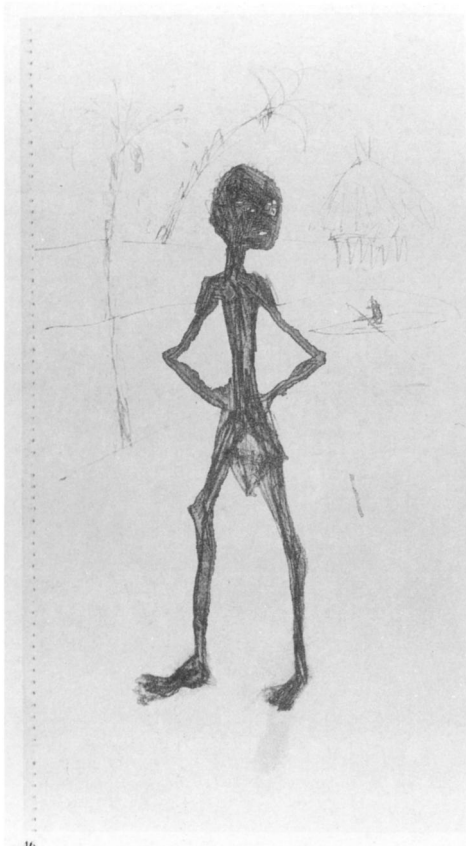
<sup>78</sup> See Connelly (as in n. 3), 164 and 237; for a discussion of the relation of caricature to primitivism and Cubism, see A. Gopnik, "High and Low: Caricature, Primitivism, and the Cubist Portrait," *Art Journal*, Winter 1983, 371-376.

<sup>79</sup> Connelly (as in n. 3), 260-261 and 266-269.

<sup>80</sup> Salmon, 43.

<sup>81</sup> See Leighton, "Dreams and Lies of Picasso," *Arts Magazine*, Oct. 1987, 50-55.

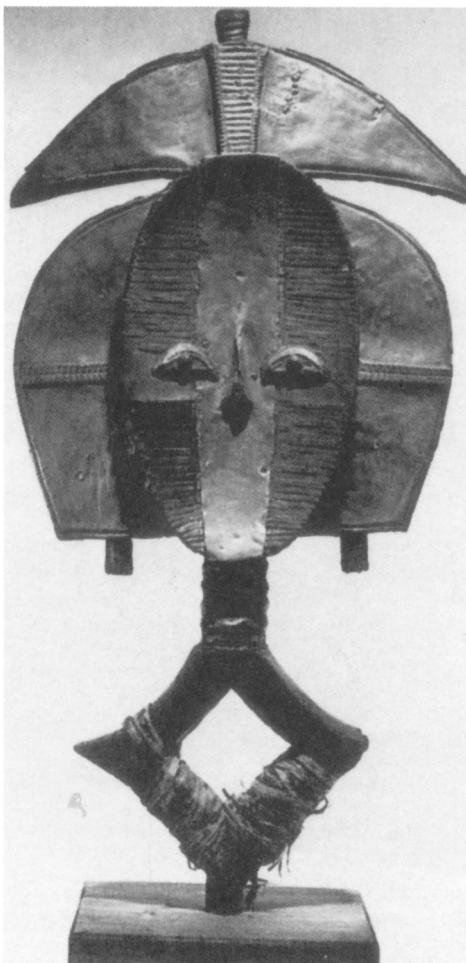




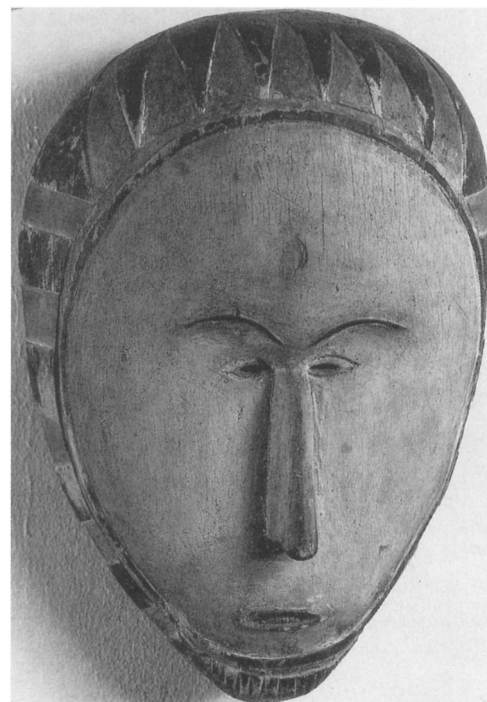
18 Pablo Picasso, *African*, sketchbook page, 1905 (photo: heirs of the artist)



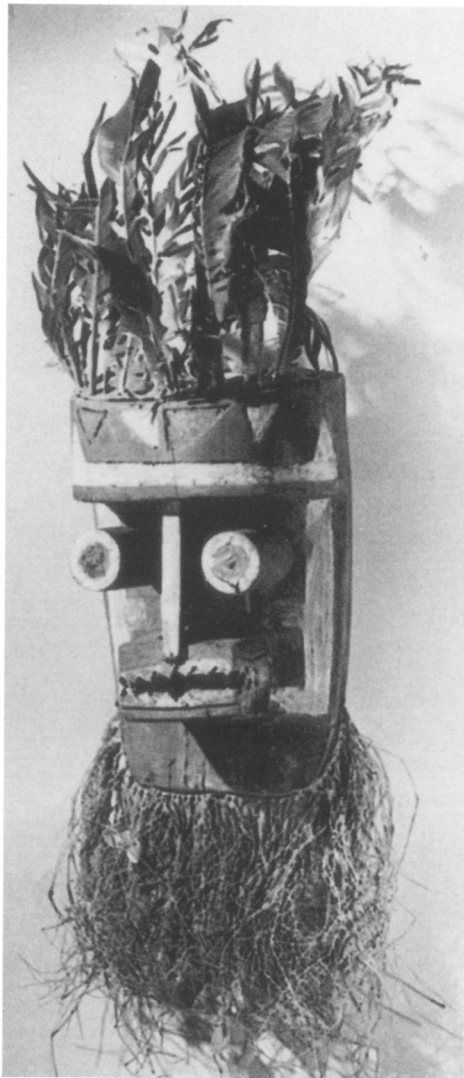
20 Pablo Picasso, *Head*, 1907. Paris, Collection Claude Picasso (photo: heirs of the artist)



19 Kota Reliquary, People's Republic of the Congo. Paris, Musée de l'Homme (photo: Musées Nationaux)



21 Fang mask, Gabon. Paris, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou. Formerly coll. M. Vlamincq and A. Derain (photo: Musées Nationaux)



22 Grebo mask,  
Ivory Coast.  
Paris, Musée de  
l'Homme  
(photo: Musées  
Nationaux)

appear "reasonable" to a Western artist, that artist has performed an almost magical act of projection and inversion of the ordinary meaning of the word as "rational."

Certainly Salmon acknowledges no contradiction in the use of such a word, going on to say in a later section of the same chapter that, "in choosing savage artists as guides," Picasso "was not unaware of their barbarity." He was "the apprentice sorcerer always consulting the Oceanic and African enchanters." Abandoned by friends who did not understand his new art, "a bit deserted, Picasso found his true self in the society of the African augurs."<sup>82</sup> Elsewhere, Salmon called Picasso's collection of African and Oceanian sculptures "grimacing idols" and "primitive marvels."<sup>83</sup> What Picasso produced in response to this influence, ac-

ording to Salmon, were "forbidding nudes, grimacing and perfectly worthy of execration," a human effigy that "appears to us so inhuman and inspires in us a sort of horror."<sup>84</sup> Apollinaire used similar nonformalist language to discuss the Congolese objects owned by Vlaminck and Derain, naming them (admiringly) "masks and fetishes," "grotesque and crudely mystical works," and "barbaric sculptures."<sup>85</sup> In 1937, Picasso gave a lengthy, compelling, and secret account of his first trip to that warehouse of colonial plunder, the Musée d'Ethnographie, to André Malraux, who did not publish it until after Picasso's death:

When I went to the old [Musée d'Ethnographie], it was disgusting. . . . I was all alone. I wanted to get away. But I didn't leave. I stayed. I understood that it was very important. . . .

The masks weren't just like any other pieces of sculpture. Not at all. They were magic things. . . . They were against everything — against unknown, threatening spirits. I always looked at fetishes. I understood; I too am against everything. . . . Spirits, the unconscious (people still weren't talking about that very much), emotion — they're all the same thing. I understood why I was a painter. All alone in that awful museum, with masks, dolls made by the redskins, dusty manikins. *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* must have come to me that very day, but not at all because of the forms; because it was my first exorcism-painting — yes absolutely!<sup>86</sup>

The interpretation Picasso gives here has been filtered through the experience of Dada and Surrealism — especially in using the concept of the unconscious<sup>87</sup> — (and filtered through Malraux), but at the very least we can say that Picasso's interest in African art lay as much in what he imagined to be their function as ritual objects as in their forms, whose very abstraction encoded the mystical power he wanted to appropriate.

In *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (Fig. 1), the Iberian faces of the two central figures and their crudely simplified forms ally them with Spain's prehistoric past and announce Picasso's origins and preoccupations as outside (and against) the French classical tradition.<sup>88</sup> The context of the brothel painfully points up the prostitutes' loss of freedom (they are bought and sold like slaves). At the same time, the exaggeration of their sexual display threatens the spectator-customer, as they turn their attention from the room to the world beyond the frame. Their "primitive" power and hypnotic gaze are anything but alluring, yet they pale in comparison with the violence of the two right-hand figures, whose faces (but not bodies) are transformed by African

<sup>82</sup> Salmon, 44-51 (author's trans.).

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, trans. in Fry, 89; and Salmon, "Pablo Picasso," *Paris-Journal*, 21 Sept. 1911, trans. in Fry, 68.

<sup>84</sup> Leighton trans. Salmon, 48 and 51.

<sup>85</sup> G. Apollinaire, "The Beginnings of Cubism," *Le Temps*, 14 Oct. 1912; trans. in L. Breunig, *Apollinaire on Art: Essays and Reviews, 1902-1918*, New York, 1972, 259-261.

<sup>86</sup> A. Malraux, *Picasso's Mask*, trans. J. Guicharnaud (Paris, 1974), New York, 1976, 10-11.

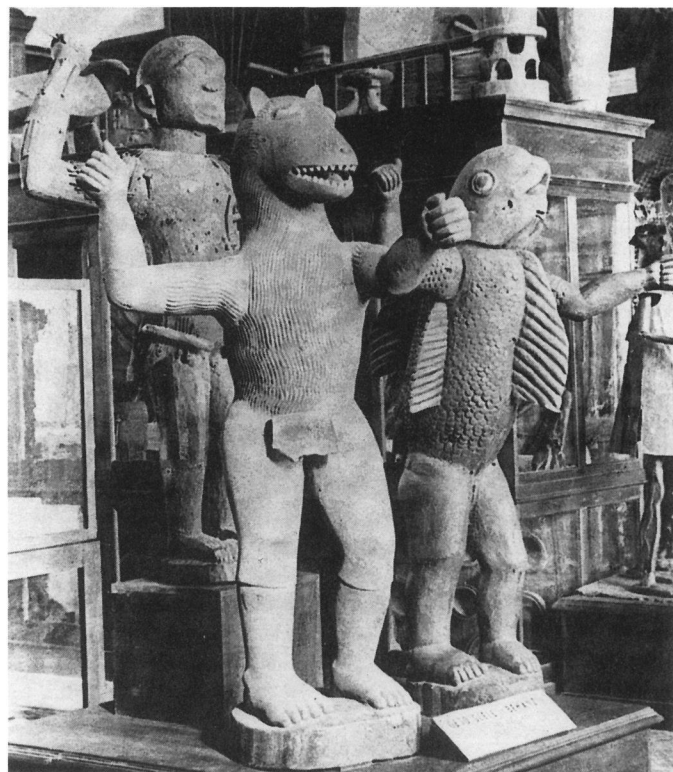
<sup>87</sup> The term "unconscious" was current among the Zurich Dadaists ca. 1916; see H. Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-art*, London, 1965.

<sup>88</sup> For a lengthy consideration of Picasso's relation to the "classical tradition," see E. Fry, "Picasso, Cubism, and Reflexivity," *Art Journal*, Winter 1988, 296-310.

rather than Iberian models and whose presences considerably increase the horrific voltage of this work; they mock such sexual display and, as "Africanized" figures, aggressively challenge the "bankrupt" Western artistic tradition.

Africa, as imported into the work, represents not an idyllic, pre-European society, but the very opposite of "civilized" Europe and, as such, a threat to it. And what Picasso's primitivism does to European art, it also does to European art's idealizations of sexuality. The radical treatment of the traditional idealized nude female announces the end of the old world of art with a new, staggering violence. The violence comes not only from the savage treatment of the distorted faces and forms of the two "African" figures, and from the transformation of usually passive nudes in tamed attitudes into aggressively challenging mock-temptresses, but also from the very allusion to the dark continent unavoidably carried with them. The tremendous powers of "primitive" spirituality — "African soothsayers," as Salmon called them — overwhelm the European tradition in a flamboyant act of rebellion. In addition, all those thrillingly nightmarish and well-publicized tales from Dahomey inevitably echo in the African forms imported into this work, summoning up an imagined ruthless barbarity that the modernist makes it his mission bravely to face. Salmon's novel, *La Nègresse du Sacré-Coeur*, stars a painter — whom Salmon later identified as Picasso — who is obsessed with what he calls "Dahomeyan" sculpture, about which he is presented as knowing a great deal. Yet, though the plunder from the Dahomean Wars was available from the 1890s at the Musée d'Ethnographie (Fig. 23), Picasso never exhibited any interest in appropriating its quite realistic forms, looking instead to the more abstract Congolese objects for the most part, such as Fang masks and Kota reliquaries from the French Congo (Figs. 19 and 21). Thus, what Salmon appropriates here on behalf of his Picasso-surrogate was not the *art* of Dahomey, but the popular resonance of its human sacrifice, animism, fetishism, and savagery. His character murmurs in conclusion, "I am haunted, haunted."<sup>89</sup>

All this "horror" mingles — in a way that evidently did not seem contradictory — with the modernists' outrage at the brutality of the white colonialists. Jarry and Conrad exhibit a fascination with both sides of this strange African coin. In the beginning of *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow is appalled to see Europeans using chain gangs of blacks, overworked and dying; but, finally, for Conrad it is the indigenous evil of human sacrifice, which the primeval forest somehow compels and to which Mr. Kurtz succumbs through his participation, that is the worst. The attraction to the grotesque, the artist's obligation to acknowledge, even to experience on some level, the most horrific human truths, was already thoroughly established in the Symbolist period by the Decadents, with precedents as distant as the Romantics of the early nineteenth century. Mario Praz's classic study of this subject details a whole literature's fascination with a catalogue of horrors that includes incest, murder, vampirism, Satan-worship, and necrophilia.<sup>90</sup> That the modernists were profoundly influenced by the gener-



23 King Statues of Gezo, Gelele, and Behanzin, Dahomey, as installed in the Musée d'Ethnographie, 1895. Paris, Musée de l'Homme (photo: Musées Nationaux)

ation of Symbolists is as true in the visual arts as in poetry and the novel, in this as in other things. And that this embracing of "horror" could be conflated with a larger agenda of social criticism and "liberation" was likewise explored by the previous generation. The new venue was Africa itself.

Thus both stylistically and thematically, the "African" figures in *Les Demoiselles* are not only unsympathetic to the art and life of established European culture, but are its enemy. The painting's "rhetoric" owes much to those anticolonial satires on black Africa that are central to Jarry's oeuvre. The raw sexuality of his black characters, their perverseness, stands against the rational, orderly, decorous world of their rulers; and behind it all lies the exploitation and the brittle and vainglorious cultural superiority that Jarry ridiculed.

I view these echoes of French politics and attitudes toward Africa as an important part, but only one part, of the complexity of meanings of this rich work. Such scholars as Robert Rosenblum, Leo Steinberg, and Ron Johnson have compellingly explored the painting's variety of art-historical allusions, its psychosexual ambiguity, and Nietzschean

<sup>89</sup> Salmon (as in n. 69), 92.

<sup>90</sup> M. Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, Oxford, 1933 and 1970.

primitivism.<sup>91</sup> The allusion to Africa is part of this mix, part of the assault on European traditions of representation and taste that Picasso brilliantly launches through his daring transformations of figure, space, color, and form.<sup>92</sup> Formally and thematically, *Les Femmes d'Alger* was the most outrageous artistic act conceivable at that time, for this and many other reasons, and is certainly the best instance of the association of a primitivizing style, with its crudely simplified geometry and flattened repetitious forms, with all that Africa represented for the culture in which Picasso lived.

Picasso's primitivism subverts aesthetic canons of beauty and order in the name of "authenticity," as a way of contravening the rational, liberal, "enlightened" political order in which they are implicated.<sup>93</sup> The deliberate ugliness of a painting like the *Femmes* is meant to assert the persistence, within a self-congratulatory "modern" culture, of the ugly realities that a complacent modernity would prefer to elide. His primitivism expresses something like a Nietzschean transvaluation of the values encoded in contemporary debate about Africa. That he means to outrage conservatives who view Africans as subhuman (and outrage their ideals of "art" and "beauty") goes without saying; but his Jarryesque affront is directed far more powerfully at socialists and liberals who would deplore the abuses in the French Congo on "humanitarian" grounds, arguing that these "savages" should not be brutalized, but rather, in effect, be remade in the image of the tolerant, enlightened Frenchman.

In opposition to this, Picasso's imagery attacks the liberal, enlightened ideal of "man," even as it offers a critique, and an alternative, to the commodified status of the artwork in a modern consumerist society.<sup>94</sup> He conjures with the anxiety that civilization has done its work too well, made us too tame, and thus cut us off from sources of magic, fear, and dread, sources on which a more "primitive" art might still draw and to which it might still be able

to return us. His imagery asserts that the culture of such "savages" has a power and a beauty all its own. Picasso's primitivizing proposes a more subversive alternative ruled out of the accepted terms of debate, namely that the African is neither an inferior brute nor a misunderstood equal, but something more like an absolute other who remains possessed of primordial powers with which "modern" culture has lost touch — much to its disadvantage.

Picasso's primitivizing style aspires, like the African sculptures he so admired, to an act not of mere decoration, but of power. Picasso paints here not as the Nietzschean artist, a conduit for the charged outpouring of "genius," but as a shaman, exorcising the thrall of civilized decorums and summoning against them the primordial forces of awe and dread so compellingly embodied in the "savage fetishes" whose meanings and motives ("they were against everything") he wanted to appropriate for his own project. Thus primitivism was much more to the modernists than allusion, even to such a powerful complex of associations as those I have described. Primitivism was also a bid to recapture kinds of representational "power" that the arts of civilized, Enlightened Europe had lost.

Critics, too, then conceived of Picasso and much of the literary and artistic avant-garde as "anarchists in art," as the journalism of the day abundantly demonstrates.<sup>95</sup> By 1910 art reviewers were also using the language of "the primitive" to characterize modern art, which allows us insight into the ways the concept — allied with simplification, deformation, ugliness, and the grotesque — was understood. For example, Henri Guilbeaux, reviewing Picasso's exhibition at Vollard's in *Hommes du jour* in 1911, noted that, "M. Picasso, after having given more than promises, set about one day totally abdicating his personality. He imitated these Spanish masters and others, and he willed himself the humble continuer of Primitives. That which he offers us today accentuates willful deformations that sometimes achieve the grotesque and the ugly."<sup>96</sup>

<sup>91</sup> This consideration of the larger resonance of Africa for the audiences of Picasso's prewar work adds to, rather than displaces, other studies and interpretations of Picasso's primitivism and, especially, of *Les Femmes d'Alger*. See L. Steinberg, "The Philosophical Brothel," *Art News*, Pt. 1, Sept. 1972, 20-29; and Pt. 2, Oct. 1972, 38-47; R. Rosenblum, "Femmes d'Alger Revisited," *Art News*, Apr. 1973, 45-48; R. Johnson, "The 'Femmes d'Alger' and Dionysian Destruction," *Arts*, Oct. 1980, 94-101; and *idem*, "Picasso's 'Femmes d'Alger' and the Theater of the Absurd," *Arts*, Oct. 1980, 102-113; M. Gedo, "Art as Exorcism: Picasso's 'Femmes d'Alger,'" *Arts*, Oct. 1980, 70-82; and W. Rubin, "From Narrative to 'Iconic' in Picasso: The Buried Allegory in *Bread and Fruit on a Table* and the Role of *Les Femmes d'Alger*," *Art Bulletin*, LXV, 1983, 615-649; and see Rubin, Steinberg, and P. Daix in *Les Femmes d'Alger*, Paris, 1988.

<sup>92</sup> See Fry (as in n. 88) and Leighton, 96-120.

<sup>93</sup> L. Trilling argued in *Sincerity and Authenticity*, Cambridge, Mass., 1971, that the idea of "authenticity" has governed much of modernist art, which rejects received canons of beauty and order because these are implicated in other, received structures of social order and dominance that the adversarial artist aspires to subvert. Trilling points out that: "Authenticity is implicitly a polemical concept, fulfilling its nature by dealing aggressively with received and habitual opinion, aesthetic opinions in the

first instance, social and political opinion in the next. One topic of its polemic, which has reference to both aesthetic and social opinion, is the error of the view that beauty is the highest quality to which art may aspire" (p. 94).

<sup>94</sup> See Leighton, 130-131, for a discussion of Picasso's nonparticipation in the "legitimate" art market — the Salons — in his prewar period.

<sup>95</sup> Critics of the 1890s and early 1900s typically saw departures from artistic tradition in political terms; for example, A. Lehmann, *The Symbolist Aesthetic in France: 1885-1895*, Oxford, 1950, 181, quotes the critic Re Colin, *Anarchie littéraire*, Paris, 1898, xii, who was hostile to *vers libres* and a defender of "le vieux bon sens français": "L'anarchie est évidente. Elle est logique aussi. Elle a ses causes, dont les deux principales sont: la rupture avec la tradition et l'individualisme." And though no critics discussed *Les Femmes d'Alger* in the contemporary press, Cubism was immediately equated with anarchism; for a discussion of this subject, see Leighton, 98-101.

<sup>96</sup> Leighton trans. H. Guilbeaux, "Exposition Pablo Picasso," *Hommes du jour*, Jan. 1911 [p. 8]: "M. Picasso, après avoir donné plus que des promesses, se mit un jour à abdiquer totalement sa personnalité. Il imita ces maîtres espagnols et d'autres, et il se voulut l'humble continuateur des Primitifs. Ce qu'il nous offre aujourd'hui accuse des déformations volontaires qui parviennent parfois au grotesque et à la laideur."

Writing on the "crisis in French painting" in response to the Salon of 1910, Georges Lecomte warned artists that the public will be "before long worn out with vulgarity, with violence and with savagery, with deformation and with ugliness, with coarse roughness."<sup>97</sup>

A debate published in September and October 1912 in *La Vie* and *L'Action française* wonderfully reveals the public knowledge of the uses of modern primitivist painting and of its political ambience. An anonymous item in *La Vie* noted: "Some artists have grouped themselves to study the savage soul in its pacifistic manifestations; their aim consists in acquiring a more profound knowledge of 'l'art nègre.'"<sup>98</sup> This group, the article continued, proposed to collect art as well as all sorts of historical objects and curiosities, to organize voyages to the colonies, and to found a small museum, "which will interest in the highest degree artists and scholars."<sup>99</sup> To give some background to this proposed museum and the interest in African art it manifests, the author noted that an antiquary shop in the Rue de Rennes displayed Dahomean masks, "fetishes" from the Congo, and symbolic statues from Guinea in its window. He continued:

It is there that M. Henri Matisse saw them. This painter, of equatorial coloring and mad with cruel stylization, acquired some to decorate his studio. After him, the Spaniard Picasso, the rigorous draughtsman, bought some. . . . At Vollard's where the exotics are found in front of the frescoes of Gauguin and the gods of Easter Island, the beautiful painter Vlaminck exchanged many of his powerful landscapes for barbaric statues. It is there also that M. Derain obtained some: he draws inspiration not only in his paintings of a hieroglyphic synthesis, but also in his sculpted works.

The article concludes with heartfelt enthusiasm: "In the Musée Guimet, in the Musée Cernuschi are collected the masterpieces of the Yellow race. Let each of us work so that Paris will soon possess its Museum of Black Art!"<sup>100</sup> Apol-

linaire had supported a similar idea in an article in *Paris-Journal* a week earlier, when he proposed a State-sponsored "museum for exotic art," which would receive all of the "artistic" objects from the Trocadéro (as opposed to those of merely "ethnographic" interest) as well as ongoing supplements from colonial administrators.<sup>101</sup>

In the month following this discussion — which reveals an animated sympathy with the modernists, though perhaps not an insider's view — *La Vie* reprinted a stunningly racist response to their item, which had since appeared in the royalist *L'Action française*:

Such is the latest of contemporary aesthetic fantasies. In the ladder of the perversions of taste, it appears it must be the bottom. Below black fetishes, there is nothing. Let us take this occasion to recall that the indulgence professed for the Byzantine mosaics and the ape-statues of the basilicas, for the figures of reindeer traced in caves and for the scribbling of infants in primary school, must lead there. The love of the primitive, in art as in politics, suits the black.<sup>102</sup>

Most of the "grotesqueries" admired by the modernists since the 1880s are here named with the most withering contempt; and, moreover, the admirers of such art are themselves compared to blacks, in their uncivilized tastes as in their uncivilized politics. Indeed, *La Vie's* answer affirmed its general support of modernism and its broadly humanistic left-wing politics: "We have never dreamed of recommending black art as a canonical *model*, but its masterpieces can be precious *indications* for all intelligent artists, for those who do not search simply but impurely to imitate like these traditionalists who wish to restore all the classicisms. One grasps, by studying them, the spontaneity of the aspiration common to all humans."<sup>103</sup>

Thus for the modernists, to "primitivize" was not merely to do something to a painting; it was to do something to oneself, and it implied an ambition to do something to the culture at large. It was an act of sympathy with the most

<sup>97</sup> Leighton trans. G. Lecomte, "La Crise de la peinture française," *L'Art et les artistes*, Oct. 1911, 23-32: "Le public, bientôt excédé de la vulgarité, de la violence et de la sauvagerie, de la déformation et de la laideur, de l'ébauche grossière. . . ."

<sup>98</sup> Leighton trans. "L'art noir," *La Vie*, 21 Sept. 1912, 393: "Quelques artistes se sont groupés pour étudier l'âme sauvage dans ses pacifistes manifestations; leur but consiste à acquérir une connaissance approfondie de l'art nègre." My thanks to Jeffrey Weiss for bringing this exchange to my attention.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*: "Qui intéressera au plus haut point les artistes et les érudits."

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*: "C'est là que les vit M. Henri Matisse. Ce peintre, de coloris équatorial et féru de stylisation cruelle, en acquit pour décorer son atelier. Après lui, l'Espagnol Picasso au dessin rigoriste en acheta. . . . Chez Vollard où les exotiques se retrouvent devant les fresques de Gauguin et les dieux de l'île des Pâques, le beau peintre Vlaminck échangea maints de ses puissants paysages contre des statues barbares. C'est là aussi que s'en procura M. Derain: il s'en inspire non seulement dans ses tableaux d'une synthèse hiéroglyphique, mais encore dans ses meubles sculptés. Au Musée Guimet, au Musée Cernuschi sont recueillis les chefs-d'oeuvre des

Jaunes. Que chacun travaille à ce que Paris possède bientôt son Musée d'art noir!"

<sup>101</sup> Apollinaire, "Exoticism and Ethnography," *Paris-Journal*, 12 Sept. 1912; trans. in Breunig (as in n. 85), 243-246.

<sup>102</sup> Leighton trans. "L'art nègre à Paris," *La Vie*, Oct. 30, 1912, 141 (repr. from *L'Action française*): "Telle est la dernière en date des fantaisies esthétiques contemporaines. Dans l'échelle des perversions du goût, elle paraît devoir être la dernière. Au-dessous des fétiches nègres, il n'y a rien. Prenons cette occasion de rappeler que l'indulgence professée pour les mosaïques byzantines et les magots des basiliques, pour les figures de rennes tracées dans les cavernes et pour les barbouillages d'enfants de l'école primaire, devait mener là. L'amour du primitif, en art comme en politique, va au nègre."

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*: "Nous n'avons jamais songé à recommander l'art noir comme un modèle canonique, mais ses chefs-d'oeuvre peuvent être de précieuses indications pour tous artistes intelligents, pour ceux qui ne cherchent pas simplement mais impurement à imiter comme ces traditionalismes qui veulent restaurer tous les classicismes. On saisit, à les étudier, la spontanéité de l'aspiration chez des humains."

profoundly human states and impulses, an act of recognition, even when it entailed “horrors” that the refined bourgeois refused to face. The fascination with savagery and barbarism attributed to Africans, and the emphasis on fetishism in discussions of African art by Picasso’s friends, ironically reflects the image of Dahomey that justified its conquest for the French. The irony stems from the accusatory presence of African forms in his works of 1907 and 1908 that evoke the political echoes of the Gaud-Toqué Affair. Like Jarry’s and Conrad’s, Picasso’s political indignation is counterbalanced by an interest in knowing the worst and by the desire to appropriate the power of these associations to his art. The complex interweaving of these ideas and events forms an important part of the dense and sophisticated fabric of associations that *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* summoned up at the time for the circle to whom Picasso showed it.

Although the painting was not publicly exhibited at the time, numerous people saw the work in Picasso’s studio, which was quite accessible to a large avant-garde circle of friends, acquaintances, collectors, and hangers-on.<sup>104</sup> And in any case, the scale and careful preparation of this large and ambitious work indicate that Picasso saw it as a major statement and necessarily imagined a public for it. Certainly this public was both an abstraction and a wide circle of acquaintances of the artist. The enormously inventive subversive maneuvers of the work speak to many levels of public and private experience, as well as to conventions of inherited tradition, which this public would have recognized and which Picasso would have expected it to recognize. And part of this recognition, by virtue of “masking” his figures (traditionally masks reveal rather than hide truth<sup>105</sup>), would have inescapably involved the complicated mixture of ideas, fantasies, political postures, and racial attitudes relating to Africa as the French public “knew” it in 1907, a public recently agitated by reports of nearly unbelievable yet documented cruelty and illegal exploitation in a colony largely viewed as undergoing a process of “civilization” by their own superior culture.

Avant-garde painters for a century and more — David, Géricault, Delacroix, and Courbet — had offered finely calculated provocations of subject and theme at moments of political anxiety, crisis, and scandal. Picasso’s provocation is similarly motivated, but additionally grapples with

a central problem of modernism in general: how to radicalize structure and form, and abandon realism and narrative, without also abandoning centrally important issues of content and allusion to real-life concerns. The parallel of his Africanism with his later incorporation of newsprint into the collages at a time when Cubism hovered close to pure abstraction is significant; and, interestingly, these two episodes frame the only period of Picasso’s oeuvre — Analytical Cubism — about which claims for the “autonomy” of his art could (later) have been made, by him or by subsequent generations of critics.<sup>106</sup>

The alliance of Africa, then, with its brutal colonial history and mysteriously “primal” spiritism, and these prostitutes, in Picasso’s oeuvre among the most cruelly exploited and spiritually damaged groups in European society,<sup>107</sup> indicts not only the old artistic order but also the old moral and political order as well. The overlay of African masks — evocative of economic exploitation and forced labor — on white female “slaves” is strongly reminiscent of the strategy of anarchist critique-by-inversion so familiar in the work of Jarry, Picasso, Kupka, and Van Dongen.<sup>108</sup> By “masking” his figures, Picasso identifies an exploited group external to Western society with one of the most exploited groups within it, analogizing the ironically more visible periphery with the corrupt center of French culture. Yet, if the masks of the individual demoiselles are horrifying, the painting as a whole is more so. Although a prostitute’s job is to please (indeed, to bring out the beast within), Picasso’s “fetishes” terrify and repel the spectator, and the painting itself mocks and challenges the time-honored status of the easel painting-as-commodity in its refusal to charm, in its principled ambition to offend.

Even Picasso’s closest circle had difficulty following him this far. Salmon wrote of this work in 1912, “Nudes came into being, whose deformation caused little surprise — we had been prepared for it by Picasso himself, by Matisse, Derain, Braque, Van Dongen, and even earlier by Cézanne and Gauguin. It was the ugliness of the faces that froze with horror the half-converted.”<sup>109</sup> Gertrude Stein was silent, Leo Stein laughed, Matisse was annoyed by what he saw as a mockery of his own more hedonistic modernism: that comfortable armchair for the tired businessman that he offered as an image for his ambitions as an artist.<sup>110</sup> *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* announces other ambitions: Braque’s famous re-

<sup>104</sup> At the Picasso/Braque seminar at the Museum of Modern Art, 10-13 November 1989, John Richardson’s estimate of the number of people who had access to Picasso’s studio in this period was approximately fifty. See Leighten, 130-131; see also R. Jensen, “The Avant-Garde and the Trade in Art,” *Art Journal*, Winter 1988, 360-367, for a consideration of the larger implications of Picasso’s and other avant-garde artists’ relations to the art market.

<sup>105</sup> M. Barasch, “The Mask in European Art: Meanings and Functions,” in *Art, The Ape of Nature: Studies in Honor of H.W. Janson*, ed. M. Barasch and L. Sandler, New York, 1981, 253-264.

<sup>106</sup> For further discussion of this question, see Leighten, “Editor’s Statement: Revising Cubism,” *Art Journal*, Winter 1988, 269-276.

<sup>107</sup> See Leighten, 34-36.

<sup>108</sup> For example, Jarry’s *Ubu colonial* of 1901 with its Paris factory slaves; Picasso’s *Mother and Child*, 1907, with its Africanizing of the Madonna with Child; Kupka’s *Christian Heaven According to the Blacks*, 1904; and Van Dongen’s brilliant *White Peril*, 1905; see the discussion above, 615-616 and 621.

<sup>109</sup> Salmon, 1912; trans. in Fry, 84.

<sup>110</sup> R. Penrose, *Picasso: His Life and Work*, rev. ed., New York, 1973, 133-134; H. Matisse, “Notes d’un peintre,” *La Grande Revue*, 25 Dec. 1908, 731-745; trans. in H. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art*, Berkeley, 1968, 135.

response, summoning up tow and gasoline, likened the work to an anarchist bomb.<sup>111</sup> Even Apollinaire was taken aback and worried that Picasso might destroy the reputations they had both worked hard to establish; he said only one word: *révolution*.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Salmon, in *L'art vivant*, Paris, 1920, 123, quotes Braque as having said, "C'est comme si tu buvais du pétrole et mangeais de l'étoffe enflammée!" F. Olivier, *Picasso et ses amis*, Paris, 1933 (trans. J. Miller, London, 1964), 120, remembered a slight variation on this: "'Mais,' finit-il par répondre, 'malgré tes explications, ta peinture c'est comme si tu voulais nous faire

manger de l'étoffe ou boire du pétrole.'" In both statements, Braque brings together the components of a Molotov cocktail.

<sup>112</sup> Cited in P. Cabanne, *Pablo Picasso: His Life and Times*, New York, 1977, 119.