An Anthropology of Common Ground

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‘I’m going on a crusade this Monday,’ said the family father and Christian priest with whom I lived, while we explored a former Danish fort in the present-day coastal village of Keta in Ghana. His straightforward attitude was in stark contrast to my immediate reaction. I was desperately trying to rid myself of images of stereotypical brownish European medieval knights in armour, men and women perishing at the stakes and in holy wars. After a few seconds, I managed to ask him what he meant. He looked at me as if I was ignorant: ‘A crusade, you know a crusade…’ I stuttered: ‘Ehh, yes, I know crusades, but to me crusades are something that set off long ago from Europe.’ ‘No, no, no,’ he replied. ‘We have it too, crusades are still very important. We have to get rid of Satan’s work… those fetishes and fetish priests and their false faith […], the evil spirits can only be chased away by prayers and destruction!’ I had seen fetishes in the area, small white clay figures looking, to me, like small figures out of Star Wars. Whenever I had asked about these figures, people had laughed and/or looked somewhat perplexed and answered shortly that they were ‘fetishes, traditional religion’. What the priest had planned for the coming Monday was to drive to nearby villages and ‘spread the gospel’. He had on several occasions succeeded in converting people, he said. And he told me about his feats, often considered dangerous because they involved contact with fetishes and, thereby, with Satan. A successful crusade achieved conversion and the destruction of the fetishes, he added, and then he told me of his greatest achievement: the conversion of a fetish priest and the ensuing burning of a huge room filled with
fetishes. Immersed in rhetoric about the importance of preserving material cultural heritage, I asked a somewhat stupid question: ‘Do you really destroy them?’ ‘Yes, of course!’ he replied enthusiastically. I continued in the same vein, ‘Don’t you save some for the National Museum in Accra?’ As if the situation was not already awkward enough, this question caused the priest to regard me with a very severe face: ‘No, they must be destroyed, they are evil!’ In reply, I asked, ‘But why do you care so much about these fetishes and their destruction when you are a Christian and know that they are false faith?’ Instead of answering, he asked, ‘Don’t you believe in them?’ ‘Well, I don’t really think so,’ I replied and the conversation drew to a close.

This opening conversation introduces the overall theme of this chapter, in which I engage the notion of the fetish to explore ideas about the powers of material objects and the values they are seen to embody. In the previous chapters I have explored Frederiksgave by bringing to the fore particular aspects of the project that detail how the Frederiksgave site was emerging as a common heritage project through quite particular means and in quite particular ways. I did this, first, by presenting a reading of the cultural political climate that produced it, then by considering the design of the project on the part of the planners and their ideas about cultural encounter, and then by focusing on the tools, drawings, ideals and techniques involved in the authentic recreation of the building, and the mimetic relations that were accordingly brought into play. Here, I move on to look at the ways in which the Frederiksgave site was analysed, constructed and, I suggest, naturalised by the project makers as a particular topographic feature and a significant piece of nature, engendering particular valuations and ideas about powerful materiality. In short, I look at how Frederiksgave comes to work as a materialisation of value, that is, a valuable heritage site.

During my several stays in Ghana, I heard about fetishes every now and then. I do not know if it was a coincidence, but somehow the fetishes always seemed to be present in proximity to former Danish buildings. Historical sources in the archives had informed me that fugitive slaves could seek refuge with the fetish priest and gain the protection of the fetish if they were dissatisfied with their slave owners.¹ This could be a reason why fetishes were found close to Danish sites. The tension that the fetish created among the Danes and their slaves is
palpable in the old documents. A particular realism seems present when Balthazar Christensen, an expatriate Dane of the 1830s, notes in his diary that the master, especially if he is ‘white’ (in Danish: blank), cannot tyrannise his slave, since the slave can simply run away to a ‘fetish place’. However, Balthazar adds, this was not always a good deal for the runaway slave, since being a slave of the fetish was not easy work either. Historically, the fetish suggests an ambiguous presence that seems to occupy an interesting if awkward space in society. The fetishes I encountered during my fieldwork took very diverse forms. For example, several people I talked to mentioned ‘the fetish’ by pointing to a lagoon, a mountain, a spring, a cannon from a European fort, while other used the term to refer to clay figurines in families’ courtyards, in shrine houses, in public spaces or in an old abandoned village. In a conversation with three guides from the National Museum of Ghana in Accra, I was told that many of their friends and relatives thought of their job as quite peculiar. With a smile, one of the guides generalised: ‘Many Ghanaians think this is a strange place’; they all burst out laughing and then one continued: ‘To keep all these old things in a place like this is strange, some even think that there are fetishes inside’, and again they laughed.

In an article on collections and visitors in small British museums focusing on the everyday life of ‘ordinary folk’ in a particular area, Sharon Macdonald has touched upon the idea that for ‘old things’ to count and be treasured as museum objects a certain fetishisation of the objects is required. The fetishisation of everyday life is a social process whereby mundane material objects can be ‘turned into a collector’s item’, i.e. fetishised by being ascribed certain values. From the opening quote above and other fieldwork experiences from Ghana there is reason to push this statement a bit further by exploring not how mundane objects become fetishised, but how some of the former Danish museum and heritage objects and places work as fetish objects, and were seen by visitors and, more importantly for my present purposes, by heritage makers, as powerful in themselves and as materialising certain given properties, and therefore calling for careful and deliberate practices of maintaining these ‘natural’ qualities. It was also on account of these qualities that the museum guides mentioned above found it unlikely that any robbers would dare to break into the museum at night. The ‘strangeness’ perhaps also explained why few Ghanaians visited
the museum in Accra – ‘a fetish house’ as one of the guides suggested with a smile. When I asked if they themselves were not affected by working in such a place, they agreed that maybe in the beginning it was strange, but then they went on to say: ‘We are educated Christian people, it’s more traditional people who believe in that sort of thing’. Much like the crusader who opened this chapter, the guides at the National Museum of Ghana thereby tapped in to a schism in Ghanaian cultural politics. One position sees tradition and the past as positive and noble resources inspired by Nkrumahist ideas of national enlightenment and the growth of ‘African personality’. Birgit Meyer labels this tendency ‘the cultural politics of Sankofaism’, referring to the Akan symbol of a bird looking back – the same symbol used on the key exchanged at the inauguration ceremony, as described in the Introduction. Another position, though, holds a different idea of tradition, one that is apparently widespread among people belonging particularly to charismatic and Pentecostal Churches, and which we saw reflected in the opening conversation about the Monday crusade. In the view of these Christian groups, tradition and heritage are features that must be overcome, as they are seen to stand in the way of the Christian message, rather than serve as repositories of value.

The Ghanaian museum guides’ view that the ascription of awesome, fetish-like qualities to museums is a thing of the past (although nevertheless somehow powerful) was not shared by all. A fieldwork experience one late afternoon in January 2009 at the Frederiksgave site in Sesemi demonstrated this. Together with one of the men who had worked at the site and who was now the caretaker, I visited the museum exhibition in the main building, along with some Danish archaeologists. As always in the afternoon, we were surrounded by children who had returned from school. Suddenly, two men and a woman I had never seen before entered the site accompanied by some men from the village. They were representatives of a family whose daughter had injured the caretaker by throwing a stone at him a few days earlier. On behalf of the family, the visitors had come to apologise for the incident, which had caused a visit to the hospital and a few stitches. In low voices, they exchanged some words and money with the caretaker. With the conflict settled, and given that they were now at the site, the caretaker invited them to see the exhibition in the main building. Since I
rarely saw Ghanaian guests visiting the Frederiksgave site and the exhibition, I was excited and curious to hear what they thought about it. However, after spending a few seconds in one of the two small rooms flanking the central hall, the visiting woman ran out of the main building, obviously agitated. I followed and caught up with her. People were laughing. At a safe distance from the building, I managed to exchange a few words with her – she did not like the museum at all. It was apparent that she did not want to talk to me about it; somebody added that she did not speak English that well. People around us continued to laugh, and all of a sudden switched to the local Ga language, which I did not understand. It was awkward – the woman was still agitated, people were laughing, and I was eager to find out what it was all about. A few minutes later, some of us gathered in the open shed. My curiosity was met only with a few fragmented sentences: ‘She doesn’t like it… it’s no good… this small room… the gun… slaves,’ and a lot of laughter. These were moments full of tension, and the conjunction of laughter and fear, silence and half-told explanations, produced palpable uneasiness. No one, least of all the upset lady, was able or willing to tell me what had just happened. It seemed that this was not so much a matter of language problems and my not speaking Ga; by her agitated body language and her unwillingness to actually speak, the lady clearly succeeded in communicating both to me and the other people around. I was in no doubt that her encounter with the building and exhibition produced a need to flee. What was at stake was that the Frederiksgave museum, evidently, was not just any old thing. This was a view shared by the project makers who in the process of reconstruction strove to accommodate particular qualities thought to be both inherent in and vital for the Frederiksgave site. A kind of circularity is again at play here: certain inherent qualities make the site appear as common heritage, and these qualities must be respected in the heritage practices for the site to maintain them.

These incidents with dangerous and powerful things, buildings and spaces made me curious because they somehow mirrored ideas about materiality and topography that the project makers often referred to. The persistent attention that people involved in the heritage work at Frederiksgave paid to materiality and topography called for analytical attention in my exploration of the Common Heritage Project. In particular, this analytical focus is meant to explore how
materiality and topography appeared as vital parts of the naturalisation of the Frederiksgave museum as a heritage site of common interest, and how particular valuations affected as well as constituted the site. What I will show is that thorough analyses of the landscape, of building materials, and of the maintenance requirements stipulated by the project planners were intimately related to, if not coincident with, the valuation of the site. This approach gives rise to two related questions that direct this chapter: how is heritage valued as the ‘Frederiksgave Plantation, Common Heritage Project’, and how is this, in turn, valued as heritage?

In addressing this issue, my path leads me through particular understandings of materiality that relate in various ways to the etymology and historical ideas of the fetish. In other words, I draw here on the history of the fetish as a prism through which to analyse how material objects and topographical features both expressed and created value at the Frederiksgave site, and how the common heritage site came to life through this double movement of describing and producing. My primary guide is a series of articles entitled *The Problem of the Fetish* (1985, 1987, 1988) by William Pietz, in which he explores the concept of the fetish. Rather than being an intra-African phenomenon as it is often thought to be, the emergence of the fetish was dependent upon the conjunction of a commodity ideology and two different religious ideologies each founded in non-capitalist societies. As such, the fetish was a product of trading relations between African and Christian feudal and mercantile capitalist social systems, where it grew out of very different notions of value. I find Pietz’ insistence on this here-and-now quality of the fetish appealing – that these cross-cultural spaces were not societies or cultures in any conventional sense. The fetish

must be viewed as proper to no historical field other than that of the history of the word itself, and to no discrete society or culture, but to a cross-cultural situation formed by the ongoing encounter of the value codes of radically different social orders.

What I would like to emphasise here is the attention to the situations producing the fetish. According to Pietz, Karl Marx likewise appreciated the notion of the
Valuing heritage through the fetish precisely because it was able to describe the power of specificity, singularity and historical consciousness, thereby pointing to the illusion of natural unities. By confusing the singular with the general, the fetish could appear as an a priori entity that had erased all the (e.g. human) energies it was constantly made up of. Pietz suggests that by taking a point of departure in these heterogeneously structured encounters, it is possible to explore how the fetish grew out of very different notions of the social value of material objects, a theme I will return to (especially at the end of the chapter). Conducting part of my fieldwork on the West African coast where the notion of fetish popped up, as we have already seen, there was clearly analytical purchase in literature on the fetish – at times also termed ‘the religion of materiality’. In my view, Pietz’ trilogy of articles can thus offer new theoretical insights into issues of the materiality of cultural heritage, which has too often been reduced to an arbitrary instrument of social relations and discourse. Through the history of the fetish we learn about the development of a word, the meaning of which has always revolved around oppositions such as manufactured/natural, material/spiritual and referential/substantial – dichotomies that take centre stage when discussing the value of cultural heritage projects such as Frederiksgave. In this sense, the fetish is an apt concept with which to explore ideas such as authenticity that have been central to heritage studies. Why not use the fetish to explore some of the particular types of materiality involved in the Frederiksgave heritage project?

Following Deleuze, Pietz goes so far as to suggest that the fetish might radically revalue and reverse the tradition of Western philosophy. As an affirmative term, it can challenge a so-called Western philosophical tradition founded on a radical separation, often even hierarchisation, of materiality and spirituality. The notion of the fetish entails not only the possibility of transgressing this fundamental philosophical divide, but also of dealing with a materiality that is untranscended. In dealing with untranscended materiality, the fetish points to a paradox: it is both a figure that transcends the divide between the material and the spiritual and untranscended, implying that the effect and meaning of the fetish is inherent in the fetish – a point I will return to later. Embracing this paradox in projects such as Frederiksgave may guide us in developing a new vocabulary to capture the materiality of heritage, which seeks to move beyond
images of transcendence and representation – an ambition also mentioned in Chapter One. It may allow me to come up with a generalisation about cultural heritage that is not an abstraction (such as the sentence ‘cultural heritage is a physical manifestation of universal value’). Instead, my analysis of cultural heritage remains in place, as it were, even as I grapple with its value.

The particular uses of the fetish explored by Pietz go back in time to the fifteenth century when the first Portuguese merchants traded with African kings along the West African coast. They built lodges and forts near coastal villages from where they could trade gold, ivory and slaves for Europeans goods such as beads, brassware and textiles. The notion of the fetish evolved in these particular socio-historical spaces dominated by trade. It was through mercantile relations that ideas of the fetish developed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries via the Portuguese term feitiço. From the very outset, then, the concept of the fetish emerged in cross-cultural encounters. In Portugal, feitiço signified amulets and small relics of saints, and the term was used for characterising often innocent magical practices and witchcraft performed by the poor – a poor man’s magic. But, as we shall see, the term ‘fetish’, as it came to be known on the African coast, has a long and interesting etymological background that can be traced back to Roman uses around the beginning of the first millennium. These particular uses, and the etymological development that attended them, give us tools to understand how and why ways of treating and understanding materiality seemed tremendously important in the Frederiksgave project. Like the priest’s fetish crusade described in the opening paragraph, bad faith was lurking round the corner and needed to be eliminated. With these introductory thoughts in mind, I now turn to the history of the fetish in more detail.

**MANUFACTURED AND NATURAL GOODS AT FREDERIKSGAVE: TRUE AND FALSE HERITAGE**

Derived from the Latin verb facere, ‘to make’, Pietz traces the word ‘fetish’ 2000 years back to the Latin adjective facticius, meaning ‘manufactured’. Here it appears for the first time in written sources, specifically in Pliny’s *Natural History* to describe particular commercial relations. It was thus used to differentiate
manufactured, man-made commodities from natural, given commodities. The latter were understood as the product of purely natural processes, not altered by human effort. Pietz mentions an Arabic aromatic gum that could be collected from the ground, and which in Pliny’s time was distinguished from a similar but processed and therefore manufactured gum from Cyprus. Interestingly, one can still see traces of this rather persistent division between the man-made and the natural in the UNESCO distinction between natural heritage and cultural heritage. The difference in mode of production seems to be the difference separating cultural heritage from natural heritage. On the UNESCO official website, represented by small green squares and yellow circles scattered around the globe, with a high concentration in the northern hemisphere, one can thus locate the selected natural sites (180) and cultural sites (704) worth safeguarding. Since 1992, however, this division has been challenged or maybe rather softened by the introduction of a notion of ‘cultural landscapes’, depicted by small yellow-green icons and described with the statement that ‘cultural landscapes represent the ‘combined works of nature and of man’.

The 2000-year-old division of commodities into either manufactured (ficticius) or natural was slightly changed by Pliny himself to also connote a distinction between the appearance of a manufactured commodity and the appearance of a naturally made commodity. For instance, commodities that were functionally identical could differ in appearance according to the character of the product. As an example, Pliny mentions the blue colour of mined flower of copper as different from the synthetically produced blue of the manufactured mineral. In a commercial setting, this visible difference invites a discussion of distinctions in value: is the artificial good as valuable as the natural good (or vice versa)? The appearance and character of goods becomes an index of different values. This distinction is obviously relevant to notions of fraud – what is actually expected and exchanged in the commercial trade? The morally neutral division of the manufactured, the man-made and the naturally produced, then, was displaced by Pliny himself into a hierarchisation of values such that the naturally produced became the ‘authentic’ and the ‘true’, whereas the manufactured became the ‘unnatural’ and the ‘deliberately false’. In consequence, fraud emerges when the authentic natural material is copied or manipulated via man-made processes. In
the following, I take manufactured to be synonymous with artificial. In this early understanding of *facticius* or *facticium*, the concept therefore not only means manufactured but also humanly altered with the purpose of deceiving, in that on closer inspection the commodity is not the substance that its appearance promised. Fraud, as thought of in relation to appearance, invites analysis of an object’s component parts – is it *facticius* or genuinely natural?

Regarding both the production mode and the character of the product at Frederiksgave, – i.e. the dilapidated and reconstructed building – various professional heritage workers at the site undertook a thorough analysis of the component materials. As we have already seen, authenticity was important to the heritage workers engaged at Frederiksgave. In addition to magical time travel through architectural drawings and antique tools, authenticity was also thought to be obtained through particular practices to do with qualities of the artificial and natural products, and with mixing these together in the right doses. Here it is necessary to anticipate what will follow and note that it would be more precise to say that the Roman understanding of natural goods as raw materials to be collected by humans – i.e. non-humanly altered goods – was, in the case of the Common Heritage Project, extended to imply materials that related to nature and time in a very specific manner. Partly, as we shall see, this was because the materials chosen for the reconstruction had to be of the same kind, or work *with* nature instead of trying to alter nature. It was also partly because what the Romans valued as natural products unaltered by humans could in the Frederiksgave case be extended to mean products that were valued for being unaltered by time, in the sense that the materials should ideally take us back to both the time and the place of the original Frederiksgave plantation. By this I mean that, in order to reconstruct the cultural heritage site, a virginal (unaltered and unspoiled) year when the building was originally constructed was settled upon as the natural and given goal that the reconstruction should make us reach, implying that there was only one point and time of origin to be imitated by the heritage site. Reconstructing the site was a way of completing the building as it was in the selected ‘year zero’ of 1831, rather than ‘altering’ it to account for its appearance in any of the 173 years between then and when the reconstruction began. The reconstruction should not be made fraudulently
artificial, but rather be made as if merely collected from a specific place and point in time, and from there naturally extended into the present. My point here is that what should be understood as authentically natural products, then, are indeed humanly altered, but in particular ways that follow the distinction between fraudulently artificial (facticius) alterations and authentic natural extensions. Let me explore what was more precisely meant by artificial and natural goods, or ‘materials’ as I shall call them here.

Although the year of the construction of the Frederiksgave buildings is difficult to define because of the long construction process, the Frederiksgave Plantation and Common Heritage Site booklet and posters give it as 1831.\textsuperscript{26} 1831, then, was fixed as the point of origin from which alterations, decay and reconstruction could begin and be recapitulated. For example, remnants of two walls indicate that two small rooms had been erected on the veranda on a later occasion. Even though the Danish architect was not too enthusiastic about conserving and securing these two ruined walls built after 1831, he accepted it because the Ghanaian archaeologist convinced him that it would be good to maintain the remaining walls ‘for pedagogical reasons’, to show visitors how the walls were constructed, as the Danish architect explained to me. Today, therefore, two rough brownish walls (not whitewashed), each approximately one metre high, divide the white veranda into three sections – the brown walls follow the symmetry of the building and are not seen before one enters the veranda.

In line with the pedagogical ambition conveyed by the Ghanaian archaeologist and coordinator, a sequence of four smaller squares of wall was left un-whitewashed on the back of the building. Together, these wall sections show the process of constructing the house in its different stages of completion: in the first square are rhombus-shaped stones, the size of a foot, glued together with mortar. The next two squares expose rough and smooth plastering respectively. The little series culminates in a well-plastered wall which, if it were not meant as a pedagogical example, would be ready for the whitewash that covers the rest of the building. Finally, part of a larger original wall is also kept un-whitewashed. This wall seems to date from the original building, and has miraculously been conserved by the protection of the two huge fig trees described in Chapter Three. The wall was kept rough for ‘demonstrative reasons’, as stated on the
**FIG. 4.1** The veranda with rough brownish wall, 2008, Sesemi, Ghana.

**FIG. 4.2** Sequence of four unfinished squares at the back of the main building, 2006, Sesemi, Ghana.
poster: ‘Why this rough wall?’, exhibited nearby. Both the architect and many visitors (myself included) have stepped close to this rough wall to let our eyes analyse it meticulously, while our hands slid over it to point at a familiar form, often that of a seashell. These displays function as windows to the past, and collapse time to allow visitors to directly explore the original materials, such as the burnt shells that the mortar was made of.

These pedagogical tools, I suggest, illustrate a more general feature of the reconstruction of the Frederiksgave site, namely the issue of diminishing the gap in time between then and now by extending what was once there, rather than altering it. Like Pliny’s distinction, the reconstruction work was about collecting natural authentic pieces and downplaying their manufacture. In other words, it was a matter of willingly disregarding the lapse in time (1831-2004, when the reconstruction project was initiated) in order to extend the past into the present and future. It is important to note that extension should not be understood as ‘us’ constructing history via extension, but rather as history extending itself into the present under the professional guidance of the planners of our common reconstruction project – a point I will return to later.

A group of key people from the National Museum in Denmark explained the gap in time, beginning after the Danish King sold the Danish possessions in 1850, as follows:

Two hundred years of Danish presence was irreversibly over […] In addition to Danish toponyms and a long list of descendants with Danish family names, the Danes left six Danish forts, a long list of plantations and merchants’ houses behind. The darkness of history swallowed Frederiksgave for almost one hundred years – until the ruin was described and surveyed in the middle of the 1940s by writer Sophie Petersen and drawer and architect I. B. Andersen, and later in the middle of the 1960s by architect Niels Bech and geographer Henrik Jeppesen.27

In this quote, the notion of ‘the darkness of history’ can be seen as a way of describing in writing the lapse in time between the Danes leaving and their return. The dark jungle which with time had literally taken over the place
consigned the Frederiksgave plantation to an oblivion in which time was thought to stand still until it was set in motion and illuminated once more, emerging through the intervention of the National Museum, with its descriptions and records. Of course, since the villagers living close by knew of the place all along, the illuminated rediscovery must be understood in a very particular way, namely as a consequence of the idea of settling on the year 1831 as the point of departure containing the common history to which we can be brought back through various techniques such as measures, drawings and written text. 

For all the apparent dynamism entailed in the exhibited and written attempts at bridging the gap between then and now, the dynamics are perceived from a specific position in space and time, with 1831 set as a year zero to which we can work to return. In a sense, then, the heritage work appeared to stop and start history. From this perspective, the two brownish walls that were later added to the veranda could be seen as interrupting, in more ways than one, the smooth backtracking to year zero constituted by the whitewashed surface. They came to disturb the point of origin (1831) by indicating that the building had been altered in another past – an alteration that with the newly reconstructed building was neither eliminated (by tearing down the small brown walls) nor incorporated (by rebuilding and whitewashing the walls), but allowed for in ways that somehow seemed awkward. When tourists visited the site they often questioned the brown walls, not immediately understanding the pedagogical ambition. Like two small brown teeth in an otherwise perfect white denture, the remnants seemed to mock the whitewashed building by showing the fragility of naturalising a specific point of departure as both the end and the beginning of history. The ruined brown walls expressed a tension between reconstructing and securing the building, and they showed that a reconstruction could have been done differently. As such, they were expressions of the choices and rejections I have explored throughout, as they interrupted the Frederiksgave site as an inevitable and continuous entity. Seen through the vocabulary of Pliny, the ruined brown walls are artificial in relation to the year zero, which in contrast is the natural year for the whitewashed building.

The idea of building on top of a ruin can also be seen through the distinction introduced by Pliny – modified as I explained above – between natural
collected goods as equivalent to an unaltered point of origin and manufactured goods as equivalent to alterations in the point of origin. ‘Just to walk around in exactly the same building as they once did is fantastic,’ commented the former Museum director when substantiating the reasons for building on top of the ruin at Frederiksgave. By choosing to reconstruct on the plot of the existing ruin, the people from the National Museum were well aware that they were indirectly challenging the Venice Charter, which recommends stopping reconstruction when conjecture begins; they knew that it was a ‘rather unorthodox decision’. A group of Danish archaeologists visiting the newly inaugurated site actually lamented the new structure, arguing that they clearly preferred to sense ‘the presence of history’ by way of a ruin – this sentiment, they told me, was not as strong in a renovated building, even if it was located on the actual plot of the original building. As these statements indicate, there was a clear tension, particularly among the project planners from the Danish National Museum, between reconstruction and conservation at the Frederiksgave site. For the people from the Ghana Museums and Monuments Board in charge of cultural heritage in Ghana it was not considered a problem. But for the Danes involved there needed to be a balancing of the original against the newly added, in order to turn Frederiksgave into a proper cultural heritage site.

The project of not altering the original building at Frederiksgave seemed to be an impossible ambition when the National Museum chose to reconstruct on top of it. The planners had considered following the Venice Charter by securing the ruin and erecting a copy of the main building alongside it. But building on top of the ruin was also supported in pedagogical terms. Early on in the project, the Ghanaian and Danish partners, had agreed that a ruin ‘did not make much sense in Ghana,’ as the Ghanaian architect told me. He continued, ‘Ghanaians would not understand a ruin’ and, for this reason, it was right to reconstruct on top of it. Even though this plan deviated from the National Museum’s practices in Denmark, as key people from the museum told me, the Danes’ enthusiasm for the reconstruction process was profound. Their engagement and energy mirrored their delight; clearly, choosing to build on exactly the same spot created a feeling of authenticity, as reflected in the director’s enthusiasm regarding the possibility of walking around in exactly the same building as his predecessors.
The location was apparently seen as making the heritage project naturally extend common history into the present, rather than being an artificial alteration, as it would have been if built at a different location. By deviating from the articles of the Venice Charter, both by reconstructing on top of the ruin and by using new materials (since anastylosis was not possible), the materials chosen for the reconstruction were seen by the project makers as acceptable alterations in accordance with a special game with nature, a game that extended or revived the site from the selected point of origin.

For instance, the sequence on the back of the building described above collapsed the building processes between then and now – it was another way of overcoming the passing of time, of overcoming the ‘darkness of history’. It blurred the gap in time so that it became impossible to tell the past from the present, impossible to tell who built in the way that these sequences revealed, because ‘we’ in the present had constructed Frederiksgave exactly as ‘they’ once did and vice versa. And, with such linearity, the four sequential squares could be seen as emphasising the idea that today’s reconstruction was seen as a more or less given and natural result of the past construction. The sequence functioned like a recipe to follow by exposing the already given process; one might say that it was a sequence that denied its own sequentiality. It unveiled what was already there to further display year zero, until now engulfed in ‘the darkness of history’.

Fourteen archives had been visited in Denmark, but unfortunately, no drawings of the buildings making up the Frederiksgave plantation had been found. Even though an architectural drawing would have been valuable, and an obvious way of rebooting to 1831 by following old guidelines, the Danish architect loved the detective work of finding out what the site used to look like. For the architect, it was a quest for the natural, i.e. the original building, and a denial of the artificial, i.e. a distortedly manufactured building. He liked the fact that solutions were not obvious and that ‘things didn’t really fit at first’. At one point we were having a break in the open shed at the site. He explained that it kept him alert to continually think of new solutions to the problems he encountered at the reconstruction site. He likened his job to a pack of cards and, laying his pipe down for a moment, he bent over the wooden table in the shed. Excited, I also bent over the table, my senses sharpened. He folded his hands as if holding
a pack of cards and then, with his thumb, he scrolled through the fictitious cards. Suddenly, his thumb stopped and he took out a card with the words ‘Nine of hearts, that’s how it should be, not two of hearts’ – he exclaimed. His demonstration reminded me of a magician fooling an audience, but this ability to find ‘the right card’, he told me, came from forty years of experience. It was not something that could simply be learned from books – the ability came from sensing, measuring, constructing and exploring various other old constructions and the materials they were made of. This situation demonstrated that, in the eyes of the architect, it was possible to ‘get it right’ – that there was one natural solution. For all the subjectivity involved, a key seemed to be attainable from a finite pack of cards. The right cards would make for a true reconstruction, finding a natural solution to what at first appeared unknowable.

The situation described above points to an interesting and productive ambiguity regarding the Danish architect. As we have seen, on the one hand, a true cultural heritage project attempts to let the buildings speak for themselves; the project extends and completes buildings as they used to be, with the help of professionals as ‘midwives’ bringing to the world what is already made. In one way, then, the Danish architect is a neutral replaceable medium, facilitating a natural process, merely by ‘choosing the right card’. But in another way he is completely crucial as he is the one with enough personal experience to make the right choices. His forty years of experience make him – and only him – choose the right card from the many that may at first appear right but which are wrong. As such he is irreplaceable, and much more than a medium at the service of nature and history. Apparently, he is a prerequisite for constructing heritage both as natural and artificial history, to go back to Pliny’s distinction. In other words, Frederiksgave was rescued from ‘the darkness of history’ both by itself and by a seasoned professional.

During fieldwork, other instances of finding the right card illustrated the (often blurred) distinction between the natural and the artificial. Analyses were conducted by a variety of professional heritage workers engaged in the Frederiksgave project, as archaeologists excavated and examined the artefacts and the ruined parts, while architects were invited to investigate the ruins and choose which materials to use to renovate the building – a high-priority issue.
that attracted a great deal of attention, including financial. A Danish historian was engaged to find letters, diaries and official documents regarding the Frederiksgave plantation in the archives, and along with the rest of the professional team he was to advise particularly the Ghanaian archaeologist and coordinator on which artefacts to exhibit and which stories to tell at the site.

Since only a few dismembered parts of the original building were available, anastylosis was not an option, as I have already mentioned. Choosing other materials for the reconstruction was therefore vital, and this turned out to be a matter of finding materials that related to nature in particular ways. Archaeological excavations were undertaken both inside the three buildings and in the surrounding area. The artefacts found were cleaned, photographed, measured and identified according to material and chronology, before being given a number that could identify in which layer and where they had been found. In collaboration with the archaeologists, the architects conducted ‘archaeological surveys of the buildings’ in order to study the original appearance of the main building, and the old building materials used. Part of a wall was studied; the clay, stones and the plaster used were analysed and identified and, again, numerous photos were taken from various angles and distances. Rubble with traces of wood imprints was investigated, and remnants of layers of the whitewashed lime were counted through a magnifying glass. And what could not be thoroughly analysed in Ghana was sent to the National Museum’s laboratory in Copenhagen as samples. Indeed, the findings were analysed in the etymological sense of breaking them up into smaller parts. Likewise, the two architects conducted investigations to ‘interpret the patterns of decay’, as the Danish architect put it: the building was measured, roots were listened to, eyes observed the plants growing on the building, and the knife picked into the materials, as described in the previous chapter. Due to termites and the humid tropical climate, no wooden parts had survived. By means of written sources partly provided by the Danish historian, however, the Danish architect was able to find out that in the construction of roofs expatriate Danes had used a particular sort of tropical palm with a high concentration of acid that supposedly made it inedible to termites. All these analyses were enthusiastically performed in order to find out what materials had originally been used and to ascertain the appearance of the building – what
it had looked like when originally built in 1831. All of this was documented in
detailed reports written by the Danish architect. It seemed that being there at the
original place, combined with all the sensuous analyses of the materials, could
bring the participants in the reconstruction process closer to the time and feel
of the original Frederiksgave, as also argued in Chapter Three. But this recon-
struction process seemingly produces a paradox: the more ‘we’ in the present
know about how Frederiksgave was originally constructed, the less the present
reconstruction appears as a creation – we have to create it in such a manner that
it is merely uncovered. The original materials, in a sense, talk for themselves – as
truly historical objects. Detailed knowledge of these historical objects seems to
turn what ‘was done’ when reconstructing the buildings into obvious, natural
facts. In the words of Pliny, one could say that by knowing how it was once con-
structed, today’s reconstruction becomes less artificial (facticius) – less a matter
of man-made creation than one of collecting and uncovering Frederiksgave’s
history from the darkness of time and the wilderness of the jungle.

In the following, I will go into more detail with regard to how the recon-
struction materials and exhibition artefacts were chosen and handled, and how
this process oscillated between displaying heritage as a natural given and as a
man-made artificial object.

CONSCIENTIOUS WORK WITH NATURE: TECHNIQUES AND
MATERIALS

From his work first as a carpenter and later as a specialist in old buildings in
Denmark, the architect of Frederiksgave had acquired a huge knowledge of
Danish fauna and flora. In Ghana, he was eager to learn about tropical species.
He talked to local people and had samples of plants sent home to specialists
in Copenhagen. He was fascinated by the skills of adaptation and knowledge
that had been required of the earlier Danes, and as described with regard to
Wulff’s House in Chapter Two, he praised the more than 150-year-old ‘hybrid
buildings’ that evolved on the coast for being smartly designed and composed.

I, for my part, was completely fascinated by the architect’s huge knowledge
of building materials and of the etymology of words regarding flora, fauna and
handicraft. Just as Pliny the Elder in his *Natural History* had divided his thorough and detailed description of nature into several books, our ‘lectures’ – as the architect named our conversations – followed the same structure. We went through a variety of materials, talking about their characteristics, their etymological meaning, and their relations to other materials. This resulted in lectures on the oak tree, on lime, on sand, on linseed oil, on wooden tar, on lacquer, and on densely woody charcoal such as palm nuts, to mention but a few of them, all dealing with ‘natural products’ as the architect collectively referred to them. In this way, we talked what at times seemed to be a strange and chaotic reconstruction site into an orderly meaningful cosmos, as had Pliny’s *Natural History* 2000 years before. We spent hours talking about lime and mortar and other substances pertaining to ‘natural history and technique’, as he framed it. In the shade of the tool shed, the architect told me about the size of a grain of sand, its shape dependent upon where it is collected, whether it has sharp edges from lying peacefully on the bottom of a lake, or if it is rubbed round from being tossed in the rough sea, and how an angular shape is relevant to its binding strength. He showed me how, in Denmark, he had learned to make an easy check of the quality of sand by mixing a small portion of sand with spit in his hand, thus getting an idea of the concentration of clay and sand. We found some sand at the site and tried out his low-tech quality check. He could easily see my enthusiasm and, jokingly, before we were interrupted, we agreed to save ‘the next private lecture’. In the evening, we continued on the subject of lime and, as our bodies began to be cooled by the night, he told me about the cooling qualities of a particular material: well-slaked lime made from burnt seashells; about its exceptional capacity for transmitting air, resulting in a quick cooling down of buildings – a capacity much needed in a tropical climate with large variations in temperature in any one day. He explained how farmers in Denmark had taken advantage of the antiseptic and anti-static quality of lime by whitewashing their stables and houses annually to kill all bacteria and prevent dust from accumulating on the inner walls. This hygienic atmosphere was later imitated in city apartments and in suburban villas, where the fashion among residents was to have white walls and wooden floors pigmented slightly white, as he also told me. The Danish architect pointed out that it was not just a matter
of aesthetics; actually, he did not care that much for aesthetics in the first place. Instead, he was more interested in good techniques; it was the technically good move that caught his interest. He then went on to talk about an old technique for increasing the strength of coloured lime by adding buttermilk, and how this ingredient covered the small well-slaked lime and pigment grains and made them stronger because of the milk’s adhesive qualities. In the process, I curiously asked hundreds of questions and thereby gave him the opportunity to talk our common work and shared nature into order. For example, I asked why, given this benefit, buttermilk had not been added in rich quantities to the lime used at the site? To this he replied that ‘It is about finding the right dose’, and he explained that it was not just a matter of making it strong and impermeable. It was about ‘whitewashing layers of lime that were so technically weak that they were strong. That is conscientious work with nature’. He lit his pipe and explained: ‘It’s about working with nature not against nature’.

By using Pliny’s distinction between artificial (in the sense of products altered by humans) and natural (products collected by humans) as a source of inspiration, we can set the ideas of the Danish architect to work and thus explore how the Frederiksgave plantation (the object recovered from history) was conceptualised as both a natural and a man-made artefact. Pliny’s distinction, however, is not exactly the same as the distinction made by the Danish architect. The architect was interested in techniques that were indeed performed by humans, but so as to ‘conscientiously work with nature’. What unites the ‘natural products’, as the architect called them, is that they are all working with nature and produced through techniques that work with nature (e.g. lime, buttermilk) and/or are ready to be gathered and hence unaltered by humans (e.g. oak, sand). By activating a version of Pliny’s distinction between natural products and artificial products, it becomes clear that distinctions were made at the Frederiksgave site; authentic nature and the right treatment of it (i.e. to work conscientiously with nature) were seen as opposed to the fraudulent artificial products working against nature. ‘Natural products’ should therefore not only be judged by whether or not they have been altered by humans, but also by the ways in which such alteration is carried out. This gives rise to a few questions that needed to be resolved in the Frederiksgave reconstruction. What
are good techniques and products, as opposed to fraudulent and bad techniques and materials? What did it mean to work with or against nature in the context of the Frederiksgave reconstruction? In what ways was the heritage seen as prone to fraud? How do the techniques and materials affect the valuation of Frederiksgave as heritage in the eyes of the people involved? These questions turn cultural heritage into a matter of finding true and good ways to deal with the materials used in the reconstruction, and of finding the right ‘dose’ of human intervention. Above we saw how the architect was an ambiguous figure: on the one hand he was almost superfluous, just a neutral medium, but on the other hand he was important because his life experience qualified him to predict how both nature and history might fulfil themselves. It seems as if cultural heritage inherits its value by appearing unchanged, and the role of the heritage worker is to let both history and nature speak, since the products and materials involved already have the solution, the potential of fulfilment within them, if it is conscientiously recovered.

**THE APPEARANCE OF NATURE: MAINTAINING COMMON HERITAGE**

This coupling of perspectives on nature with ideas about what should be considered authentic as opposed to fraudulent seemed vital in the Frederiksgave project. People visiting the site should not be ‘cheated by modern materials such as concrete and emulsion paint’ as a key person from the National Museum once told me. As in Pliny’s time, appearance can reveal the character of the product and be tied up with a kind of valuation system.

As an example of work against nature, the Danish architect mentioned emulsion paint. This artificially made product was clearly not one of his favourites. He likened living in buildings painted with emulsion to ‘living in a plastic bag’. If painted onto a permeable substance, such as for instance lime mortar, stone or clay, which were the components of most of the old European-built constructions on the African coast, then the emulsion would form such a strong protective layer that it would start flaking off the building (because of the potential difference of permeability of wall and paint). Lime, on the other
hand, would be weak enough to enable permeability, but strong enough to protect the building from sun cracks and rain. The architect acknowledged that the poor indoor climate ensuing from the emulsion's impermeability could be handled by introducing yet another technical solution, for example, expensive energy-guzzling machines that could renew the air – one solution giving rise to another problem, as he expressed it. Indeed, the architect’s ideas about nature were combined with a critique of how we had organised our modern society. He suggested using technically elegant solutions that did not interfere with nature – as he said ‘nature always has the best solutions’. He lamented the fact that concrete and emulsion were generally the most sought after materials in Ghana. When we visited Ghana’s UNESCO-listed heritage sites, the forts and castles along the coast, we noticed the lustrous surface and the peeling walls characteristic of emulsion paint on former lime structures. Renovation had been done with what the architect defined as the wrong materials. In the village of Sesemi where the Frederiksgave site was located, colourful concrete houses had sprung up to replace old brown mud houses. To many of the people living in Sesemi that I spoke with, the colourful houses were clear signifiers of status, and even thinking about choosing to live in a cluster of mud houses if one could afford to construct a brightly coloured concrete house with aluminium roof and a surrounding fence seemed incomprehensible. The Danish architect was clearly of another opinion; he treasured ‘natural materials rather than artificially made bull-shit’ as he once jokingly put it when alluding to the Ghanaians aspirations to live in modern houses. Just as important, as noted above, he treasured a thorough knowledge of the qualities and characteristics of the natural materials, and as a mantra he repeatedly told me: ‘You may just as well work with nature as against it’. Of course concrete, as a burned mixture of lime and clay, could also be seen as a product of nature. But the reason why the Danish architect rejected it in the renovation of the main building was, first of all, that it was not the original building material and, secondly, that it did not fit well technically with the other original materials. Emulsion received an even harsher evaluation; it was rejected for the same reasons as concrete but, in addition, its propensity to work against nature was repeated several times by the Danish architect. As if ranked, emulsion paint seemed to be a more artificial, and thus a normatively
worse product, than concrete – the latter was actually used in the erection of a full copy of one of the buildings, probably a stable and/or kitchen, built a few metres alongside where it used to be. Like the other two buildings, the concrete structure was whitewashed, but modern facilities such as a small kitchenette with running water, toilet and electricity had also been installed in the building so that it could be used as a reception and potential store for fresh drinks and souvenirs, in addition to exhibiting the archaeological artefacts.

If the priest quoted at the start of this chapter was on a crusade against fetishes and idols as dangerous objects and signs of backwardness, then the architect could similarly be seen as fighting materialities that he considered to be ‘bullshit’ in arguing against a modernity that eradicated techniques and knowledge developed over generations. The sign was thus reversed in the architect’s crusade: it was a struggle for history or tradition and against a modernity that compromised techniques true to nature. One might say that to the architect the technological and artificial modern ‘stuff’ had to be eradicated because of its false treatment of nature. Or rather, expressed in a self-fulfilling argument, history (up to destructive modernity) had been seen to work with nature and, as such, both nature and history appeared as naturally given phenomena that could be uncovered through proper, qualified procedures. However, not everyone renovating old buildings shares the Danish architect’s views that modern techniques necessarily distort history and nature.

During my fieldwork, I had the chance to meet a Dutch architect who had been involved in an EU project that had sponsored the renovation of ancient European-built buildings and some of the fort structure in Elmina, in the western part of coastal Ghana. As an experienced worker with heritage in rather poor countries, he had judged – rather pragmatically, as he said – that it would be better to paint the renovated houses with emulsion instead of the original whitewash. He argued that emulsion lasted longer and only needed repainting every six years, as opposed to the well-slaked lime used for whitewashing buildings, which needed a brush up at least every second year to look nice. Furthermore, he argued that emulsion was a material that the Ghanaian and other local craftsmen knew and used in their daily work. He told me that even though the well-visited UNESCO site, the Elmina Castle, had recently been
whitewashed to look its best for the celebrations of fifty years of Ghana’s independence, it was looking grey and spotted after less than a year. He had therefore concluded that, even though it may not be correct in terms of the originality of the houses, it would be better to paint the houses with emulsion. In all, the Dutch architect had thought it rather difficult to engage the people living in Elmina and the owners of the houses in terms of seeing the value of authenticity and of this part of history, as he expressed it. In the very next sentence, he pointed to issues that apparently seemed of much higher priority and interest to the Elminians, such as schools, sanitation, jobs and so on. The colours chosen for the historical houses were not the original combination of white and beige colours, either. Together with the other partners involved in Elmina, he had suggested these traditional European colours at a meeting, as these were the colours originally chosen for the houses. However, an architect from Namibia who was also present had presented pictures of various Mediterranean pastels, and clearly the Elminian owners of the houses preferred these colours to the more neutral but original ones. All the renovated houses were therefore now painted in very bright colours, too bright for the Dutch architect’s taste but, as he said, ‘it’s their houses, they’re the ones who live in them and look at them each day, why should I insist?’ Vividly recollecting all the ‘lectures’ and discussions I had had with the Danish architect, I asked his Dutch counterpart where the limit should be set when choosing materials that were alternatives to the original ones. With this question, I was probing the issue seemingly so essential for the Common Heritage Project, namely the distinction between original and new materials, and authentic and fraudulent appearance. The Dutch architect responded that his tolerance level depended upon whether it was relatively easy to make amends for the use of alternative materials by approximating to authenticity. For example, he argued that one could easily repaint the houses in the original colours if someone wanted to, whereas old wooden window frames would be more difficult to replace. Interestingly, he did not mention the more radical move of scratching off the emulsion paint and whitewashing the buildings in the original colours. Instead he talked about the houses having a similar appearance to the authentic ones, while not necessarily staying true to the authentic materials.
Using the same distinction as Pliny’s example with the fraudulent artificial (facticius) gum, the Dutch architect had considered keeping the emulsion but painting the houses in their original colours in order to give the houses an authentic appearance. Yet an authentic appearance was not in line with the wishes of the house owners, and so the situation changed. Well aware of the original whitewashed buildings and their colours, the Dutch architect thus indirectly pointed to a space for negotiation and adjustment within each project, not allowing for a particular understanding of nature to decide the course of reconstruction. Projects, in his view, were processes rather than products. To him, heritage seemed obviously to be a relative and social affair – adjustable to the present-day lives lived at the sites. It was more important to adjust to such a lived life than to maintain strict ideas about authenticity and natural techniques in order for history to be unveiled. In other words, the Dutch architect introduced a different kind of commonness from the one explicit in the Frederiksgave project, namely a commonness stemming from the needs and wishes of the present-day Elminian citizens and owners of the houses. With the slogan ‘Building on the past to create a better future’ the heritage project in Elmina had, in addition to renovating old buildings, also worked from an explicit ambition of assisting the city with a ten-year development strategy. By collaborating closely with the local authorities on identifying the needs and wishes of the people of Elmina, the heritage project was much more in line with the numerous development projects in Ghana, where communities were engaged. Such an inclusive approach was, as also mentioned before, apparently never an ambition for the planners of the Frederiksgave project. Apart from whatever interest the people of Sesemi had in taking part in ‘a common history’, their interests were mainly labelled ‘side-effects’ by the Danish project planners – as we shall further explore in Chapter Five.

Interestingly, the Danish architect had a similar argument in relation to where his tolerance level was. In response to a critique raised by some Danish archaeologists of building on top of the ruin, he talked of the possibility ‘of taking off the hat’ of the main building, explaining that one could, in theory, remove all the new materials used for renovation in order to return the site to the original ruin. This ruin, as the architect stressed, had been virtually unaltered, simply strengthened, secured and built upon. It had been strengthened
by clearing out 2-3 centimetres of old mortar made from clay in the remaining stone construction, followed by filling in with a new and stronger mortar made of lime and angular river sand. PVC tubes also now made up the inside of the columns on the terrace, in order to strengthen the rather weak pillar construction. And in order to stabilise the building, it was secured by being tightened to a huge subterranean steel reinforcement bolted to the cliff upon which half of the main building stood. This construction, the architect told me, ‘was not interfering with the building’, but was merely a construction that would guarantee that the building did not ‘run down the slope’, as he jokingly explained. The Frederiksgave site was thereby constructed with different considerations to the Elmina project, which achieved commonness by paying attention to present-day local considerations. The considerations at Frederiksgave were also local, but local in a different way. Apparently these concerns were not negotiated in consideration of the village’s present-day local life, as was the case in Elmina. Instead, they referred to the local environment and to the local life of 1831. Instead of the kind of commonness sought in Elmina, the Common Heritage Project found commonness in a shared Danish-Ghanaian history and nature to which local buildings had to adapt then and now. In this sense, commonness is part of the absolute value of cultural heritage – it is a universal good. Universal in the sense of being given as a natural site for ‘our common history’ which, curiously, is a point in time rather than a process. As a given common good, the reason for paying attention to it appeared obvious and unquestionable. No argument other than taking care of our common history was needed, and whatever else the project accomplished became ‘side-effects’. Concerns for the stability, conservation and durability of the newly-constructed building could be accommodated with unobtrusive modern materials. The space for negotiation was to be found in different spheres from those at play in the Elmina project – in an internal sphere in the building and in the archives, rather than in an encounter with living people. Maintenance, however, did not necessarily imply unobtrusive techniques, as we shall see.

Even though it was a high priority, the whitewashing of the Frederiksgave building the following year became the subject of some misunderstandings. Many of the young men living in the village had, under the direction of the Danish
architect, participated in the first whitewashing of the buildings immediately prior to the inauguration of the site. Based on this experience, guidelines had been produced in order to eliminate any misunderstandings in the further process of maintenance. Together, the Danish architect and the Ghanaian architect had written a page-long instruction on how to whitewash the building in the future. Bags of burnt seashells with which to make the lime had been left in the tool shed at project end, together with a barrel of well-slaked lime. This would secure proper maintenance of the surface of the buildings for many years to come – a maintenance that sustained the possibility of returning to year zero (1831) and extending it into the future. One or two of the former workers from the village had been asked to look at the water level in the barrel every now and again, to ensure that the lime did not dry out. When I arrived with the Danish architect a year after the inauguration, the surface of the Frederiksgave building looked bizarre. It was spotted and had cracks in its surface. Upon making enquiries, the Danish architect learned that there had been a celebration in the village, for which occasion the village council headed by the Chief had asked for a brush-up of the building. It was this, according to some of the villagers, that had turned the building greyish and dirty-looking. The Danish architect could infer from the cracks that now spotted the surface that they had mixed the lime with too little water, and probably whitewashed the house in full sun, thereby not allowing for the necessary slow drying process. Furthermore, unlike emulsion paint, lime has to be whitewashed in very thin watery layers, preferably at sunset. It seemed that the workers had painted the house as if they were painting it with a nice thick emulsion. Obviously, the Danish architect was disappointed and he could not really understand how they had got it wrong – they had done it a year previously under his instructions, and he and the Ghanaian architect had left a clearly written guide. As a ray of comfort, we discovered that they had only whitewashed the façade of the building, the side facing the village; the work against nature and history had thus done limited damage. But the building had nevertheless been altered; the materials may have been right, but they had been used in the wrong doses. The procedure for natural maintenance – the extension of year zero made possible by the well-slaked lime and its proper use – had not been followed. Instead, the house
appeared mistreated, a mistreatment that was not of the 1830s, but due to other habits, interests and ignorance and, indeed, to interference with nature. Visitors could be fooled by this alteration, because it was not the authentic properly whitewashed building that they saw, but a mistreated copy. Paradoxically, and as previously mentioned, the more careful the heritage work is, the less visible the human intervention becomes. One could say that, by reconstructing the original after the manner of the original builders, the actual reconstruction process fades away, as do the ensuing attempts at maintenance – these practices are ideally invisible as processes, because they are only needed to keep a year zero and a given product stable. The main building at the Frederiksgave site is not to be understood as a new construction, but as an extension emerging through the various Danes who visited, surveyed and documented the site in order to bridge the gap of 100 years of darkness, as stated by people from the Danish National Museum. The point here is that even if the place gained value as a cultural heritage site from this conscientious work with nature and by collapsing the gap between then and now, such a point in time and place needs proper maintenance. Maintenance, then, is ideally a matter of not interfering with nature and history. Rather, the issue is simply one of cultivating the already given and charted, as captured in the idea of a single moment of origin: in this case the year zero of Frederiksgave, identified as 1831. Indeed, the bumblings and failures of the project show us that an expert’s design – here supposedly a non-misunderstandable set of guidelines for whitewashing – cannot control its subsequent life. The various ways of treating the building indicate that it is not just a copy of history and/or nature, even if this is the vision of the project planners. Instead, they show the various practices and ways of valuing the project. Thus the awkward encounter between the Danish architect and the mistreated house points to an important aspect of the heritage project, namely that there is a certain fragility entailed in working with a point – in this case the year 1831 – in that it causes all maintenance and human involvement to be interferences, for better or worse. As analysed in Chapter Two, encounters also seem obstructed by conceiving of heritage work in this way, or at best reduced to minor interferences having no generative potential. Only a very particular encounter seems to be allowed for, namely an encounter with a point of origin
By leaving no room for other encounters, multiple valuations of the site are reduced in number – reduced to ‘side-effects’ or to negligence.

**Idols and Referentiality: Approximating the Creation at Frederiksgave**

Above, we saw how a Roman use of the word *facticius* was used to distinguish artificial goods from natural goods, and how this distinction could be fruitful in exploring the emergence of a heritage site in Ghana where both nature and materials were key elements for the people involved. Having examined how the Common Heritage Site obtained its value as such by skilfully handling an already given history and nature, let me now look at the development of the etymology of the word ‘fetish’. This will allow me to further explore how the site accrued value, and how the materiality of cultural heritage is seen to become effective and valuable in the words of the people involved.

From a Roman commercial setting, Pietz moves on to track the etymological roots of the fetish in an incipient Christian religious setting. In this new context, instead of denoting or suggesting the opposition of artificial fraudulent goods to natural genuine goods, the concept is related to the theme of the body, the soul and the sacramental objects. The notion of idolatry, understood by members of the early Christian Church as the worship of any manufactured religious object that does not point to the true God, seems to be produced in these complex relations of material bodies, spiritual souls and sacred objects. *Facticii*, one of the etymological roots of the fetish, was the term used to characterise the manufactured character of these false man-made objects. Worshipping such objects was regarded as spiritual fraud and classified as idolatry in early Christianity. Matter, Pietz argues, was seen to be ‘an improper medium for acts of worship’. Whether the practice in question was bodybuilding or artistic sculpture, the concern for the early Christians was not to seek to surpass the work of God. Instead of worshipping external forms, the early Church prescribed inner faith and the soul’s free will as proper Christian faith. The unmotivated free verbal utterances that characterise the human worshipping of the divine creation were voluntary acts of true faith which, in substance, were not material but spiritual
and eternal. Relations with the divine could be made through the spoken word, which was distinguished from the worldly human realm where we are left with the craft of resemblance. God was understood as the only true creator, and humans were doomed to act within the material world of mere resemblance. But resemblance had various meanings. Pietz notes that resemblance in a Judeo-Christian understanding was thought to be ‘an essentially material relation and as such inherently improper for representing spiritual models’. Instead of being a result of free will, materiality was thought of as being only referential, secondary and of lesser value. This understanding differed from what Pietz characterises as a Greek philosophic tradition (Platonic and neo-Platonic), where material resemblance was thought of as a matter of how successfully an individual or an object embodies the virtues of its type – meaning the degree to which a unification through a reflection of the soul’s ‘substantial resemblance’ to the godhead could be reached – a resemblance which, when realised, would appreciate that it emanated from the One. As Pietz explains, resemblance for the Greek mind is:

the relation between material entities and their eternal ideal forms. In Christian thought the logic of image and resemblance explains the truth within the material half of the creation only [...] resemblance neither expresses the true relation between the earthly and the divine nor describes the logic of the spiritual half of creation (which is explained by a logic of identity and voluntary relation – even notions of the ‘imitation’ of Christ are based on the idea of enacted identification rather than mimetic reflection).

At this point, an analytical experiment might prove productive. As we have seen throughout, the Frederiksgave site was discussed by the planners very much in terms of authenticity, commonness, true appearance and closeness to original materials, design and topography. As has become clear, paradoxes emerged with regard to all of these issues: the recreation of an original, authentic building was the project’s starting point and its end goal – but this is a contradiction in terms. If we focus on the distance between the human material world and the divine spiritual world then we might liken the spiritual being to the point of origin at the Frederiksgave site, this being the creative point from where everything
emerges. We might then ask whether cultural heritage as it was practised in the reconstruction of the Common Heritage Project was pointing to the tragedy (mere resemblance) or rather to the potential of materiality (embodying the virtues of its type)? How successful were the different strategies adopted to reach the point of origin through technologies such as detailed studies of the site and of the archaeological artefacts, the architectural measures and proportions of the building materials, and investigations in the Danish National Archives? In other words, did the reconstruction process follow what might generically be called a Greek or a Christian reasoning? Did the planners and constructors, like the Greeks, understand the reconstruction as a matter of embodying the virtues of its type – that is, as a matter of substantial resemblance between the material reconstruction and what it had been in the past? And is this implied in the idea of working with nature? Or did they rather understand the reconstruction as referential, and thereby always already a tragic project due to its incarceration in materiality, while still being as close as one can get to the past? Was the reconstruction an issue of coming to terms with the fact that resemblance with or imitation of the past can only be enacted identification through the verbal act of the free will, rather than embodied mimetic reflection, as Pietz expressed it? Is it a matter of referentiality when the Danish architect stresses the need to work with nature, or is it implying an embodiment? All of these questions arise out of my attempt to understand the value of Frederiksgave through the history of the fetish, the religion of materiality. In other words, I now explore how Frederiksgave worked for its worshippers as a particular material object.

It seemed that in very specific ways, whether through anastylosis (the use of dismembered original parts), identical location, similar materials or materials working with nature, authenticity – to employ the term used by those involved in the reconstruction – could really be attained, at least momentarily. This can be seen, for example, in the case of the treasured lime, described above. The Danish architect did not pass up a chance to talk about the lime’s wonderful capacities. By worshipping the lime as the original material used at the Frederiksgave site, and for its capacity in the restoration to ‘work with nature’, in the hands and words of the Danish architect, the material accorded with the Greek understanding of resemblance. It did this by embodying the virtues of its type – virtues that had
to do precisely with authenticity and working with nature. Neither the Danish architect nor the later visitors to the site seemed to regard the newly produced lime as a mere simulacrum, or to be in only referential relation to the point of origin of the Frederiksgave site. Instead, the lime contained virtues pertaining to an original history and nature. But if the very specific ‘guidelines’ aimed at capturing the virtues of nature and history were not thoroughly followed – as happened when the villagers later whitewashed the building on their own – or if the Frederiksgave site had been painted with emulsion, then the visitors would have been cheated.

A huge amount of energy and money was put into exploring the site, selecting the materials and preparing the exhibition – all in order to uncover and return to the point of origin. But the resemblance to the original plantation could indeed be questioned, and it certainly was throughout the project. For instance, the steel reinforcement was debated; obviously, it was not part of the authentic construction, but because it was apparently not interfering with the building it was nevertheless chosen in order to secure the building and guarantee that visitors would be able to meet and share a common history (and nature) at the site for many years to come. By the same token, there was a debate about whether electricity should be provided in the main building. The Danish architect yielded to arguments about using the building for meetings and educational purposes that might require electricity. However, he dismissed any idea of using electricity to illuminate the exhibition, guaranteeing that the house – with all its windows and its well-sited location – would provide sufficient light. Discussions in meetings at the National Museum focused on whether remakes of oil lamps found during the excavation of the site could be used in the event of evening functions, but this idea was dismissed since the lamps would produce too much soot in the whitewashed building. As a compromise, electricity was then built into the walls, assisted by sockets discreetly laid in small rough pieces of wood, instead of the plastic sockets of today. (In fact, electricity was only a virtual subject of discussion, since there was no electricity in the village at that stage in the project. And yet, perhaps partly in response to the project, the application for electricity that had been made by the Chief and elders in the village many years previously had finally been approved by the Ghanaian electricity
company by the end of the project). These two newly added modern materials (steel reinforcement and electricity) obviously did not resemble anything from the 1830s, and so, unlike the lime, they could not directly be seen as embodying the virtues of a type. These modern additions were somehow beyond the issue of resemblance. Of course, this was well known to the project planners, and still they chose to use these materials, even though they were not strictly necessary. This could indicate that the typical virtues of steel and electricity were defined differently – not only as virtues of ‘substantial resemblance’. Instead, the virtues of steel and electricity could be understood as those of creating a site where visitors could come and join in or even worship ‘our common history’. From this perspective, where the ‘type’ is the Frederiksgave site, these materials could actually be seen as embodying, maybe even enhancing, such virtues. Both of the added materials facilitated people’s experiences of a site that had not, after all, slipped down the hill, and that now, being suitably lit, could function as a place to learn about our shared past in appropriate educational facilities for many years to come. Put differently, the virtues embodied in these types were those of creating and maintaining an easy passage to or contact with a common point in history. The introduction of electricity to the building had the additional effect of making not only the past, but also both the present and the future collapse into the project, thereby elucidating yet another paradox; namely, that the return to year zero, 1831, might also accelerate a current development by bringing electricity to the village.

Introduced on the basis of proper knowledge and technical skills, the new materials could facilitate engagement with the past, or even embody it – as expressed in the previously mentioned quote: ‘Just to walk around in the very same building as they once did is fantastic’. In other words, materiality with certain qualities was what made up the heritage, and if it were treated as such (as common cultural heritage), then it was treasured for those material qualities. Once again, we see here a peculiar circularity in the valuation of the common heritage site. It seems that, even though they were clearly non-authentic, the new materials gained value by being seen from a Greek perspective that posits materiality as a potential of embodiment and not a tragedy of resemblance. However, in the Frederiksgave project there were indeed also expressions that
could be understood in a Judeo-Christian way. On the main posters introducing the site to visitors, it is stated that the main building and the small annex ‘have been reconstructed, both in appearance and in materials, as close to the original as possible’\textsuperscript{39}, and the neighbouring poster states that

\begin{quote}
By way of surveying and careful examinations of the material, combined with an architectural analysis, it has been possible to reconstruct the building as it most probably looked in the 1830s and 1840s.\textsuperscript{40}
\end{quote}

Reconstruction is here presented as a matter of approximation. Through meticulous and professional work, the reconstruction takes us as close as possible to the original. It is only an attempt, never promising a complete unification through substantial resemblance, even though professionals have examined and analysed the place. We have to make do with a referential resemblance – only a ‘secondary’ history of what it really was in the past.

The furnishing and setting up of the exhibition, too, might be understood through such Judeo-Christian reasoning about materiality. When setting up the exhibition, the furnishing of the building was thoroughly debated among people from the National Museum. Proposals were made in Denmark and then presented to the Ghanaian coordinator for comment, either via emails or on trips to Ghana. The people working on the exhibition in Denmark (including me) were eager to hear his comments and thoughts, and wanted him to put forward ideas and produce text for the exhibition, nurturing the collaborative spirit of the project. It was decided that selected archaeological artefacts should be exhibited in the concrete annexe building, but that the main building should be furnished only with copies of artefacts. The idea of making copies was eagerly discussed, since the Danish National Museum usually only exhibits original objects. But how should the museum act in a small Ghanaian village on the outskirts of Accra? Since the place could not be secured according to the National Museum’s standards, a repatriation to the site of the collection of Ghanaian items now in Denmark was not an option. These Ghanaian items were part of a rare and highly treasured early collection of everyday items shipped to the National Museum in Copenhagen in the 1830s and 1840s. The collection
had been acquired upon a request made by the former director of the museum to the last Danish Governor on the Guinea Coast, as the area was then called, in the period of Frederiksgave’s operation – a time when letting laymen collect items and send them to experts in Europe was common practice. Some of the people involved in the project thought that it was a shame to deviate from the museum’s standard and exhibit copies; still, all agreed that this was the only option, since any repatriation would demand too much security and too many facilities to ensure a stable climate and proper protection.

It was agreed that, for the Danish artefacts, copies should be bought in auction houses or from second-hand dealers in Denmark – in line with the Judeo-Christian understanding of resemblance as material and therefore secondary. The copied artefacts were mainly selected with the aid of an inventory that had been made in relation to the auction when selling the Frederiksgave plantation in 1850, which had been found in the Danish National Archives. The copies were also inspired by the highly treasured early collection of everyday items kept securely in storage rooms at the National Museum in Copenhagen. Under close instruction and supervision from the Danish historian, I was hired to find and buy the ‘Danish’ items at auctions and from second-hand dealers in Denmark, while a Danish trainee was engaged to hire Ghanaian handicraftsmen to make copies from pictures of the treasured everyday artefacts in store at the museum – indeed a referential and second, third or even fourth-hand job.

The Danish historian explained to me that Frederiksgave’s heyday coincided with a furnishing style known as ‘Empire’, named after the French emperor who was a trendsetter at that time in Western Europe. Even though, according to the Danish historian, you could not expect the highest fashion on the African coast, you could imagine out-of-date furniture being sent to the coast. I was therefore to look for Empire-style furniture that did not have too much decoration. The Danish coordinator, the historian and I thoroughly studied the inventory and the diaries that the historian had found in the Danish National Archives. Copies of Danish drawings made on the African coast from the 1800s were also circulated in meetings at the National Museum. For example, a French prince visiting the Danish Fort of Christiansborg in 1843 had made a water colour painting of a
lunch, which we meticulously studied as evidence of what the furniture would have looked like. However, looking at the picture, it was difficult to focus on the design of the chairs: other things were going on, and the painting added other layers to the idea of a common past. Looking at the drawing, my eyes constantly moved to the social interaction between the almost naked black waitresses and the white men in full uniforms.

In other words, it demanded a very specific and decisive gaze to focus on the chairs in the picture. Nonetheless, I succeeded in finding two chairs in Empire style that looked somewhat like the ones in the drawing. Again, lots of differences must be ignored in order to create resemblance via small conjunctions of sameness.

Some months later, when the container from Denmark was opened in Sesemi, the Chief of the village spotted the antique chairs that I had bought for the exhibition. According to the Danish architect who was present, he solemnly sat on one of them, spreading his legs as Ghanaian tradition prescribes, and contentedly exclaiming: ‘I am the first African Chief to sit on this old chair’. I knew that there were close links between stools and leaders in Ghana; even the

**FIG. 4.3** Aquarelle made by a French prince visiting Christiansborg, used in the exhibition at Frederiksgave. Courtesy of the M/S Maritime Museum of Denmark.
new presidential palace was being built in the form of a traditional Ghanaian stool. So when I heard the architect’s account, I could not help think of the famous old Asante stool that is still a vital part of the Asante King’s power. When colonising what later came to be Ghana, the British had taken the royal stool as war booty and exhibited it in the British Museum. In 2007, the Chief of Sessemi was somehow inverting this story by taking the opportunity to sit on old European chairs and exhibit them in his village. I would suggest that the Chief’s reaction to the chairs was not a matter of referentiality, as if the chairs were understood as copies pointing to an original point at the beginning of the nineteenth century, nor were the chairs being used as a secondary image or symbol of his power. Sitting on the chair was rather a way in which he could manifest his unique power as Chief via old European objects. Exclaiming that he was a unique African Chief while sitting on the chair, he was embodying the virtues of its type – virtues that had to do with power, colonial rule and his chiefhood.

The secondary role of matter, and the idea that immaterial acts were the only true way to worship a Christian God was, according to Pietz, a theme discussed within the Church itself at the time the word fetish was developing in the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries. This renunciation of material objects did not mean that there were no sacramental objects within the Christian Church – there were crosses, images of saints, Eucharist wafers, and so on. But, as stressed in a Catholic catechism from 1975, what was important was that all these material objects demanded voluntary active participation based on faith – they ‘are not some kind of fetishes that work magically by just being had or worn or said’. At least as importantly, however, what distinguishes these material objects from idols is that they are accepted by the Church institution. In the case of Frederiksgave, too, one could talk about significant institutions sanctioning the heritage objects – whether copies or originals. Old national institutions such as universities, archives and museums legitimised and approved the project – and they did so, as far as possible, in accordance with international institutions such as UNESCO. It was not an individual affair, but rather a matter of communicating a common past in accordance with institutional standards. Just as the Catholic Church could transform bread into the body
of Christ, so the National Museum and the heritage workers involved in the
Common Heritage Project worked to turn ‘a pile of worthless stones’ into a
valuable heritage site.\(^{45}\)

As a consequence of the sacramental objects being different from other
superstitious objects, given that they are based on voluntary verbal acts and
endowed with sacred power by the church institution, the objects’ power
was, in the early church, seen to be independent from their manufacturing.\(^{46}\)

As Pietz remarks, there is no Christian Daedalus in Christian thought:

Humans can manufacture (facticii) images as idols, but they cannot endow
them with any true relation to God […] . Humans can manufacture but not
create, and they cannot endow a body with a soul.\(^{47}\)

But are today’s heritage workers such as historians, archaeologists and architects
modern equivalents Daedalus? Or are they manufacturers of cultural heritage
that can be worshipped because proper institutions have approved them and
sanctioned their sacred power to take us to a given point of creation?

In order to explore these questions, we need to consider the mode of pro-
duction at the Frederiksgave site, and not settle for a dismissal of heritage as
idolatry. In the history of the fetish concept, the Church’s ideas about idolatry
cannot explain what came to be termed witchcraft and vain observances\(^{48}\) –
both practices where materiality and mode of production took a central role.

**CROSS-NATURAL EQUIVALENCE: WORKING IN A COMMON
NATURE**

During the early Middle Ages, a new form of non-cultic worship emerged that
attempted to obtain desired results or effects, or to prevent particular things
from happening, through the use or mediation of certain objects.\(^{49}\) Pietz iden-
tifies witchcraft and the related notion of vain observances as characteristic of
these practices, which were more related to the material world than a spiritual
In Portugal, the first European naval trading nation to appear on the Western coast of Africa, witchcraft was termed *feitiçaria*. Witchcraft worked via physical actions that sought to interfere with the laws of nature through various combinations and doses of essential material ingredients. According to Pietz, the effects of the material mixture were seen only as products of mechanistically correct combinations and doses of the ingredients. Most importantly, these mixtures of various ingredients had to be combined with spells and voluntary verbal pacts with evil forces, as the Church framed them. So, just like the idols and sacramental objects, witchcraft depended upon some immaterial voluntary verbal act in order to be efficient – even though the act was not institutionalised. Thus no powerful novelty, as Pietz further remarks, could come from the material objects alone; nothing indeterminately new could happen via the material world, according to Portuguese witchcraft. The objects were only made efficient by being measured and mixed in the right doses and combinations, together with verbal invocation.

These ideas and, not least, the vocabulary of witchcraft, vain observances and Christian understandings of the relation between materiality and spirituality, were among what the Portuguese brought with them when they arrived on the African coast in the fifteenth century. Their mission was primarily to trade, as described above. The Africans highly treasured the Portuguese goods, along with other African religious objects, and the early Portuguese traders therefore soon termed all these venerated objects *feitiço*. The Portuguese distinguished between African idols and *feitiço*, understanding the former as freestanding statues and the *feitiço* as rightly proportioned and ritualised powerful objects worn on the body. It is interesting to note that, instead of inventing a new term or calling these treasured objects by an African name, the Portuguese seemed to recognise them as belonging to the same phenomenon known in Europe. In other words, a sort of ‘cross-cultural equivalence’ existed – at least to the Portuguese who documented the encounters in various texts. Yet Pietz modifies this equivalence and argues that, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, witchcraft was not a well-discussed issue in Portugal, which might have given it some looseness in its definition, and thus be a reason for choosing the term in Africa – it was not to be interpreted in a strict sense, since the Portuguese merchants might not
have either dared or wanted to trade with witches. Therefore, feitiço might have been understood by the early Portuguese traders more in the sense of harmless and vain observances, and ‘poor man’s magic’.

The religiosity demonstrated by the various African groups trading with the Portuguese could not, however, be sufficiently captured by an old European Christian vocabulary. Over time, it became clear that feitiço was not an adequate term to describe this religiosity, which was apparently intimately related to precious material objects. The Africans’ religious behaviour wasn’t something that the Portuguese could understand as the true worship of God, since it was not based on a relationship to a non-material power to be related to via the free will. Neither was it idolatry, which captured the material object as a passive referential image governed by ideas of resemblance. Finally, it was not really witchcraft either, since what the Portuguese merchants saw lacked the element of a linguistic pact that in European witchcraft accompanied the mechanistic relations to nature. The term used for the Africans’ practices, therefore, changed over the years, and the Portuguese feitiço changed to a middleman’s term, fetisso, thereby removing both Europe and Christianity from the word. Fetisso subsequently became increasingly associated with religious practices in Africa, causing it to drop out of Christian religious discourse – and, misleadingly, be understood as an intra-African phenomenon.

As the Portuguese word feitiçaria changed first to feitiço and then to fetisso, its meaning also evolved. It no longer characterised merely ‘the same phenomenon’ (witchcraft as practised in Portugal) just with different content – a classic relativistic figure, as described in Chapter Two. Instead the word came to describe a different phenomenon, fetisso, that emerged through heterogeneous encounters on the African coast. However, as we have seen, the role of encounter was subsequently either forgotten or ignored, and the concept came to designate something inherently African, as also mentioned in the introduction to this chapter.

At the Frederiksgave site, I will suggest, the early relativistic figure of cross-cultural equivalence was inverted – at least by the project planners. Here, the same material – the physical structure or nature of present-day Frederiksgave, which collapsed with history and nature, as we saw in the previous
chapters – had various names, as I will explore further in the next chapter. The name ‘Frederiksgave’ was far from shared among the people engaged in the site. For instance it was called ‘Frederiksgave plantation’, ‘the thing’, ‘tourist attraction’, ‘fort’, ‘Common Heritage Project’, ‘slave centre’, ‘Danish Fort’ or ‘museum’. The site thereby also invoked a classical relativism – but of a different equivalence to the Portuguese-African, namely of what I would call a cross-natural equivalence. While the early Portuguese-African encounter could be framed as having the same culture but materialised in various ways, the Danish-Ghanaian encounter could be framed as having the same nature, but literalised in various ways. In what sense, then, did the project participants work from an idea of ‘more or less the same nature’? With all the different names used to characterise the site, one could indeed argue for some sort of loosely defined understanding of it. And, certainly, all these words were used ingeniously in different contexts. However, the project planners’, particularly the Danes’, repeated cry for ‘education of the guides’ as a solution to the ‘wrong history’ that was continuously appearing at the site with regard to the transatlantic slave trade seems to indicate a limit to the looseness of nature permitted. For instance, when a Danish journalist called the inaugurated museum a ‘fort’ in a Danish newspaper, it caused the Danish coordinator to react, as she explained to me. The problem seems to be that, by naming the site ‘a fort’ and linking it to the transatlantic slave trade, the nature of the place is altered – it is not the same nature – not even ‘almost the same nature’. Therefore, any words that alter the site’s already given nature and history (i.e. of Frederiksgave being a plantation using locally enslaved people as its workforce) should be eradicated. The other terms – ‘the thing’, ‘tourist attraction’, ‘museum’ – even though rather imprecise, did not alter the nature of the site; as curious abstracted symbols they floated above a real world of phenomena. We find a similar argument, but with history instead of nature, in the case of the Danish words still present in Ghana: kalkun (turkey), and gaffel (fork). They were also permitted because they did not alter history; rather, they confirmed a non-compromising and innocent version of the past, where cultural exchange was a matter of folklore. In this light, the Frederiksgave site appears as an intra-natural phenomenon where a frictionless point in history and nature can be uncovered.
THE FORCES OF MATERIALITY: UNTRANSCENDED HERITAGE

Over the years fetisso (or ‘fetish’, in English) came to designate powerful materiality, describing the ‘novel divine power in material objects and bodily fixations within the contingency of worldly experience’. Even though this particular understanding characterised the emergence of the fetish concept on the West African coast 500 years ago, the challenge of understanding the vitality of the material world is longstanding and ongoing in the Western philosophical tradition. Whereas idolatry, according to Pietz, was seen as performing a (wrong) law and a (wrong) faith, fetishism as it developed in West Africa came to be seen as an accidental and completely lawless and natural process. To the Europeans, what their trading partners in the south venerated seemed completely arbitrary. The Europeans back then could not find any rules defining what came to be venerated as a fetish. Sometimes it was a lake, at other times an animal or an object. By the turn of the nineteenth century, the celebrated European philosopher Hegel argues that the Africans were worshipping

the first thing that comes their way. This, taken quite indiscriminately, they exalt to the dignity of a ‘Genius’ […]. In the Fetich, a kind of objective independence as contrasted with the arbitrary fancy of the individual seems to manifest itself; but as the objectivity is nothing other than the fancy of the individual projecting itself into space, the human individuality remains master of the image it has adopted. […] it is merely a creation that expresses the arbitrary choice of its maker, and which always remains in his hands. Hence there is no relation of dependence in this religion.

This quote points to an interesting differentiation between a so-called objective independence and an individual’s arbitrary fancy. But, by quickly dismissing the objective independence of the fetish and turning it into a cabinet of mirrors, Hegel could be criticised for missing an important point in the material character of the venerated object. By understanding the fetish as a human projection, he does not leave any agency to materiality, which Peter Pels, for instance, sees as
a vital characteristic of the fetish. The fetish, for Hegel, is a passive medium resembling what Pietz characterised as an idol. Hegel sees the fetish as nothing but an image of human intentions, a mirror of our individual hopes and wishes – arbitrary and changeable, as these by definition are. I will return to the idea of the arbitrary character of the fetish, but for now I will concentrate on Hegel’s disregard for the material independence of the fetish, which allows him to see only the fetish’s dependence on humans and not the other way round. In his attempt to show the Africans’ inability to think strictly and consistently, Hegel perhaps misses some interesting points about fetishes. As we shall see below, the relationship between humans and the fetish, and particularly the role of the individual’s power over the fetish, is something that has been carefully discussed by recent scholars.

In the early writings on fetishism, such as Hegel’s, the idea of the fetish was inscribed in a racial discourse whereby it was believed that the physicality of the fetish was a sign of the African’s inability to worship an abstract being. Interestingly, this normative and hierarchical thought resonates in Ghana today. In the introduction to this chapter, for example, we noted the tension between, on the one hand, the minister’s belief in traditional fetishes (a belief that leads him to destroy them), and on the other hand, the attitude of the three young women working at the National Museum of Ghana, who while recognising traditional belief in fetishes, as modern Christians consider these beliefs passé and are therefore able to work in a museum containing fetishes. During my fieldwork in Ghana, I heard several Ghanaians argue that traditional thoughts and belief in fetishes were actually hampering the country’s progress – further evidence for the existence of tensions over powerful materiality. As noted above, the idol was pointing beyond itself, indexing an immaterial being, whereas the fetish gained its power from its material embodiment. Yet Hegel’s quote above exemplifies a prevalent understanding of the fetish as indexing human intentions – an understanding that makes Deleuze state that taking the fetish seriously might potentially reverse the Western philosophical tradition. My point here is that this difference between a thing being what it is (a material embodiment), and its being a material embodiment pointing beyond itself, mastered by its human maker, has consequences for how we analyse and theorise the particular
form of materiality that makes up cultural heritage, and hence also for how we value that heritage.

In an article entitled ‘Fetishism’, Roy Ellen has pointed to ‘an inner ambivalence as to whether it is the objects themselves which effect material changes in some mysterious way, or whether it is some spiritual force which is represented by or located in (but separate from) those objects’. Among anthropologists at the beginning of the twentieth century there was much confusion regarding the concept of fetish, which, according to Ellen, led anthropologists to abandon the idea altogether. The confusion was about whether the fetish was material or spiritual in character, and in the twentieth century this confusion among scholars ended in a reduction of the fetish to a derogatory term only to be connected with the religion of ‘primitive peoples’ who lacked the power of abstraction, resulting in their worship of objects from the perishable material world. Nevertheless, in the edited volume *Border Fetishism* (1998) Peter Pels takes up the challenge and summarises the confusion as concerning the difference between the *spirit of* and the *spirit in* matter. In an attempt to explore the agency of materiality, Pels discusses Appadurai’s often-quoted introduction to *The Social Life of Things* (1988). Pels argues that by reducing a thing’s agency to something that can be understood and explored only methodologically, Appadurai disregards materiality as a radical other that cannot be mediated by humans. For Appadurai, things necessarily get their meanings from human transactions: ‘things have no meanings apart from those that human transactions, attributions and motivations endow them with.’ Inspired by Pietz’ three articles, Pels suggests instead that materiality can ‘talk back’ in two ways: it can either be others talking through the material object, or it can be the object itself talking back. He terms this difference as one between the spirit *in* matter as opposed to the spirit *of* matter. Spirit *in* matter is a derivative agency obtained through ‘an other’ enlivening or inscribing agency into matter, just as – and here I agree with Pels – Appadurai seems to understand things. It should be said, as Pels also recognises, that Appadurai’s focus on commodities automatically accentuates the human agency in exchange situations. Matter as a derivative or referential idea points, in Pels’ terminology, to an animistic tradition – the material object is animated by something external to itself. As discussed
above, such referentiality was also characteristic of idols in Pietz’ terminology. But fetishes in Pietz’ view are not idols or false gods ‘but rather quasi-personal divine powers associated more closely with the materiality of the sacramental object than would be an independent immaterial demonic spirit’. In Pels’ terminology, fetish is the spirit of matter, i.e. an agency internal to the thing in question – to the fetish object. Here Pels is following Pietz’ ideas of the fetish as being characterised by its ‘irreducible materiality’ or its ‘untranscended materiality’. Pels writes, ‘[t]he fetish’s materiality is not transcended by any voice foreign to it: To the fetishist, the thing’s materiality itself is supposed to speak and act; its spirit is of matter’. As a consequence of this powerful capacity, ‘the fetish is an object that has the quality to singularise itself and disrupt the circulation and commensurability of a system of human values’. It is an ‘other thing’ that talks back. The fetish is not a neatly controlled pedagogical illustration to be (de-)activated at will.

Even though Frederiksgave was reconstructed in order to teach and communicate our common past – as justified, for instance, by the choice of building on top of the ruin – the learning process did not just follow smooth illustrative lines; it seemed as if there was more at stake. A model of the buildings accompanied by informative posters could have been erected beside the original site, but the project planners chose to reconstruct on top of the ruin. This indicates that there was something highly fascinating about the topography, the materiality and the ruin that influenced their ‘rather unorthodox decision’. It seemed that Frederiksgave was not just any building: it was, in Pels’ vocabulary, an ‘other thing’ talking back. Apparently it evoked something else apart from just the opportunity for education via a referential constructed model or a poster. In the case of the director, topography and materiality even aroused feelings of awe. So, too, for the frightened woman who visited the site, even if with different sentiments. In this case, it seemed as if the materiality and topography caused her to quickly exit the building, evidently arousing fear in her. Here one could indeed talk about a materiality that talked back.

What I argue here is that all these examples point to the important insight that each moment of intense material or topographical experience in the Frederiksgave project seemed to be made up of both referential stories and
untranscended effect at once. We might consider Frederiksgave both as having ‘quasi-personal divine powers’ and being a freestanding idol to be worshipped; it was both something to admire and worship from a distance – preferably from the symmetrical axis – and something that could be embodied by ‘walking around in precisely the same building as they once did’.

**OTHER THINGS — HERE AND ELSEWHERE**

By stressing that the fetish is an ‘other thing’, Pels points out that it is different from already accepted processes by which things are characterised by their exchange value and their use. Even though the fetish can be a commodity, it is an ‘other’ commodity, and it is differently valued. This makes Pels insist that

its singularity is not the result of sentimental, historical or otherwise personalized value: The fetish presents a generic singularity, a unique or anomalous quality that sets apart from both the everyday use and exchange and the individualization or personalization of objects.⁸⁰

In relation to the Frederiksgave site, one might say that its singularity, being reconstructed on a unique location, is a result precisely of sentimental, historical or otherwise personalised values, thereby disqualifying it as a fetish. However, the examples of fetishes Pels comes up with in the following sentences, such as velvet, fur, blue jeans, old shoes, underwear, and so on, could all be explained as powerful materiality; they are fetishes precisely because of their history – in other words, their power could just as well be explained as being a result of sentimental, historical or otherwise personalised value. Pietz, on the other hand, seems to have a different and less radical idea of fetishes. He writes that they

exist in the world as material objects that ‘naturally’ embody socially significant values that touch one or more individuals in an intensely personal way: a flag, monument, or landmark; a talisman […] a city, village, or nation […]. Each has that quality of synecdochic fragmentedness or ‘detotalized
Putting ‘naturally’ in quotation mark calls for attention. Pietz explains it with reference to the fetish’s ability to make metonymic relations, and refers to the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre’s idea of ‘detotalized totality’. ‘Detotalized totality’ is Sartre’s paradoxical figure developed in order to rethink collectivities as something other than a direct unity of consensus. As *pars pro toto*, a metonymic quality, the fetish (as a part) is embodying a greater collective whole, a totality or, to be more precise, socially significant values – just as the flag can be seen as embodying the collective nation. But if we recall Pietz’ (and Marx’s) attention to the historical dimension of the fetish, that it is ‘always a meaningful fixation of a singular event,’ then this collective whole of socially significant values can never be self-identical. On the contrary, being based on ‘recurrence’, a concept developed by Sartre, totalisation can only be reached momentarily as a detotalised totality – an idea that we noted in Chapter Three, when Taussig challenged the idea of (pure) imitation through the sensuousness of mimesis. Sartre clarifies that, as a material and social organisation, a city acquires its ‘reality from its ubiquitous absence. It is present in each of its streets *insofar* as it is always elsewhere.’ At first, the quote might seem like an oxymoron or a collapse of logic: the city gains its reality from its absence. But instead of a collapse in logic, I would argue that it is an alternative to abstract thinking where the concrete manifestations (e.g. streets) can be added together to form an independent and abstract idea of the city. City and street are not separate entities, with one hierarchised above the other. Rather, they take part in each other. This means that the city is present in its particular streets but it is also always elsewhere. No street can capture the whole city, and we might add that no city can capture the whole street; there is always more to the street than the city, just as there is more to the city than its streets. Similarly with the Common Heritage Project; here, the collective ‘common heritage’ is a material and social organisation that, I would argue, gets its reality from its ubiquitous absence. This means that it is present in all its stones, lime, pages in a diary, and so on, yet it is always also another place. And the stones, lime and diary pages are also always more than
this ‘common heritage’. Above, I have argued for this in the case of the name of the place. The alternative names, while naming it, were also pointing beyond, to something other than the Frederiksgave site. In avoiding being captured as a whole (a city, a common heritage) and in refusing to be reduced to a mere collection of parts (streets, walls, lime, archives, etc.), the ‘detotalized totality’ of Frederiksgave is as total as it can get.

The reason why I find this discussion of the fetish useful for my analytical purpose is that it provides an alternative to ideas of the materialities of the world being reduced to a matter of human instrumental relations – a social life of things. However, the idea of spirit in matter, the fetish as an untranscended object, does not capture the work of common heritage either. My fieldwork continuously made it impossible to uphold such an either/or view of the materiality of heritage. The actual encounters in the here-and-now made the heritage site’s work cut across such a divide; materiality gained power and worked through people, history books, the particular moment, the UNESCO charters, the architect’s ruler, and so on, all at once. The point is that in order to qualify common heritage such as the Frederiksgave site, I need to let this complexity remain and instead focus on the here-and-now whereby the Frederiksgave site emerges as both a referent and an untranscended object to such an extent that the divide ceases to make analytical sense. Materiality indeed talks back – we need only recall the singing roots of the previous chapter – but it depends on someone listening professionally for a distant history to be uncovered in the present.

If we explore the Common Heritage Project through the lens of the fetish, it can be said that the fetish was awakened (the magic was generated) when investigating the lime with a knife, when looking at the maps through a magnifying glass, when decoding old Danish handwritten sources in the Danish National Archives and when walking around in the building. From these sensuous relations a cultural heritage site emerged. And it is these sensuous engagements, I suggest, that produce part of the power of the cultural heritage site. The sensuous mimetic faculty that is at play at the Frederiksgave site awakens the fetish. How, then, does this relate (or not) to the issue of Frederiksgave as a site materialising the universal value of common heritage? Once again, I draw on the fetish history to explore this matter.
Trinkets and Trifles – ‘The Mystery of Value’

In the early European-West African mercantile encounters, the question of value became pertinent; what was valuable and what was the right tally in these heterogeneous encounters became pivotal questions. The trade, by definition, centred on translating and transvaluing objects, and thus raised questions of the social value of material objects. In return for the precious metal, the Europeans offered what they often referred to as ‘trinkets and trifles’ or ‘trash’ to their trading partners – a view that has recently been contested by the archaeologist DeCorse, who has carried out excavations in Elmina, the first Portuguese trading station on the West African coast. In the old diaries and official documents, it seemed shocking and completely ridiculous to the European traders that many of the ‘trinkets and trifles’ they traded were praised as powerful and valuable material objects by the Africans; they wondered about ‘[t]he mystery of value’. At times, the European traders even expressed contempt for those who valued and worshipped ‘trifles’. They pondered over the ignorant and confused Africans not knowing the ‘true’ value of things. One can easily imagine how the Europeans, but probably also the Africans, stood and rubbed their hands with glee after having exchanged glass pearls, brassware and clothes for gold. And, not least, why rich sponsors in Europe were willing to invest huge sums in the dangerous and costly voyages and, particularly in the eighteenth century, why African traders sold huge numbers of slaves in return for European goods. However, ideas of cross-cultural equivalence regarding magical objects were slowly abandoned.

The arrival of the Dutch in the sixteenth century, and subsequently the British, Germans and Danes, to mention only some of the Protestant European nations seeking fortune via the Atlantic Ocean, gave rise to new understandings of materiality. The Dutch Calvinists in particular, according to Pietz, had very different ideas about materiality to those of their Portuguese competitors. To the Dutch, the African fetishes were seen as homologous with the Catholic sacramental objects dismissed by Protestantism. As a result, the Dutch merchants ignored the above-described Catholic division between idols (referential materiality aspiring to a spiritual being) and feiticos/fetissos (efficient
materiality). To the Dutch, and to Protestants in general (who did not accept any mediation by either the papal authority or sacramental objects in relation to God) both idols and fetishes were understood as deflected spirituality, and therefore wrong. The Dutch and other Protestants thought that the African’s worshipping of material objects was false, even ridiculous. As a consequence, debased gold came to be known as fetish, in this way connoting unpleasant and suspicious trading situations, rather than a religious situation. The Dutch understanding of the fetish was closer to the Roman Pliny’s distinction, used in mercantile situations, between the artificial (\textit{facticius}) and the natural, than to thoughts on idolatry whereby materials were understood to refer to a divine being. In Pietz words, the ‘material objects came to be understood as proper to economic as opposed to religious activity’. Trade became a secular, disenchanted affair, and religion a spiritual affair, and the two, ideally, did not intersect with each other. According to Pietz, a new understanding of nature and the natural powers of the material evolved as well. This new understanding stressed the fundamental impersonality of material happenings that was the basis of the new ‘enlightened’ definition of superstition as the personification of impersonal natural forces, accompanied by the attribution of end-oriented intentionality to chance events and to objects randomly associated in contingent experience.

Belief in the impersonality of natural forces, and the denial of end-oriented intentionality to chance events, created an idea of an ‘enlightened’ mind. Together with new technologies (e.g. modern navigation aids) and a new commercial consciousness produced by new forms of economic organisations (e.g. the Dutch West Indies Company), material objects became the focus of attention in the relations between European and African merchants on the coast. ‘[T]he truth of material objects came to be viewed in terms of technological and com-modifiable use-value, whose ‘reality’ was proved by their silent ‘translatability’ across alien cultures’, as Pietz argues. If material objects had other meanings and values then this was to be understood as a given culture’s deception and lack of reason. Material objects were understood as universally impersonal entities,
independent of their substance and function. To the enlightened European mind, any notion of fetish went against a thinking based on ‘natural reason and rational market activity.’ What for the Europeans was based on pure technological knowledge was understood by the Africans as involving supernatural agency. This led the European merchants to conclude that their trading partners had false ideas about causality. And therefore, the argument went, the Africans could not estimate the true value of things. Following this line of reasoning, one of the expatriate Danes, Ludwig Ferdinand Rømer, gives a very interesting description of a fetish house in his account of life on the Guinea Coast. He terms it ‘the Negro’s curio cabinet’ – a term that is most likely intended as derogatory, since the curio cabinets so fashionable in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were considered outdated in the eighteenth century, when Rømer wrote his account. Rømer calls the items ‘foolish trinkets (I do not know what else I can call them)” or ‘knick-knacks.” By bracketing his hesitation or inability to name the objects, it could be argued that Rømer is emphasising that he is dealing with a phenomenon unknown to him – in other words, an intra-African phenomenon. The fetish houses, Rømer writes, are always round, and inside you see a thousand kinds of worthless objects, hanging up or lying in it. A clay pot, standing in a corner, contains red earth in which there may be a feather from the tail of a cock. Sticks tied together with thread or raffia are placed on the wall or sides of the hut. […] Indeed, you cannot count all the bric-a-brac they keep in those places.

A few paragraphs later, he writes as if the clients visiting the fetish priest in the house are being fooled. Placing himself in an enlightened position, he asks them, ‘why don’t you lift your heads a little […] and open your eyes, in order to see.’ Like his contemporaries, the Englishman William Smith, or the Dutchman Willem Bosman, both quoted in Pietz’ text, Rømer points to the contingency of the things chosen and also to what is of prime interest to my analysis: the deceit, the blindness of the Africans – ‘why don’t you lift your heads a little […] and open your eyes, in order to see’. Rømer continues that if one wanted to know about the religion of the ‘Blacks’ one had to be on the coast.
for several years without anyone seeing us laugh at their ceremonies, or, when they answered our questions, without a European ridiculing them. If we do this, and say ‘it is nonsense’, etc., they then answer, ‘That may well be – believe what you will!’ And they will even laugh with us.\(^{102}\) 

One can easily sense the disrespect, not to mention the awkwardness emanating from this quote. In order to obtain knowledge about the Africans’ religion, one has to hide one’s laughter. And if one speaks honestly, raising a disagreement, they will only settle the discussion, potentially agreeing, potentially not, leaving the question unanswered and, as if establishing a momentary meeting point, they laugh with the Danes – and avoid similar encounters.

Reading this old description immediately reminded me of an incident I experienced during my fieldwork in Ghana. On a late afternoon in November 2008, I was sitting with a group of people from Keta, the easternmost coastal city housing ruins from Prindsensten, a former Danish fort. We sat at the end of the sandy road outside the Chief’s office, under a tree facing what was once Prindsensten. I enjoyed these afternoons; the people seemed very interested in politics, and our repeated attendance seemed to be a sign of our pleasure and engagement in listening and discussing various issues with each other. As we had done the previous two weeks, we discussed issues of British colonialism, poverty in Africa, Barack Obama, corruption, chiefs, local and governmental elections, immigration and, of course, the fort – ‘a tourist attraction for the city’, as the people of the town called it. This afternoon, the discussion revolved around the fort and what to do with it. Suddenly, one of the pacesetting men raised his voice and stood up. He looked down at me, and in his loud voice he asked me,

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\text{C’mon Nathalia, why is he [the Danish architect] standing there looking at that wall for hours? Eh? Standing there with his pipe [and he imitated smoking a pipe so characteristic of the Danish architect, and all of us listening started to laugh], scratching the wall with his knife [he raised his index finger and bent it in the air], looking closely [he took my arm and moved it close to his eyes to study it. We all laughed, and in a high voice he shouted: \(,), why? Tell me why? If it were the Americans, then they would just have rebuilt that}
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thing quickly so that tourists will come. But the Danes, eh, eh, eh, [shaking his head] they are just looking, they are so slow!

The people around nodded approvingly and expressed agreement, while we nearly fell over laughing: I found it funny, because in that setting I too could see the humour and inefficiency of ‘the Danes’, despite my fascination with the detailed attention the architect paid to the materiality of the old Danish sites. By imitating the Danish architect and his apparently strange interests, the man articulated ‘the mystery of value’ described above. In contrast to the Danish architect and, with him, the Danish National Museum, the speaker was not interested in the lime, the oyster shells, or the detailed surveying of the building– these things did not turn it into a ‘fort’, a ‘tourist attraction’. No, instead he suggested following the Americans, known for their mercantile ingenuity, and just rebuilding ‘that thing’ as fast as possible in order for it to attract tourists and, with that, money for the impoverished town. Humorously, he questioned what to many Danes from the museum seemed to be the universal value of heritage. But he did more than just question: like Rømer, he asked the Danes to look up and see. He asked us to see that the Danes’ fetish house – the fort – was full of trinkets and trifles, and not precious lime, sand, measures, etc., as they falsely thought; the value lay elsewhere – in the pockets of the thousands of tourists who would come and visit the fort because of its history and its location on the West African coast.

The European merchants clearly could not make sense of what their trading partners treated as fetishes; it seemed completely random. An important characteristic of the fetish was that its power rested on its ability ‘to repeat its originating act of forging an identity of articulated relations between certain otherwise heterogeneous things’. But the European traders could not identify this repetition and stringency. The arbitrariness of defining what the fetishes were produced a paradox to the Europeans, namely that social order in Africa was apparently generated by a solely ‘natural and lawless process’.

I encountered similar accusations or implications of arbitrariness during my fieldwork, but this time it was not expressed by European merchants, but by many people living close to the former Danish buildings. In general, the
Europeans’ interest in the old European constructed buildings, and the energy put into studying and possibly renovating them, was, as in the instance described above, a mystery to many Ghanaians, who prioritised spending their scarce resources differently. For instance, I participated as a fieldworker in an excavation at a former Danish fort, Fredensborg, on the Ghanaian coastline. Before the archaeologists started digging, they talked to the Chief of the city, explained their interest and asked for permission to dig in the grounds. Permission was granted, but several people from the village looked at us as if we were mad, and asked the archaeologists or myself whether we were digging for gold. Why else should we trouble ourselves with the hard and unpleasant work of digging into what had until recently been a public toilet? The Danish archaeologists said that this was a typical question in gold-rich Ghana, but that in Denmark too they had been asked this treasure-hunting question. They explained their purpose, and invited people to come and look at the work and the artefacts. The people seemed to appreciate our inclusiveness, but did not seem convinced enough about our drive to bother.

It was likewise in Sesemi, where the Frederiksgave site was reconstructed. It took a long time for the Chief of the village to be convinced that the Danes would actually reconstruct the building. He was polite, and arranged ‘durbas’ [official rituals] where he and his group of elders all dressed in traditional clothes and performed rituals to confirm their goodwill and willingness to cooperate. But until the Danish architect started hiring workmen from the village and actually commenced the reconstruction work, he was not convinced that the project would in fact be realised. Shortly after the inauguration of the Common Heritage Site, I talked to him about the project. It was a Sunday, there was a relaxed atmosphere in the village, and people were slowly returning from the churches in the area, still dressed in their Sunday best. I found the Chief relaxing alone on his porch. He was constantly smiling, and seemed to be very satisfied with everything. The small village at the end of the road had for one day – the inauguration day – been the centre of the world. With all this hype, the challenge for the Chief now, I was told by some people living in the village, was how to manage all the invitations from chiefs in the area to be guest of honour at their social arrangements. How would the Chief afford all the gifts that such a
position traditionally demanded in Ghana? For the moment, however, he was not worried about such challenges. Instead, he threw back his head, looked up at the sky and exclaimed: ‘It’s a miracle’. I was not prepared for such an expression, and asked what he meant by ‘miracle’. He explained: ‘All these big people coming here to Sesemi; before nobody knew about Sesemi, now they do, it’s fantastic,’ and he added, ‘We can only give thanks to God.’ Then he showed me a paper produced for the church-based celebration of the commissioning of the site. It looked like the official invitation to the inauguration: on the front page there was a copy of the drawing of the architectural façade of the building, but instead of welcoming you to the inauguration it read: ‘Thanksgiving Service in Commemoration of the Commissioning of the Frederiksgave Plantation and Common Heritage Site’. None of the Danes from the National Museum or otherwise involved in the project had been invited, or had even heard about this commemoration service. Nor had the people from the Ghanaian ministries or the Ghanaian university been invited to attend. It was an internal village affair, and not thought of as a common event. Bringing the Common Heritage Project to the church seemed to be a new and surprising movement – at least to me. This was the first time I had heard about the project in such religious framing. It was not so much a matter of being Frederik’s gift, as the name denoted, nor a gift from the foundation granting money to the project, or from the Danish National Museum to the University of Ghana, as was officially stated. To the Chief of the village, it was ‘a miracle’ and ‘a gift from God’. In the New Testament, miracles are illustrated as what happens when water is turned into wine or when waking the dead. Similarly, following the words of the Chief, a miracle could mean suddenly turning a pile of stones that perhaps reminded people of a difficult past into a prestigious building attracting notables from all over. One could also point to the arbitrariness with which miracles happen. They do not follow any law and order, at least not known to humans, and the only thing we can do when they happen is to wonder and give thanks to the Lord, just as the Chief and the villagers were doing.

With these incidents during fieldwork at the former Danish ruins (the slow-paced attention to materials, the excavation/gold digging and the reconstruction/miracle), it should be clear that the value of Danish-built structures is
not given once and for all. The people living close to the sites were difficult to convince of our enthusiasm for the ruins and the importance they materialised. The Chief’s declaration of a miracle showed that to him it seemed completely arbitrary that his village had been chosen from among many just as important ones; this choice certainly seemed to be completely out of his hands. The movement of turning water into wine, or ruins into highly valuable artefacts, was later commented on in the article written by many of those involved from the National Museum: ‘Before the excavation the villagers viewed the ruin as an overgrown and worthless pile of rocks, but in the course of the last three years the buildings have become a living testimony to the times of their ancestors.’ However, to the writers themselves, it was never a question of turning something worthless into something valuable, of turning water into wine, but more of rediscovering what for centuries had lain in oblivion in the dark jungle. Clearly, and as opposed to the villagers, the people from the National Museum worked on the assumption that they already knew the true value of things. Importantly, this self-assuredness meant that the diverging views of the heritage objects and places on the part of, for example, the people living in the village, did not really interfere with the course of the reconstruction. The project, as also discussed before, was never geared toward inclusive community practices, since Frederiksgave was merely seen by the project makers as an extension of a common past with inherent value, to be uncovered and constructed by responsible – and affluent – agents. The project simply followed History, Nature, laws, order and international charters as best it could.

ENCOUNTERING MYSTERIOUS VALUE — THE MATERIALITY OF HERITAGE

In this chapter, I have explored in great detail the history of the fetish in order to analyse the powerful materiality of heritage and the mystery of value, thereby showing how heritage works and is valuated. Drawing on Pliny, I explored the distinction between natural and artificial goods, and showed how in the reconstruction process this distinction was continuously both challenged and upheld. The Danish architect emphasised working with nature in order to let
history speak for itself. Commonness at the site was, according to the project planners, found in the sharing of one single universal nature and history (naturalised history and historicised nature), and this was what had to be uncovered if heritage was to be authentic and true. Professionalism, the right techniques and materials, were thus vital for creating the Common Heritage Site. Invoking the history of the fetish, we saw how questions of the material and the spiritual shed additional light on the reconstruction of the Frederiksgave site. At issue in the history of the fetish was the distinction between materials as resembling or embodying the original creation. At Frederiksgave, we saw instances where both of these logics were enacted, and my point is that common heritage is made of materials that at once resemble the original and embody the virtues of its type. This is essentially a discussion of what a thing is – whether it is controlled by a human maker or has agency in itself. The Frederiksgave planners, in their care to let the objects act in accordance with nature, worked from a curious mix of these two positions. At first, the idea of the fetish as untranscended materiality, an ‘other thing’, or a thing in which the effect is only inherent, seemed a good way to analyse the power of heritage objects. However, in my view – and based on what took place at the Frederiksgave site – the idea of the untranscended seems to contradict the generative power of encounters. If we follow Pels’ argument about the fetish being an untranscended object, we risk rendering it a given entity, a nature ‘out there’, not talking back as much as talking past. Sartre and Pietz, on the other hand, retain the paradoxes inherent in the term ‘fetish’ and how it is understood, without letting these fall into confusion – as, according to Ellen, had happened among anthropologists at the beginning of the twentieth century. With the notion of detotalised totality, Pietz points to the incompleteness of the fetish, but he also points to its historicity, that the fetish is a fixation of a singular event. Only in the sensations of the here-and-now can the fetish gain its power and value. Likewise with the Common Heritage Project, it was sensuous moments of engagement with material and topography that made the site valuable. This was a value that, as we saw, was not pre-given, but rather pointed to awkward moments and to a mystery that has a certain degree of circularity and indeed a paradoxical character to it: the common heritage has inherent value, but still needs to be created in particular conscientious ways to
preserve and maintain this value. My fieldwork material thus kept questioning the translatability and universal worth of heritage, showing the mystery and multiplicity of value. To the project planners, the Frederiksgave site presented a universal history to tell that did not include it being a fort, as some would have it. To others, the value of Frederiksgave rested in the pockets of future visitors, rather than in the reconstruction of a shared past. In short, the Frederiksgave site was commonly valued in different ways. In this way, the bumbling and failures marking where both pure referentiality and untranscended materiality were challenged could be seen as vital parts of the value of common heritage.

An important dimension of heritage, then, is that it works in ways that point beyond the discussion of spirit of and spirit in matter. The friction between these ideas of the material qualifies cultural heritage, and suggests a specific and mysterious materialisation of value.