

THE OCCULT LIFE OF
THINGS

Native Amazonian Theories of Materiality and Personhood

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Introduction

Amerindian Constructional Views of the World

Fernando Santos-Granero

With a few notable exceptions (Wilbert 1975; Ribeiro 1980, 1987, 1988; Reichel-Dolmatoff 1988; Whitten and Whitten 1988, 1993; Guss 1990; Pollock 1995; Rival 1996), in the past decades anthropologists have shown scant interest in the material culture of native Amazonian peoples. This contrasts with the work done on other ethnographic regions, such as Africa, where since the 1980s there has been a renewed interest in “the situated ways in which individuals use objects in the construction of identity, social formations, and culture itself” (Hardin and Arnoldi 1996:8). It is only very recently that objects and artifacts have come to attract once more the attention of Amazonianist specialists (Van Velthem 2001, 2003; Chaumeil 2001; Erikson 2001; Myers and Cipoletti 2002; Barcelos Neto 2004; Bilhaut 2006). The past indifference toward material life might be a reaction to the obsessive detail with which our modernist predecessors described the objects of Amerindian everyday life in order to determine cultural similarities and differences (e.g., Koch-Grünberg 1917; Métraux 1928; Nordenskiöld 1929; Tessmann 1930). It might also be, as Stephen Hugh-Jones suggests in this volume, that the Amerindian fascination with animals and the emphasis on people in recent theories of native Amazonian political economies have conspired to make the world of objects somewhat invisible. As the chapters in this volume indicate, however, objects figure as prominently, if not more prominently, than animals in native Amazonian cosmologies and imaginaries. This suggests that the paucity of studies on the material culture of Amazonian indigenous peoples should be credited to our own preconceptions rather than to any alleged Amerindian indifference with respect to objects.

The last important attempt to present an overview of Amerindian material culture was that of Julian H. Steward (1946) in volume 5 of his

Handbook of South American Indians. Since this work came to light, the topic has hardly been the subject of fresh anthropological reflection. The term “material culture” has itself become out of fashion, and rightly so, for it imposes a Western perspective on Amerindian phenomena. By focusing on the materiality of things and grouping objects on the side of cultural production, this notion obscures the fact that, in Amazonian ontologies, things—or at least some things—are considered to be subjectivities possessed of a social life. More importantly, as we shall see, it obscures the “natural”—in the sense of given—dimension of objects, and particularly artifacts, and the important role they play in the production of what we understand as Nature—including humans, animals, and plants.

This book does not intend, therefore, to revive the topic of “material culture.” Rather, it strives to explore how native Amazonian peoples envision the lives of material objects. In other words, its purpose is to examine the “occult life of things”—occult because their lives are extraordinary, and occult because their personas are normally not visible to lay people. In the recent past, there has been a renewed interest in the notion of “animism” both within and without Amazonia (Descola 1992; Århem 1996; Howell 1996; Ingold 1998, 1999; Morris 1998, 1999; Bird-David 1999; Stringer 1999; Morrison 2000; Pedersen 2001; Harvey 2006). By placing emphasis on the “animic” character of Amerindian cosmologies, these authors have called for the need to expand the notion of Amazonian sociality beyond the sphere of human relations to include plants, animals, and even spirits. Similarly, a great deal has been said about the “perspectival” quality of relationships between all beings in the world, a quality whereby each category of being regards its own members as human while viewing other kinds of beings as nonhuman predators or prey (Århem 1990; Stolze Lima 1996, 1999, 2005; Viveiros de Castro 1996, 1998, 2004a and b; Vilaça 1992).

Objects, however, have been conspicuously absent from these analyses. In their pioneering works on Amerindian perspectivism, Kaj Århem (1990), Tânia Stolze Lima (1996), and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1996) concentrate on what they consider to be the three basic categories of living beings: humans, animals, and spirits. Viveiros de Castro (1998:470), who turned what was a fertile ethnographic intuition into a stimulating theory of Amerindian perception and thought, asserts that artifacts are only “occasionally” considered as subjectivities—adding, almost as an afterthought, that “the spiritualization of plants, meteorological phenomena or artefacts seems to [be] secondary or derivative in comparison with

the spiritualization of animals" (Viveiros de Castro 1998:472). The studies gathered in this volume demonstrate otherwise. Animic and perspectival notions also encompass the world of "things," a term used here to refer not only to artifacts—objects made by gods and humans, including images, songs, names, and designs—but also to natural objects and phenomena that are believed to be central to human life and reproduction. As we shall see, objects are not derivative. Rather, they are often attributed the role of primordial building blocks in Amerindian constructional cosmologies and composite anatomies.

The widespread distribution in the Americas of the myth of the "revolt of objects"—objects rebelling against their masters—attests to the pervasiveness of the idea that in primordial times, things (or at least some of them) were human (Lévi-Strauss 1969). Even objects that are not thought to have an intrinsic living dimension are nevertheless believed to be capable of becoming endowed with properties generally attributed to living beings. Some objects are imbued with the power to attract those persons with whom they come into contact; other objects become, through intimate contact, of one essence with their makers/owners, and may be as much the subject of sorcery as the people to whom they belong; still others are believed to have important fertilizing powers that increase with the passage of time and with their transmission from generation to generation as family or collective heirlooms. In brief, there are multiple ways of being an object in Amerindian lived worlds.

The contributors to this volume focus on three domains regarding native Amazonian conceptions of things. First, there is the issue of the "subjective life of objects." Which things have a subjective dimension? And how is this subjectivity manifested? Second, there is the issue of the "social life of things," by which we understand not the way things move in and out of various "regimes of value" à la Arjun Appadurai (1986),¹ but rather the diverse ways in which human beings and things relate *qua* subjectivities. Lastly, there is the issue of the "historical life of things." Because of their high value as ritual objects, prestige goods, or family heirlooms, some things (e.g., flutes, masks, shamanic stones, feather headdresses) have both a social history—a history that recounts who made them and how they changed hands—and a biography—a personal history recounting their life cycle. Contributors to this book address these issues combining linguistic, ethnological, and historical perspectives. Their works draw on a wealth of information gathered from ten Amerindian peoples belonging to seven different linguistic families. Together, the authors have identified the basic

tenets of what can be considered a native Amazonian theory of materiality and personhood. These tenets I discuss in the following pages.

Constructional Cosmologies

The notion that in mythical times, all beings were human—or appeared to each other as human—constitutes one of the most widespread native Amazonian mythemes. In times of indifferentiation, the predecessors of all living beings—humans, animals, plants, and spirits, but also a variety of objects—shared the primordial mythscape with powerful creator gods, cultural heroes, or mischievous tricksters. This idyllic existence, native Amazonians say, came to an end due to the fallibility of the ancient people, at which point emerged the different categories of beings that populate the world nowadays. This emergence was not, however, a straightforward process. It involved multiple metamorphoses, by which primordial people passed through different modalities of existence before acquiring their (more or less) definite form. It entailed processes of bodily deconstitution and reconstitution marked by extreme forms of interspecific permutation of body parts, including artifacts that were formerly body parts and body parts that were formerly artifacts. And it implied the intervention of powerful demiurges whose creative capacities often took the form of divine “technological acts” (Van Velthem 2003:90). More importantly, the coming into being of the present-day world was not the result of a creation *ex nihilo*, but rather the product of the transformation of pre-existing things (Viveiros de Castro 2004a:477). These characteristics endow Amerindian cosmologies with a “constructional” character that contrasts strongly with the “creationist” emphasis of other cosmologies such as the Judeo-Christian. This does not mean that Amerindians cannot conceptualize a creation *ex nihilo*, as Stephen Hugh-Jones (this volume) has very well demonstrated is the case of the Tukano. But even Amerindian cosmologies that evoke an initial creation *ex nihilo* can be described as being constructional, insofar as subsequent creative acts assumed the form of creations via transformation.

According to Viveiros de Castro (1998), in Amerindian cosmologies humans and animals appear as the primordial forms, whereas plants and objects seem to be derivative. Proof of this would be the extended notion that cultural artifacts originated when humans borrowed or stole the prototypes possessed by nonhuman beings (Viveiros de Castro 2004a:477). This, however, is far from being a universal notion, as is attested by the

native Amazonian cosmologies discussed in this book and elsewhere. In these cosmologies, objects and artifacts appear as having existed prior to other forms of being. More interestingly, they are often attributed a crucial function in the creation and constitution of humans, animals, and plants.

Tukano people assert that in the beginning, there was only the creator god and his Instruments of Life and Transformation, artifacts of great ceremonial and shamanic significance (Hugh-Jones, this volume). These instruments, made of white crystal, were constituent parts of the creator god's body and later on became the bones of true humans. Similarly, the Wakuénaí claim that the body of Kuwái, the primordial human being and creator god, is made up of a variety of sacred flutes and trumpets (Hill, this volume). In Mamaindê cosmology, the first beings to come into existence were humans and their artifacts, which were themselves human (Miller, this volume). When a child opened the gourd that contained the night, the primordial people and their artifacts turned into animals. Axe became a *tayra*, arrows were transformed into poisonous snakes, and Carrying Basket turned into a jaguar. A similar conception is found in the Cashinahua myth of the great flood that ended with the transformation of ancient people and artifacts into animals (Lagrou, this volume). For example, the boa came into being as the result of the transformation of a couple lying down in a patterned hammock—this explains the beautiful designs of its skin. Wayana people claim that the demiurges' first creations were the primordial people and their instruments, which were made out of the same raw materials and had a bodily existence (Van Velthem 2003:93, 120). At the end of the time of indifferenciation, the bodies or parts of bodies of these primordial beings turned into present-day animals, plants, and artifacts. Because they were created by the demiurges, objects have the capacity to transform into other beings, mostly animals.

A slight variant of this theme is found in Yanéscha (Santos-Granero, this volume) and Piro (Peter Gow, personal communication) cosmologies, which recount how present-day animals are ancient human beings transformed into animals. The artifacts they possessed in mythical times became emblematic parts of their bodies. The blood-covered axe of the primordial Curassow became the red beak of the present-day curassow, the straw mat on which Armadillo slept became the plated shell of its animal counterpart, and the beautifully woven hammock of Spider became the spider's subtle web. In other Amerindian cosmologies, some artifacts are said to have appeared even before the creator gods themselves. The

Miraña claim, for instance, that before coming into existence, the Creator was pure, disembodied consciousness (Karadimas 2005:259–66). In such a condition, he created a stool on which he sat, thereby giving shape to his own body. With the help of Yurupari, who was flute and earthworm simultaneously—and was the only other living being—he created the animal and plant people.

What becomes clear from these ethnographies is that in native Amazonian thought, the creation of life is a constructional process in which primordial bodies and body parts—often conceived of as prototypical artifacts—play a crucial role. Based on his data on the Miraña, who assert that human beings were made up of different fish species, Dimitri Karadimas (2005:402) refers to primordial creations as acts of “corporeal organization of species,” each species being fabricated from the bodies and body parts of other natural species. Given the widespread belief that most living beings contain within themselves the bodies and body parts of primordial artifact-people, I would suggest that it might be more accurate to understand demiurgic acts as a form of “artifactual organization of species.” Because artifacts were believed to be people or parts of people that were later transformed into other beings, it can be said—as suggests Lúcia Van Velthem (2003:119)—that in native Amazonian ontologies, people and objects share the same “symbolic frame of fabrication.” They are simultaneously things and embodied social relations.²

Artifactual Anatomies

It has long been accepted that in Amerindian societies, bodies are the main instruments to convey social and cosmological meanings (Seeger et al. 1979; Turner 1995). They are the privileged means for imprinting and preserving both self-identity and the memory of changes of status (Clastres [1973] 1998; Viveiros de Castro 1979). Viveiros de Castro (1998:480) has argued that the ultimate aim of the social construction of the body is to “particularize a body still too generic” in order to make it different from that of other human and nonhuman beings. He further contends that whereas the model of the spirit is the human spirit, that of the body is animal. From this point of view, the maximum social objectification of bodies, which generally takes place in ceremonial contexts, would coincide with its maximum “animalization”—when the bodies of participants are clad with impressive feathers, pelts, and other emblematic animal body parts (Viveiros de Castro 1998:480). However, since animal bodies are

frequently conceived of as being constructed out of cultural objects—and this is confirmed by the fact that animals themselves see their body parts as cultural instruments (Viveiros de Castro 1998:470)—we are forced to conclude that the model of the human body is not the body of animals but rather the body of artifacts.

This has some important corollaries. If bodies are, as Viveiros de Castro (1998:478) has suggested, the main site of differentiation between different life forms, and if they are, as they seem to be, composite or even artifactual constructions, then interspecific bodily differences are never absolute but just a matter of degree. If bodies are indeed “bundles of affects and capacities” (Viveiros de Castro 1998:478)—and there is much evidence to support this conclusion—then they would be made up of a combination of affects and capacities derived from different living beings, among which artifacts figure prominently. From this perspective, there would be no pure species, but rather a variety of species manifesting the affects and capacities of a diversity of other living beings.

This should not be all that surprising given native Amazonian theories of personhood, which place emphasis on the incorporation of the Other as an indispensable feature in the making of Self. Persons are not born as such, but must be intentionally manufactured or shaped through the input of a variety of substances and affects provided by parents and kin (Londoño Sulkin 2005). The person is a complex amalgam of substances and influences. Since kin are originally Others, alterity becomes a crucial component in the making of human bodies (Vilaça 2002). Marilyn Strathern’s (1990:13) dictum with regard to Melanesian notions of personhood, namely, that “persons are frequently constructed as the plural and composite site of the relationships that produce them,” is thus also valid for lowland South America. Els Lagrou (this volume) has aptly labeled this particular way of conceiving personhood as the “Amerindian mode of relatedness,” a social mode by which every being is a synthesis of the combined efforts of all the beings who have contributed—socially and bodily—to his or her existence. Such a constructional and relational perspective, which is basic in the fabrication of social bodies, could not be absent in the acts of the creator gods.

As we have seen, in mythical times, artifacts were the bodies or parts of bodies of primordial human beings. At the end of the times of indifferenciation, they became constitutive parts of human and other-than-human persons, such as animals, plants, and spirits. In some Amerindian cosmologies, it is said that the artifactual mode of reproduction preceded

the genital mode (see Hugh-Jones, this volume). Often, however, native Amazonians view both modes of production/reproduction as being homologous. More importantly, as I suggest below, there is evidence supporting the idea that in Amerindian ontologies, it is craftsmanship rather than childbearing that provides the model for all creative acts. If this is true, it could then be asserted that the artifactual mode of production/reproduction is not only prior to the genital mode but also to the paradigmatic mode of creation.

Artifacts were important not only in the fabrication of primordial human and other-than-human persons in pre-subjective, pre-objective mythical times. Their contribution to the construction of persons continues to be salient even today. Among Urarina, baby hammocks, elaborated by mothers, and hammock rattles, made with animal parts and a variety of objects presented by fathers and other kinspeople, are believed to shape, protect, and fortify the bodies of their baby owners (Walker, this volume). Parents carefully select the components of hammock rattles, which are generally gender specific, to instill into their babies highly valued artifactual or animal qualities. Cashinahua boys and girls undergoing ritual seclusion are presented with stools made from the buttress roots of the lupuna, so that they acquire from this powerful tree the knowledge of how to live a tranquil life (Lagrou, this volume). Objects are important components of the bodies of all living beings, having been incorporated either through primordial processes of creation or through ceremonial body-making techniques. The same can be said of objectified animal and plant subjectivities, which, like Urarina hammock rattles or Cashinahua ritual stools, are considered to be vitally important in the production of well-formed and competent human beings. As a result, all living beings appear as composite beings possessing eminently artifactual anatomies. This is why, as Joana Miller suggests in this volume, a native Amazonian theory of objects must be a theory of the person.

Multiple Objectivities

One of the notions that transpire from this volume is that there are “multiple ways of being a thing” in the Amerindian lived world. Without attempting to exhaust all possibilities, in this volume I mention at least five categories of objects with this notion in mind: (1) objects originating through self-transformation, (2) objects originating through metamorphosis, (3) objects originating through mimesis, (4) objects originating

through ensoulment, and (5) plain objects. Objects in the first four categories, which are amenable to some kind of subjectivation, encompass a large number of “things”: ceremonial items, shamanic paraphernalia, personal ornaments, songs, names and images, tools and weapons, cooking utensils, sleeping accessories, baby accouterments, personal documents, and a broad range of industrial objects—only recently incorporated into Amerindian societies—including not only shotguns and flashlights but even airplanes (see Turner, this volume). These objects differ from others not only in the way they have become subjectivized but also in terms of the degrees of animacy and agentivity they are thought to possess (Santos-Granero, Erikson, Guzmán-Gallegos, and Hill, this volume).

Ellen Basso (1985) was the first to point out that in Amerindian ontologies, not all beings were attributed the same kind of powers. On the basis of Kalapalo data, she suggested that each class of beings—including objects—is characterized by possessing particular forms of communication skills and by being able to act only upon beings of the same class or of classes with lower degrees of animacy. Philippe Descola (1996:375–76) has also noticed that communicational skills were the basis for Achuar hierarchies of animate/inanimate beings. From an Achuar point of view, he contends, such skills depend on the possession of or lack of a *wakan* (soul), as well as on the strength of the *wakan* of each species. At the bottom of the Achuar hierarchy of life forms, there are some animate beings and inanimate objects that, having no *wakan* of their own, can be said to be the only beings that properly belong to the sphere of “nature” as understood in Western thought.

In a similar vein, María Guzmán-Gallegos (this volume) suggests that “subjectivity does not necessarily presuppose the presence of a soul, whereas not all agency presupposes will and intentionality.” Some objects are “subjective” objects. They are conceived of as “persons” insofar as they possess an independent “soul” and are “agents of meaningful action” (Pollock 1996:320). Other objects are simply “subjectivized” objects. They possess some kind of soul substance, but not in the quantity or quality needed to be able to act on their own. They require the intervention of human beings to activate their agency and, in this sense, they can be described as “secondary agents” (Gell 1998).³ Thus, the Kawoká flutes of the Wauja, possessed of a strong *apapaatai* animal spirit (Barcelos Neto, this volume), contrast greatly with Yanéscha objects, which are mostly subjectivized rather than subjective objects and are thus incapable of autonomous agency (Santos-Granero, this volume).

Since the communicative aspect is crucial in native Amazonian classification of animate/inanimate beings, the only objects recognized as such from an Amerindian point of view are those that lack any kind of soul stuff and with which no communication is possible. All other "objects" are actually subjectivities more or less endowed with soul substance, which is tantamount to possessing communication skills. It is this capacity for communication that turns "things" into social beings (Douglas and Ney 1998:46). From a native point of view, the more powerful among these objects/subjects are those that can engage in actual dialogues with human beings, whether in dreams, spirit trips, or supernatural encounters—and particularly those that can impart important life-giving or life-taking knowledge. Tukano flutes, Urarina shamanic stone bowls, and Wauja drums are among these hyper-communicative objects. Thus, from a native point of view, materiality is both a social and a communicative process. However, since communication is always subjective and meaning unstable, the degree of subjectivity attributed to objects, as well as their meaning, is always open to negotiation and debate. Indeed, the subjectivity of objects reveals itself to, or is perceived by, different categories of people in very different ways, shamans being recognized as the most capable of engaging objects as subjects.

Native Amazonians also distinguish objects according to their use-value, opposing artifacts of daily use to those used in ceremonial contexts. Tukano people, for instance, consider all human artifacts as *gaheuni* or things capable of subjectivation (Hugh-Jones, this volume). The paradigmatic *gaheuni*, however, are the Instruments of Life and Transformation, the fertilizing ceremonial objects that are indispensable for ensuring the continuity of all forms of life. Likewise, Kayapo designate all personal possessions or valuables—including names and rights to ritual roles and songs—by a single term, *nêkretch* (Turner, this volume). They make, however, a further distinction between "common" and "beautiful" *nêkretch*, the latter being mostly names and valuables transmitted through complex collective ceremonies, as opposed to common names and objects whose transmission is confined to the sphere of the extended family.

Objects are also classified according to their origin, the main distinguishing factor being the opposition between native and industrial goods. Foreign objects have been gradually incorporated into native societies since the time of their contact with European peoples, to the point that some of these objects are conceived of as constituting an intrinsic part of "traditional" lifeways. Native Amazonians do not always agree, however,

as to the animacy of these alien objects and their place in local hierarchies of life forms. In some societies, such as the Matis and Yanésa, only native objects are believed to be animated or capable of becoming animated (Erikson and Santos-Granero, this volume). This is also true for the Yekuana, who consider that only locally made objects possess subjectivity and are thus capable of relating or being social (Guss 1990). In other societies, such as the Urarina (Walker, this volume), both native and foreign objects are thought to have a subjective dimension. Likewise, the Tukano term *gaheuni* and the Kayapo term *nékretch* encompass both native and industrial objects (Hugh-Jones and Turner, this volume). In both cases, these objects are endowed with subjectivity, being the objectification of the capacities, affects, and knowledges of the people who made them. Not all of the objects, however, are thought to possess the same kind of potency—some are more powerful than others and should thus be taken care of more conscientiously.

As Hugh-Jones has proposed in this volume, not only are there multiple ways of being an object in Amerindian ontologies, but there are also important differences in terms of what he calls “object regimes.” The wealth and social prominence of objects in societies such as the Tukano, Kayapo, and Wauja contrast with the simpler “material culture” of the Urarina, Yanésa, and Matis, and even more with the paucity of the material life of the Mamaindê. This volume has only pointed toward such fascinating differences, which certainly deserve further analysis. The existence of inalienable objects, individually or collectively owned, that escape the common fate of native Amazonian artifacts once their owners die and that are transmitted from generation to generation (see below) must have, undoubtedly, important social and political implications of which we are still unaware. Differences between object regimes do not obviate, however, the existence of many shared notions about the world of things that point to a common, underlying native theory of materiality.

Linguistic Markers

Animic peoples do not consider that all forms of existence are endowed with animacy and agentivity. Some objects are just plain objects. In turn, some living beings are considered to lack souls or other attributes of personhood and for this reason are distinguished from other animate beings that possess them (Descola 1996:375–76; Camargo 2006). Distinctions between animate and inanimate beings or between more and

less animated beings are often marked through a variety of linguistic devices (Harvey 2006:33). These may be positive or negative; that is, they can operate either by adding markers to distinguish a group of items from others groups or by not marking them, thus implicitly grouping all unmarked items into the same category. On the side of positive forms of marking, we find the Cashinahua, who, through the use of a series of possessor elements, distinguish between human and nonhuman beings according to whether the latter are assimilated or not to the category of “humanness.” Eliane Camargo (2006) asserts that in the Cashinahua language, the opposition between humans and nonhumans (animals and nonanimals) is not pertinent. Rather, the main opposition is that between humans and nonhumans assimilated to humanness versus nonhumans. Artifacts are conceived of as belonging to the class of nonhumans and in genitival phrases are morphologically treated as they are. Subjectivity and agentivity are attributed, however, to certain manufactured objects, particularly in shamanic contexts. On the side of negative forms of marking, we find the Urarina, who do not distinguish objects from animals, plants, or humans either through the use of pronouns for animateness or nominal classifiers, thus indicating that all these forms of existence are capable of subjectivity (Walker, this volume).

In other societies, such as the Wayana, personal belongings and body parts cannot be named without a possessive pronoun, a marker underlining their subjective quality (Van Velthem 2003:141). This is also the case for the Yanésha people, who consider body parts (arms, legs, heart), immaterial aspects of self (vitalities, shadow souls), and objects of personal use (tunics, beads, chestbands) as being equally animated (Santos-Granero, this volume). In this case, however, the common subjectivity of these forms of existence is emphasized by marking the non-possessed forms of these terms with a privative suffix. This linguistic practice is connected to the widespread native Amazonian belief that, through intimate contact, objects of personal use become gradually “ensouled” or infused with the soul substance of their owners, thus acquiring a certain degree of subjectivity. This particularity is not always linguistically marked, however. Although the Matis share the notion that personal ornaments become subjectivized through long-term contact, they classify those ornaments as being *chu*—“belongings” or “inanimate possessions”—rather than *wiwa*—“pets,” the term they use to classify nonhuman “subjected beings” (Erikson, this volume).

Among the Wakuénai, levels of animacy and power are marked through the use of numeral classifiers that arrange different beings and

objects into noun sets according to common interactional properties, such as edibility, utility, gender, and place. According to Jonathan Hill (this volume), “Things most likely to become subjectivized are those that come into bodily contact through eating, using, and touching; things that come in pairs or that are otherwise involved in quantitative expressions; and things that are believed to have exceptional power to cause harm in ritual and myth.” The cases discussed in this volume provide a glimpse of the rich semiotic resources that are available to describe materiality and materialization in native Amazonian languages. These resources include not only grammatical aspects but also sounds, music, and gestures, constituting as much a way of speaking as a way of feeling/being. A deeper knowledge of the kinds of things that are amenable to subjectivation in different Amerindian societies, together with more detailed linguistic studies focused on the issues of animacy and agentivity, such as Camargo’s (2006), would certainly contribute to a better understanding of native Amazonian constructional cosmologies. It would also provide much necessary linguistic data to enhance our comprehension of native Amazonian forms of animism and perspectivism.

Subjectivations

Whereas some objects are thought to possess strong, autonomous souls, others are credited with weaker forms of subjectivity or none at all. In other words, not all objects are believed to be subjective in the same way. These “states of subjectivity” (Stolze Lima 2005:214) depend to a great extent on the amount and quality of the “soul substance” that they are thought to possess. Objects that lack autonomous souls are often dependent on some kind of human intervention to become subjectivized or personified. This is in consonance with Amerindian theories of personhood, which view persons as beings that possess a soul or vitality. It is the possession of a soul that allows for awareness of oneself and of others, as well as for the ability to think. From this point of view, “persons” are volitional and relational social beings with whom communication and reciprocity is possible (Harvey 2006:xvii; see also Taylor 1993). They know themselves through the relationships they maintain with others. More importantly, as Beth Conklin (2001:141) has suggested, the capacities of the self are thought to be activated only through interaction with others. Indeed, it is through relationships with persons different from oneself that creativity and vitality are possible. Amerindian personhood is, in this sense, a

“fractal personhood” insofar as it involves relations of incorporation of the Other into the Self at different scales, which are always similar to each other (Luciani and Antonio 2001). As Viveiros de Castro (2004a:480) has so compellingly put it, from an Amerindian point of view, “the self is always the gift of the other.”

The subjectivity or personhood of objects is also relational, particularly in the case of objects lacking autonomous souls, which depend on a subject to realize their subjectivity. The subjectivation or subjectification of such objects is achieved through intimate contact or through the activation of a pre-existing, latent subjectivity. In the first situation, which involves mostly but not exclusively artifacts, a series of objects—which may or may not have been produced by their owner—become subjectivized through the gradual diffusion of the soul stuff of their owners into their most personal belongings (Miller, Walker, Lagrou, Santos-Granero and Hill, this volume). Subjectivation through ensoulment entails a kind of embodiment by which the ensouled objects become a sort of “extension of their owners’ bodies” (Santos-Granero, this volume). This notion seems to be very widespread in native Amazonia. The Urarina view baby hammocks as being simultaneously extensions and constitutive parts of their baby owners; indeed, each appears as an extension of the other (Walker, this volume). The same is true of Mamaindê personal ornaments or gender-specific objects (Miller, this volume). According to Philippe Erikson (this volume), among the Matis, those objects that are in closest contact with their owners become, as it were, “extra-somatic body parts.” Since in many native Amazonian ontologies souls and bodies are seen as “doubles” (Vilça 1992), any addition or subtraction to the one must be reflected in the other. This explains why human and other-than-human people seen in dreams or shamanic spirit trips always appear clad in their emblematic clothes, ornaments, and weapons. Viveiros de Castro (1998:482) is thus right when claiming that “it is not so much that the body is a clothing but rather that clothing is a body” (see also Santos-Granero 2006).

From an Amerindian point of view, the boundaries of a person are not coterminous with his or her body, not only in the sense that bodies are relational and subjectivity communal but also because a series of personal objects become part of the body (Harvey 2006:113). Certain personal, generally inalienable objects are even thought to stand for the qualities and/or subjectivity of their owners. Mamaindê bead necklaces (Miller, this volume), Kayapo “beautiful” *nêkretch* valuables (Turner, this volume), and Runa identity documents (Guzmán-Gallegos, this volume) are some

of the many objects that are thought to possess this metonymical quality. Because of the close association, or even identity, between bodies and personal objects, actions that affect personal objects are thought to affect their owners in similar ways (Santos-Granero, this volume). Furthermore, because personal objects are constitutive parts of their owners, they may be used by enemies or evil agents to bewitch their owners under the principles of what James George Frazer (1982) dubbed “contagious magic.”

The second form of subjectivation involves objects that are not the product of human efforts, but rather of supernatural agency. Being the result of their productive agency, these objects embody the powerful intentionalities and affects of their supernatural makers. They are generally not credited with possessing an independent soul and thus depend on human intervention to become active. This is the case with Yanesha panpipes, whose subjectivity and generative powers—derived from the creator gods associated with them—can be activated only by means of offerings of manioc beer, coca juice, and tobacco smoke (Santos-Granero, this volume). Other objects of supernatural origin, such as Runa curing stones or Urarina shamanic stone bowls, are thought to possess an autonomous soul and thus to have intentionality and agency of their own (Guzmán-Gallegos and Walker, this volume). Their subjectivity, however, finds full expression only when activated by the shaman who found them and took possession of them. Modes of activation vary significantly. In order to utilize *egaando*, or stone bowls, Urarina shamans must first capture and tame them through ritual dialogue, songs, and dieting. As Harry Walker (this volume) asserts, the *egaando* have to be “coerced into full personhood.” In contrast, Runa shamanic stones can neither be tamed nor controlled (Guzmán-Gallegos, this volume). Their subjectivity and agency can be activated in positive ways only by establishing amicable relationships with them. Only when Runa shamans have managed to befriend a particular stone does the latter become an active helper in the context of curing sessions. Similar relationships of friendship between shamans and their stones are found among the Zapara (Bilhaut 2006; see also Santos-Granero 2007 on friendly relations between shamans and their familiars).

Whether subjectivized through intimate contact or appropriation, these objects are always conceived of as extensions of their owners’ bodies. When their owners die, they appear—in the words of Terence Turner (this volume)—as an “unburied part of the dead person’s corpse” and thus have to be destroyed. If they are not destroyed, the soul of the dead person might linger around the objects that were a constitutive part of that person in

order to haunt the living and drag their souls away to live in the afterworld. To avoid this, all the possessions of a dead person, including ornaments, weapons, utensils, pets, houses, and gardens are destroyed, burned, killed, or abandoned. In the past, this practice included even captive slaves, who were often killed and buried with their masters to serve them in the afterworld (Santos-Granero 2009). Despite its widespread character, this belief is not, however, universal and does not apply to all objects. In certain native Amazonian societies, generally those exhibiting more “opulent” object regimes, some artifacts are spared from being destroyed when their owners die. These particularly esteemed objects, such as Tukano feather headdresses, Wauja Kawoká flutes, and Kayapo *nékretch* names, are kept and transmitted from generation to generation (Hugh-Jones, Barcelos Neto and Turner, this volume). Some of these objects, like the peccary tusk necklaces of Guiana, are enhanced throughout time, representing the accumulated prowess not only of the wearer but also of his ancestors (Im Thurn 1893:196). They have the character of “inalienable possessions,” objects imbued with the intrinsic and ineffable identities of their owners—often a social collectivity—that are never given away and are passed on from one generation to the next within the closed context of clans, descent groups, or moieties (Weiner 1992:6).

Objectivations

Amerindian ontologies contemplate both the possibility of objects turning into subjects and that of subjects turning into objects. Processes of objectivation or objectification are thus the counterpart of the processes of subjectivation/subjectification discussed above. There are at least three ways in which subjects can be turned into objects: through craftsmanship, through ritual action, and through de-subjectivation. The first situation entails the direct production of artifacts, which appear as the materialization of the subjective dimensions of their makers (Erikson, Hugh-Jones, Lagrou, and Santos-Granero, this volume). The situation assumes the form of a material embodiment of nonmaterial intentionalities (Viveiros de Castro 2004a:470). Artifacts constitute the objective expression of the knowledge, skills, and affects of their makers, and thus partake of their makers’ subjectivity (Karsten 1923:12; McCallum 2001:93). This agrees with the Amerindian notion that views makers and their artifacts as being related in terms of filiation. As Els Lagrou, following Joanna Overing (1988), suggests in this volume, artifacts are often described as the “children” of their makers.

Less well acknowledged is the fact that Amerindian people conceive of their actual children as being as much artifactual creations as blowguns and pots. Cashinahua people describe the processes of fabrication of babies and artifacts in similar terms (McCallum 2001:16–17). And the Wayana use the same verb (*tihé*) to refer to the production of both children and objects (Van Velthem 2003:119). Since production is understood as the process through which something is created, made to appear, or made to happen, the Wayana designate all things “fabricated” by a person, including children, hunted animals, and captured enemies, by a single term that translates as “my made things” (Van Velthem 2003:141). This explains why children are often placed in the same category as other personal “belongings” and are said to be “owned” by their parents (Rivière 1969:243; Santos-Granero 1991:211; Belaúnde 2001:121). The artifactual character of Amerindian children is powerfully expressed by Mamaindé parents, who affectionately call daughters undergoing puberty initiation rituals “my thing” (Miller, this volume).

Like children, artifacts are the result of the input of substances and affects belonging to their makers/genitors and, thus, also constitute a sort of extension of their bodies. Urarina baby hammocks constitute the embodiment or materialization of the love and affection of the mother who made it, as well as that of her female kin, who contribute to its making through gifts of selected items that belonged to the hammocks of their own children (Walker, this volume). Cashinahua artifacts and designs constitute, in turn, the “crystallized memory” of the persons who made them, as well as that of the invisible network that links their makers to other human and nonhuman beings (Lagrou, this volume). This characteristic of artifacts was already pointed out by Marcel Mauss (1954) in his essay *The Gift*. In this work, he argues that gift-giving must be reciprocated—both because gifts retain attributes of the person by whom they were given and because they embody the relationship that exists between two persons by virtue of their mutual obligation to receive and reciprocate gifts. This is so because craftsmanship involves a double process of objectivation/subjectivation. By transforming raw matter by means of his or her affects, skills, and intentionality, the maker produces an object that is simultaneously a subject—a subjectivized object that acts as an objectified subject.

The second form of objectivation is related to the sphere of ritual, often shamanic, action. It involves a process of objectivation of supernatural subjectivities, which Jonathan Hill (this volume) has very aptly labeled the “materialization of the occult.” Here, too, the process entails the production

of an object that is simultaneously a subject. In shamanic contexts, subjective relations (fear of death, illness and misfortune, conflict and anger) are turned into tangible materialities under the guise of pathogenic objects (Guzmán-Gallegos and Hill, this volume). Native Amazonians often conceive of shamanic darts as thwarted desires transformed by shamans into harmful objects (Gow 2003). The fabrication of certain ritual objects is frequently viewed as a means of materializing supernatural subjectivities. The ritual operations aimed at giving material shape to such normally invisible entities are surrounded by great secrecy and involve ascetic practices, such as fasting, vigils, and sexual abstinence, as well as numerous supernatural precautions. They often involve singing and chanting, as is the case with Wakuénai shamans who “sing into being” the cord that connects the world of the ancestors to the world of the living (Hill, this volume).

In some instances, artifacts thus materialized are thought to possess strong, independent souls. They are often attributed great agency and extraordinary powers, including the power of self-transformation. Such is the case of Wauja flutes, masks, drums, and other objects embodying powerful *apapaatai* animal spirits, which are made by ritual specialists for the purpose of shamanic curing (Barcelos Neto, this volume). These objectified subjects are thought to possess different degrees of power and agentivity, determined according to the hardness and durability of the materials out of which they are made. Wayana and Miraña masks are also believed to be the embodiment of the powerful, monstrous beings or masters of different animal species that they represent (Van Velthem 2003:125, 198–99; Karadimas 2005:322). For this reason, the masks require very careful ritual handling. Their making, often entailing the efforts of the entire collectivity, involves not only great skills of craftsmanship but also the input of nonvisual elements such as movement, sound, and fragrances. All these elements are indispensable in order to bring to life the powerful supernatural beings that the masks represent and to engage them in ritual operations in favor of the collectivity.

The aim of processes of objectivation through craftsmanship or ritual action is always the production of an object-as-subject. In contrast, the third form of objectivation involves the de-subjectivation of a subjective, or subjectivized, object in order to turn it into an inanimate thing. Such operations are effectuated, for instance, before transferring personal objects or powerful ritual objects to a third party. In such situations, objects are deprived of their subjectivity to prevent them from harming the receiver or

from being used by the receiver to harm the donor. Before passing tobacco tubes and other powerful shamanic artifacts on to someone else, Yanéscha people thoroughly cleanse them (Santos-Granero, this volume). Likewise, Matis men conscientiously scrub curare pots destined to be sold (Erikson, this volume). Native Amazonians often refuse to sell used items unless they have undergone a process of de-subjectivization. Even new items may be manufactured in ways that will prevent their subjectivity from becoming manifest. Thus, Wauja masks made for sale lack eyes, mouths, and/or teeth so that their monstrous subjectivity will not be activated due to lack of proper ritual tending (Barcelos Neto, this volume). In other native Amazonian societies, highly subjectivized artifacts are taken out of public circulation in order to de-subjectivize them. Urarina baby hammocks, carefully kept out of the way by mothers until they rot, are a case in point (Walker, this volume). Sometimes, extremely powerful subjective objects may also be mutilated prior to taking them out of circulation. After ceremonial masks have fulfilled their function, Wayana people deprive them of their feathers before leaving them to rot under the ceiling of the ceremonial house (Van Velthem 2003:214). By doing so, they seek to weaken the masks' subjectivity and render them harmless.

These practices suggest that the life of Amerindian artifacts follows a cycle similar to that of other living beings. They are brought to life through craftsmanship or ritual operations; they actively participate in a variety of economic, social, or ceremonial contexts; and once they are worn out or unable to continue performing the tasks for which they were made, they are left to die or are "magically killed" (Turner, this volume). Often, however, Amerindian artifacts are unable to fully complete their life cycles. When a person dies, most of his or her possessions are burned, destroyed, or abandoned in an effort to de-subjectivize them so that they will not haunt the living. On such occasions, the lives of objects come to an abrupt end. Since artifacts, like people, have a life cycle, they also possess a biography (Kopytoff 1986)—that is, a personal history recounting how and when they came to life, who brought them into being, what life experiences they had, what relations they entertained with other living beings, and, sometimes, how their lives came to an end. This aspect of the occult life of things, which has been insufficiently explored in this volume, could be a very promising area of research, especially key to understanding the connection between artifacts and sociopolitical organization in opulent object regimes.

Objectual Relations

Animic ontologies consider the world to be full of persons, only some of whom are human. Sociality in such contexts encompasses not only humans but also other-than-human persons. Human life is always lived in relationship with these other persons (Harvey 2006:xi). Intersubjective relations between humans and objects, like those between humans and animals, are not exempt from conflicts and power struggles. Indeed, relations between humans and objects are often expressed in terms of power asymmetries. Such asymmetries generally derive from absolute differences in terms of the degree of animacy and agentivity attributed to different life forms. In such contexts, the place of each life form is more or less predetermined in hierarchical classifications such as those found among the Kalapalo (Basso 1985), Achuar (Descola 1992), or Yanesha (Santos-Granero, this volume). The signs of the relations between humans and objects in these hierarchies vary, however, considerably.

Among the Urarina, for instance, human-object relations always entail some kind of subjection of objects by their makers or owners (Walker, this volume). This is particularly the case with respect to powerful objects such as shamanic stone bowls, which need to be tamed and subjected before they can be safely used. For the Urarina, objects are always “subjected companions.” The Matis hold a similar view (Erikson, this volume). Human-object relations are always seen as relations between subjects of unequal standing. They are described either as a relationship between “master/owner” and “wiwa/pet” or as one between “master/owner” and “chu/belongings.” In either case, objects occupy the position of semi-autonomous subordinates. They are, in Erikson’s words, “obedient things.” A weaker version of this conception is found among Yanesha people, who conceive of objects and artifacts as being dependent on the whim of their owners, for they lack true souls, which are the source of full agency and subjectivity (Santos-Granero, this volume). The power of some objects may be greater than that of their owners, but since they lack an autonomous soul, they depend on human intervention for their agency to become activated.

In other native Amazonian societies, some objects are thought to be not only more powerful than humans but also potentially dangerous for human existence. These powerful subjective objects can neither be coerced nor tamed. At most they can be appeased, so that they stop being dangerous to their owners and to the collectivity at large. These objects

occupy a dominant position, demanding much attention from their owners. This is the case with Wauja flutes and masks, which must be given periodic offerings of food lest they become angry and transform into the animals they represent in order to punish their uncaring owners (Barcelos Neto, this volume). The ornaments that Mamaindê shamans obtain from the spirits of the dead are also thought to occupy such a dominant position (Miller, this volume). Shamans must appease them with offerings of manioc beer in order to secure their help when curing patients. A similar process of pacification, this time occurring through singing, takes place in Cashinahua puberty rituals to persuade the predatory lupuna-tree spirit, contained in the stools on which those being initiated sit, to impart its knowledge to them instead of devouring them (Lagrou, this volume).

Human-object relationships are not always hierarchical and predatory. In order to be able to cure, Runa and Zapara shamans must establish friendly relationships with powerful shamanic stones (Guzmán-Gallegos, this volume; Bilhaut 2006). Egalitarian, amicable relationships between shamans and spirit helpers—whether animals, plants, or objects—are not uncommon in native Amazonia, as the examples of the Tapirapé, Matsigenka, Kaingáng, and Juruna attest (Santos-Granero 2007; Stolze Lima 2005:100, 112). In some cases, shamans even claim to interact on a sexual level with spirits as they would with human partners, marrying and having children and families in the other world (Saladin d'Anglure and Morin 1998; Miller, this volume). In brief, in Amerindian ontologies, people and objects may interact in both egalitarian and hierarchical ways. The sign of the relationship mostly depends on the degree of animacy and agentivity attributed to objects.

Native Amazonian ontologies are not only “animic” and “perspectival.” They also have a strong “constructional” dimension. Amerindian constructivism is particularly salient in mythical accounts narrating the creation of the world and the different life forms that populate it. It conceives of all living beings as composite entities, made up of the bodies and parts of bodies of a diversity of life forms, among which artifacts occupy a prominent place. According to these cosmologies, at the beginning there were only people and their artifacts—and sometimes, only artifacts. These artifacts are conceived of as the primordial building blocks out of which the bodies of people, and even gods, were first created. In this Amerindian view, artifacts fall on the side of the “natural” or the given—they were the first divine creations—whereas humans, animals, and plants fall on

the side of the “cultural” or the constructed. In Amerindian ontologies, Culture—as understood in Western thought—preceded Nature, whereas what we understand as Nature appears as a cultural construct.

It can thus be said that Amerindians are not only intellectual “bricoleurs,” as Claude Lévi-Strauss (1967) proposed in *The Savage Mind*, but, above all, that they conceive of all creative acts as taking place in the key of “bricolage.” All visible and invisible occurrences in the world have originated through processes entailing the deconstitution and reconstitution of the bodies of ancient demiurges and primordial humans. Present-day living beings are the result of this original act of bricolage in which objects, and particularly artifacts, played a crucial role. In Amerindian constructional cosmologies, creation is always a process entailing the destruction and re-creation of bodies. In other words, it is always about composite, namely artifactual anatomies.

Much has been said about the transformational character of bodies in native Amazonian ontologies. Bodies, it is argued, are highly unstable and prone to transformation and metamorphoses. Corporeal existence is extremely fluid. Amerindian body-making ritual techniques are meant to fix human bodies in their humanity. Other ritual practices are meant to fix the bodies of nonhuman beings in order to prevent them from transforming into more dangerous beings. Offerings, songs, and proper rules of behavior are some among the many Amerindian practices aimed at hindering objects from turning into rabid animals, animals from transforming into predatory monsters, or plants from becoming blood-sucking creatures. This capacity for transformation, I argue, derives to a large extent from the composite character of all life forms. Humans are made out of artifacts or plant and fish species; animals are made out of fish and a variety of artifacts; plants are made out of animals and artifacts. Designs are made out of boas or the language of spirits; flutes are made out of forest fruits, birds, and animals; songs are made out of the divinities’ breath or the smoke of their cigars. These composite, often artifactual life forms are thought to be held together by a dominant affect, capacity, or habitus that makes them what they are.

Often, however, these anatomical arrangements are extremely unsteady. It suffices for an animal spirit to steal the personal ornaments of a human being to induce a change of perspective and thus the transformation of the affected person into the animal that attacked him or her. By simply answering the call of an aquatic spirit, a person opens the

door to becoming a spirit of the same category and thus being abducted (Santos-Granero 2006). Thus a hunter who kills too many individuals of the same species runs the risk of inducing the transformation of that animal into human form and becoming the subject of the animal's attacks. The possibility, inherent in all beings, of imposing their point of view onto other beings also derives from their composite character. I suggest, however, that the "struggle between points of view," which Stolze Lima (1999:48) posits as the crux of Amerindian perspectivism, is not as much a struggle to impose one's point of view onto that of other life forms as it is a perpetual effort to prevent one's point of view from becoming tainted with that of others. This is particularly true with regard to human beings, the only beings that are fully aware of the perspectival nature of reality (Stolze Lima 1999:50; Santos-Granero 2006:74–75). Since in Amerindian ontologies it is the body that shapes consciousness, most efforts aimed at preserving the integrity of the human point of view center around the body. The Amerindian obsession with body-making and body-shaping techniques, including the ingestion of sublime substances—such as coca, tobacco, and hallucinogens—and the use of particular body ornaments, is aimed at internalizing the "moral" and "civil" values that make humans human (Londoño Sulkin 2005; Seeger 1975). Through these means, native Amazonians seek to firmly anchor in their composite, artifactual bodies a properly human point of view.

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Notes

1. In Arjun Appadurai's seminal work on the circulation of commodities, things are said to have a "social life" insofar as they acquire value through exchange, that is, through circulation in networks of relations that are both socially and politically defined. It is this argument that, according to Appadurai (1986:3), "justifies the conceit that commodities, like persons, have social lives." When we refer to the social life of things in this work, we do not use the phrase as a metaphor, but rather as a notion that reflects native Amazonian perceptions.

2. This conception of the world, which at first glance appears to be similar to the notion of "commodity fetishism" developed by Karl Marx and elaborated by Michael Taussig (1980), is, nonetheless, its opposite. Whereas native Amazonians conceive of people and things as being always the product of social relations, members of capitalist societies perceive the products of social relations (time, space, land, labor) as things disconnected from social life.

3. Objects lacking subjectivity, will, and intentionality may also have agency in Alfred Gell's (1998) or Marilyn Strathern's (1999) sense, insofar as they can cause events to happen and can have an effect on a variety of entities ("patients"), including people. Here, however, we use agency in the more classical sense of a subject's conscious capacity to act upon or exert power over other beings and the surrounding world. Such capacity varies depending on the subject's degree of subjectivity, which from a native Amazonian point of view is always associated with the amount of soul substance he or she is believed to possess.

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