

# The Return of Things to Amazonian Anthropology: A Review

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Amazonian societies, as Stephen Hugh-Jones remarks, are commonly not only assumed to be ‘object-poor’ and characterized as such, but the study of material culture itself has long appeared to have fallen out of fashion with regional specialists (2009: 33). Whether this is, like Neil Whitehead suggested (2011), due to its association with salvation anthropology, a reaction to the particular emphasis put on it by early researchers of the region, or the international lack of awareness of the more recent works on objects in terms of (indigenous) art and aesthetics (e.g. Münzel 1988; Baer, Gutiérrez Estévez & Münzel 2001; Suhrbier, Ferreira & Kawall 2000), the general shortage of ethnographies and comprehensive publications on material culture in lowland South America justifies this assertion. Nevertheless, an increased interest in material culture within the anthropology of the South American lowlands,<sup>1</sup> and particularly Amazonia, has recently manifested itself in numerous studies and conference symposia (Brightman 2012). This drastic turnaround becomes all the more intriguing considering that in the early days of research on the South American lowlands material culture held a notably different, more crucial, position for anthropologists and ethnographers. As a component of ‘cultural inventories’ compiled for newly encountered groups believed to vanish soon (e.g. Tupí-Guaraní: Métraux 1928; regions such as Guiana: Roth 1924; 1929 or the Rio Negro: Koch-Grünberg 1909) or as exhibits gathered for museums and collectors (Krause 2004), material culture played a central role in the engagement with the region. As more and more publications pile up, we would like to seize the opportunity to discuss the form that the revived interest in the former key theme has taken.

The recent works on the topic comprise a wide range of ethnographic material and theoretical interests, including publications on specific objects such as masks (Goulard & Karadimas 2011) and wind instruments (Hill & Chaumeil 2011b), Amazonian object regimes (Santos-Granero 2009b), comparisons between Andean and lowland approaches to artefacts (Neto 2008), and the modes of creation/crafting and subjectification of

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1 Lowland South America is used here in terms of non-Andean South America, including the Chibchan and Chochoan speaking Amerindian groups south of the Mesoamerican linguistic area (Campbell, Kaufman & Smith-Stark 1986). Amazonia refers to the broader Amazon-Orinoco basin, including the Guiana land mass.



objects as well as on the related practices of de-subjectification and disassembly of objects (Velthem 2003; Augustat 2006). Further publications are concerned with things in myth (Hill 2011b), the role of objects in asymmetric power relations with external agents (national societies: Vidal 1992. NGOs: Brightman 2012; Conklin 2010. Inter-ethnic relations: Pétesch 2011; Walker 2012) and with objects as examples and visualizations of ontological frameworks (Descola 2010). Three edited volumes among the recent publications concerned with objects in lowland South American societies stand out on account of the collective effort of their contributors to bring together ethnographic findings that put the study of material culture within Amazonian anthropology on renewed foundations. Assembling examples of the uses and meanings of artefacts in Amerindian societies and of their position within the cosmological frameworks, the authors prove the alleged indifference of Amerindian groups towards things – a term often preferred for its comparative lack of conceptual baggage (Henare, Holbraad & Wastell 2007) - to be based on the ethnographer's bias rather than in the beliefs held in the societies he may be working amongst (Santos-Granero 2009b).

### **Multiple ways of thinghood**

The first collected volume, *The occult life of things: Native Amazonian theories of materiality and personhood* (Santos-Granero 2009a), breaks with the position of taking things and the related ontological beliefs about them for granted and takes a radical and new stand towards things. Combining ten ethnographic case studies on things in native Amazonian societies and a thoughtful and provoking introduction by Santos-Granero, the authors strive to draw attention to Amazonian understandings of things as genuine social agents and seek to include this aspect into the theorization of Amazonian cosmologies, concepts of personhood and economies of social relations. With this attempt, the authors successfully break ground for a new way of thinking about the topic, as several renowned scholars of the field have acknowledged (Seeger 2010; Rodríguez & Hill 2011; Whitehead 2011).

Neither concerned with specific types of artefacts nor contemplating the term and topic of 'material culture' as such, the authors aim to capture native theories of materiality and the vivid participation of things in Amerindian everyday life, ritual and myth (Santos-Granero 2009b). The contributors of *The occult life of things* show that images and designs (Lagrou 2009), songs (Hill 2009), names (Turner 2009), natural objects (Walker 2009), human manufactured artefacts (Neto 2009; Erikson 2009), and textual objects (Guzmán-Gallegos 2009) are objects or things that are not only embedded in the social and cultural practices of native Amazonians but are also agents in social relations with the latter. We learn thus that objects are not only good to think with but that they may also be thinking subjects (Brightman 2012: 555).

Since social relations require subjectivities and persons, the understanding of the animacy, subjectivity, agency and intentionality of things comes into focus as well. The contributions agree unanimously in their emphasis on the variety and plurality of theories of materiality and the respective conceptualizations of the agency and subjectivity of things (Santos-Granero 2009c; Hugh-Jones 2009): agentivity may be seen as a latent potential that needs to be intentionally activated, as in the case of curare production among the Matis (Erikson 2009), pan-pipes among the Yanésha (Santos-Granero 2009c), song and music among the Wakuénai (Hill 2009); or it may take the form of somatic diffusion from the owner's soul stuff to their possessions (Miller 2009; Walker 2009; Lagrou 2009). Moreover, not all objects can be understood as possessing agency, subjectivity or intentionality and even fewer have all of the three characteristics (Guzmán-Gallegos 2009; Hugh-Jones 2009; Neto 2009). The careful and attentive use and understanding of these concepts parallels a trend to reformulate the use of 'agency' in recent anthropological writing; by means of its separation from and connection with categories such as subjectivity, personhood and humanity (High 2010; Brightman, Grotti & Ulturgasheva 2012). This reformulation differs significantly from the understanding of artefacts as 'secondary agents' who's agency

[...] remains irreducibly human in origin [...] while] things gain social agency insofar as they are embedded in social relationships between persons [and] depend on the social relation between humans

as Henare, Holbraad & Wastel (2007: 21) summarize Gell's concept of agency, which Gell put forward in *Art and agency* (Gell 1998: 21; Hoskins 2008). Likewise, neither the meanings and 'trajectories of things' as facilitated by human subjects (Appadurai 2006: 5) nor the production of subject and object by mental acts of objectification as proposed by Miller (1995) quite fit in with the recent works on Amazonian notions of materiality. Rather, the focus on things as agents in social relations stimulates further reflections on the economies of relations in which things are embedded. Though Amerindian object regimes vary considerably, some common configurations of the economies of relation between things and humans can be made out. Hugh-Jones points out that these are related to the respective social structures and cosmologies of a group. By way of example, he contrasts inalienable objects that can only be owned and used by their makers, such as is the case among the Matis (Erikson 2009), and collectively owned objects among the Kayapo (Turner 2009). He goes on to suggest that

[...] the 'fit' between the domain of objects and materiality and other social structural and cosmological features suggests that attention to different object regimes might itself provide new insights into some wider similarities among and differences between Amazonian peoples (2009: 55f).

Santos-Granero relates these to the degrees of animacy and agentivity, which in their degree condition the need to manage the relations to objects (2009b). In some groups, as Erikson shows for the Matis and Santos-Granero shows for the Yanéscha, things may be understood as having low or human-dependent agentivity and are thus subordinated to the will of or the activation by their human owners or makers (Erikson 2009; Santos-Granero 2009c). In other cases, certain things are considered to possess more agency and power than humans and to affect health, lives, and the ability to act on the world of the latter (Miller 2009; Neto 2009; Lagrou 2009). For this reason, they need to be tamed (shamanic stone bowls: Walker 2009), kept at good humour, and cared for regularly (flutes: Neto 2009). Though this is not always the case, a few relations appear to be characterized by equality or friendship (shamanic stones: Guzmán-Gallegos 2009) rather than by asymmetric power constellations such as subjection or domination (Santos-Granero 2009b).

Degrees of agency and the resulting configurations of the relations between things and humans are not essentially new to Amazonian ethnography. As early as 1973, Ellen Basso wrote about the distinct levels of animacy of different things indicated through suffixes in Kalapalo (1973, 1985) and others, such as David Guss (1989) for the Yekuana and Lucia Hussak van Velthem (1988, 2003) for the Wayana-Apalai, worked on the necessity to tame or dominate powerful or dangerous natural materials before they could be used.

What certainly does differentiate *The occult life of things* both from earlier and from most contemporary publications is the systematic approach of putting Amazonian notions of things at the centre of attention. This allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the variations and similarities of native Amazonian object regimes and as a result gives a first impression of how those object regimes fit into more generalized theories, such as Amazonian concepts of personhood and agency (Miller 2009; Lagrou 2009), the body (Hugh-Jones 2009; Santos-Granero 2009c; Turner 2009), the predator-pet-paradox (Erikson 2009), and Descola's animism or Viveiros de Castro's perspectivism (Santos-Granero 2009b). The critique of the latter, which originates from the ethnographic findings of the contributors, has been an initial impulse for the collected volume. The authors criticize the undue focus of Viveiros de Castro who, in his writing and theorization, concentrates on the relations between humans, animals and spirits in Amerindian thought and only assigns a position of minor importance to things (Santos-Granero 2009b; Hugh Jones 2009). With their work, the authors of *The occult life of things* intend to broaden the narrow focus of that which Erikson and Santos-Granero call 'radical perspectivism' and which presupposes interaction between "equals in disguise" (Erikson 2009: 185); they argue for ethnographic attention to the nuanced differences in Amazonian cosmological frameworks and the types of relationships between humans and things (Santos-Granero 2009c). Consequently, they extend existing theories by a virtually fundamental aspect and connect the latter to the wider discussions on the politics of relationships.

### The multiple lives of wind instruments and masks

The two other aforementioned edited volumes, Jonathan Hill's and Jean-Pierre Chaumeil's *Burst of breath: Indigenous ritual wind instruments in lowland South America* (2011a) and *Masques des hommes, visages des dieux: regards d'Amazonie* (2011), a collection of essays edited by Jean-Pierre Goulard and Dimitri Karadimas, follow a fairly different agenda. Both focus on particular types of objects in various regions and different societies. The contributors, who are predominantly concerned with ritual contexts, explore two modes of the objectification of other-than-human beings which are different, though at times complementary. *Masques des hommes* is an investigation of the use of masks in ritual performance, their aesthetic value and the context of their production and deconstruction as well as of their histories (Goulard 2011a). The editors Karadimas and Goulard aim to show that masks have an equally prominent position in lowland South America as they do in other parts of the world, an insight which up to now has not received adequate attention (Goulard 2011a; Karadimas 2011b). In order to do this and simultaneously contribute to a new body of work, the authors pursue a twofold strategy: on the one hand, they introduce the diversity of designs, contexts of production, ritual use, and regional distribution of masks and on the other hand, they produce a shared understanding by posing the same questions to their ethnographic data (Goulard 2011a). Among other things, they inquire about the cosmological knowledge necessary for and the constraints of the production of and care for masks (Goulard 2011a).

It follows from the contribution that masks are versatile. They function, for example, as ethnical markers for the Karajá (Pétesch 2011), as tourist art (Brohan 2011), or they express specific modes of relationships with Others. Starting from the scarcity of masks among Tupi groups, Fausto argues that visualization is an uncommon mode of objectification among them since masks imply reciprocal relationships and continuity, while trophies in the predominantly predatory disposition of Tupi speakers do not (Fausto 2011). This points to an interlocking of forms of modes of objectification and agency towards human and non-human Others. Therefore, a variety of non-human beings may be represented by the masks or temporarily inhabit them. The latter may, for example, comprise the spirits of the dead, as for the Matis and Chané (Erikson 2011; Villar & Bossert 2011), the sickening and healing spirits known as *apapaatai* (Velthem 2011; Neto 2011), demiurges or immortals (Mansutti Rodríguez 2011a; Goulard 2011b) or, as is the case for the Miraña (Karadimas 2011a), animal spirits. But masks are also icons of change and contact with national society and have acquired an additional or changing meaning as a consequence of the reanimation of their ritual use after contact shock (Erikson 2011) or due to contact with external agents such as collectors or tourists (Brohan 2011; Pétesch 2011).

Though variation is accounted for and highlighted as a critical aspect of a comparative understanding of masks, the authors also recognize similarities on a cognitive and

cosmological level. For one, masks have in common the way in which they pose a cognitive problem, or as Alfred Gell puts it in Fausto (2011), the manner in which masks constitute ‘cognitive traps’ characterized by ‘notorious instability’ (Goulard 2011a). Obviously, masks are never exactly those whom they depict, but neither are they those who appear to be hidden beneath them. They are always on the verge of being or revealing something or someone else (Goulard 2011a). In addition, the editors follow Anne-Christine Taylor’s lead (2010) in looking at masks as specific types of envelope/cover that allow taking the perspective of the depicted entity temporarily (Karadimas 2011b). They hence contribute to the material on the central perspectivist concern of Amerindian groups’ belief about shared interiority and differentiating exteriors.

With a similar strategy of looking at wind instruments in different settings and regions of lowland South America, the selection of essays in *Burst of breath* evokes an impression of a more moderate diversity. In this publication, the authors aim to explore the meaning of wind instruments in the reproduction of the social and as means for communication in ritual and secular contexts. While allowing for consciousness of the diversity of wind instruments, their use and meanings, the contributors are also concerned with the central role hearing and sound play in Amazonian societies and with what amounts to their often sacred status. They are careful not to attribute these similarities too strictly to an overarching theory or historical developments; however, the Arawakan migration and the entailed processes of exchange and incorporation have certainly contributed to the similarities encountered all over the region (Hill & Chaumeil 2011b).

While accounts of the changing meanings or use of wind instruments can be found in the volume (Alemán 2011; Augustat 2011), overall familiar themes such as variations of the *jurupari* complex (Mansutti Rodriguez 2011b; Beaudet 2011; Prinz 2011; Journet 2011), gender relations (Cruz Mello 2011; Menezes Bastos 2011; Brightman 2011), and the origin or acquisition of instruments from mythical creators or heroes (Fiorini 2011; Prinz 2011) are also reflected in the ethnographic case studies. The classic interest in the role of wind instruments as communicative devices of nonverbal communication has also been taken up (Chaumeil 2011). The authors pursue the meaning of wind instruments in settings and rituals concerned with interethnic contact (Cruz Mello 2011; Menezes Bastos 2011; Piedade 2011; Ruedas 2011) and with spirit beings (Brightman 2011; Fiorini 2011; Wright 2011; Chaumeil 2011). They find that wind instruments may not only be used to communicate with spirit beings, but that these may also be inhabiting the wind instruments themselves and communicate through them. In accordance with the findings in *The occult life of things*, wind instruments may not only represent such beings, they may also incorporate them or be attributed an agency of their own (Chaumeil 2011; Wright 2011; Brightman 2011). Hill, who has also contributed to *The occult life of things*, and Chaumeil express an interest in wind instruments “as actors and persons”

(Hill & Chaumeil 2011: 30b) and several other authors mention the powerful agentivity these instruments possess due to their origin from the transformed body parts of mythical heroes, among other things (Brightman 2011; Fiorini 2011). If one was to look for agency as an indicator for a powerful subjectivity, the case studies on instruments reveal similar economies of relations as discussed for *The occult life of things*. By way of example, Chaumeil mentions the nurturing of flutes as part of a reciprocal exchange for game (2011) and Menezes Bastos, Fiorini and Piedade expand on the necessity of controlling, taming, and humouring powerful and dangerous flutes by playing and alimending them (Menezes Bastos 2011; Fiorini 2011; Piedade 2011). These could be seen as examples for practices which concern asymmetric power relations and involve things with subjectivities and high degrees of agency. However, the authors and editors of *Burst of breath* and likewise those of *Masques des hommes* do not take up agentivity and animacy as unifying perspectives on masks or wind instruments. The agency of objects and things appears to be of interest with regard their sociological function rather than in terms of their meaning within the cosmological order.

### **Current concerns in the study of Amazonian things**

The approaches towards things can be distinguished by the different strategies and aims the three publications follow. Neither of the three – and not many other recent publications on things in lowland South America, come to think of it – intends to give an inventory or an account of things for the sake of material culture studies as an end in itself. Even though every contribution may by itself put a type of thing or an object regime at the centre of its attention, taken together the collections of essays serve purposes of their own. While *The occult life of things* primarily displays an interest in summarizing the diverse native Amazonian object regimes under the notion of agency and personhood, *Burst of breath* and *Masques des hommes* illustrate the diversity of meaning and use that occurs with presumably similar objects. Above and beyond this, the first publication predominantly concerns itself with the role of things in cosmological frameworks and consequently with their position in the currently influential theories of the region. The authors' work thus functions as an amplifying critique that points to an alternative version of perspectivism. Conversely, the strategy and purpose in *Burst of breath* and *Masques des hommes* is one of collecting and compiling elementary contributions for the current (re-)foundation of the study of the respective objects. Thus, the motivation for both lies in drawing together data that has hitherto not been collected and reflected on in its entirety. The contributions give a panoramic impression of the meaning and use of the respective types of objects but simultaneously show that any attempts at simplifying systematization would unjustly restrict its breadth.

The renewed interest in the study of specific objects, such as masks and wind instruments, and in fitting things into the wider theoretical frameworks of the region

has given important impulses for future research. However, it is not the only concern flagged up in the publications covered by this review, nor for other recent work on the region.

Hugh-Jones calls attention to the fact that further research could be carried out on the relations between social structure, object regimes, and cosmologies as a nexus. This would allow us to learn more about the patterned differences between groups with regard to their orientation towards egalitarian or hierarchical forms of social organization and material ideologies and the relations between these (Hugh-Jones 2009). Systematic approaches to these issues are much called for, as is more work on intra- and inter-regional exchange relations such as they obtain between the lowlands and the Andes (Neto 2008). In a similar vein, the authors of the recent publication *Animism and rainforest and tundra* set out to connect hitherto uncomparated areas of material culture for the purpose of drawing attention to the similarities and differences in material ideologies between the regions (Brightman, Grotti & Ulturgasheva 2012). This could be fruitfully intensified by explicit comparative accounts of these and other regions.

Apart from highlighting geographic changeability and interdependence, it reminds us of the processes of the adaption and change of particular objects or of their treatment, and of object regimes which should be examined in order to better contextualize current ethnographic findings (Tipiti: Carneiro 2000; Hugh-Jones 2009. *Masques*: Erikson 2011. *Plants*: Kohn 2007b. *Masks in Museums*: Augustat 2006). This does not only apply to processes of change but also to continuity. Walker and Conklin both showed in their work on the Urarina (Walker 2012; 2013) and Wari' (Conklin 2010) how the treatment of and attitude towards commercial goods may express a fit with and a continuation of native material ideologies and the politics of relations in which those are embedded. Those might, for example, include gender relations, as Walker illustrates (2013), or relationships with enemies (Conklin 2010), or with spirit beings (Walker 2012).

Those are but a few aspects which could be pursued in future research. However, it seems like things have not merely returned to Amazonian anthropology but that they have rather gained a new, important position in the analysis of the politics of relations with nonhuman Others – one that is equal to the position hitherto occupied by entities like the spirits or animals– and may therefore feature centrally in future research.

### **The next big 'thing'**

It is not difficult to predict that things and object regimes are most likely the next big 'thing' in Amazonian anthropology. The contributions to recent works on material culture may provide incentives to look more closely at Amerindian notions of things and their constitutive meaning for native cosmologies. So far, still rather few works that have the material culture of Amerindian groups as their central topic of reflection have

been published. Notable exceptions to this are, on the one hand, Philippe Descola and his fellow contributors who, from a more theoretically concerned perspective and by means of the exhibition *La fabrique des images: visions du monde et formes de la représentation* (2010) and a publication of the same title, presented selected objects from across the world as illustrations for Descola's four basic ontologies and the corresponding notions of things. On the other hand, Lucia Hussak van Velthem's *O belo é a fera* (2003) on the material culture of the Wayana-Apalai and David Guss' *To weave and sing: Art, symbol, and narrative in the South American rain forest* (1989) on the Yekuana stand out for their ethnographic focus on things.

A more extensive proliferation of works on the topic may hence be expected and looked forward to. This would certainly be desirable since many related issues, such as gender or linguistics, have so far only been briefly touched upon and have not yet found systematic attention. Museums and exhibitions are, for example, one context for treatments and conceptions of things that could allow for new contributions from an Amazonian anthropological perspective. Considering the various challenges associated with, dangers arising from, and taboos concerning things in Amazonia that have surfaced in the recent publications – especially with regard to masks and flutes – one should think that museums and exhibition activities would also appear in a different light. What conflicts and what solutions do arise between indigenous groups and museums regarding the issue? There is room for negotiation both on the part of the native communities from which the pieces originated and on that of the exhibition planners, who could demonstrate creativity and consideration towards the possibilities and modes of cooperation and exhibition design that take the meanings and norms that native communities attach to things into account (Augustat 2011; Van Broekhoven, Buijs & Hovens 2010). Moreover, a careful consideration of linguistic means and differentiations in relation to things may be a productive field of work. So far, several scholars have shown that this is one of the first places to look for clues about degrees of animacy and agency and for understanding of differences between humans and other beings (Santos-Granero 2009b; Walker 2009; Turner 2009; Hill 2011a; Alemán 2011). Linguistic analysis may further impel us to pay more attention to the way we use certain terms and concepts, such as object and subject, and to the underlying ontological assumptions which may be transported together with them (Course 2010). Kohn uses a semiotic approach based on the works of Pierce for the methodical treatment and understanding of relations with non-humans in his research; he is also using a linguistically inspired concept, but diverges creatively from a “linguocentric representational framework” (Kohn 2007a: 5). So far Kohn has applied this new semiotic approach mostly to relations with animals and plants (Kohn 2007a; 2007b; 2013); however, it is almost certain that this approach could lead to highly interesting and influential results if applied not only to natural objects but also to artefacts.

Thus, future work may allow for a better understanding of the meaning of things in native Amerindian thought and unveil further misconceptions and conceptual superimposition in our thinking about things (Santos-Granero 2009b; Villar & Bossert 2011). Especially with regard to the latter, Amazonian anthropology may make a genuine contribution to the more general discussion and the growing interest in things and objects in anthropology, the social sciences, and philosophy (Ingold 2012; Olsen 2007).

It is another question to ask whether and to what extent the almost simultaneously emerging interests and discussions in the humanities and Amazonian anthropology could or should be seen as connected. While speculation remains about why things and object regimes have come into the focus of Amazonian anthropology just now, we may expect forthcoming publications to further fill the void and to produce even more fascinating insights into the role of material culture in Amerindian cosmologies. This is a process to which the aforementioned publications have contributed by providing a solid foundation and by serving as future standard works. After occupying a predominant position in the beginnings of the region's studies, things have come full circle and eventually returned to Amazonian anthropology. Today, they are of interest not primarily as the objectified manifestations of local cultures or the aesthetics of indigenous art, but because they serve as theoretical challenges in the reconsideration of basic conceptions of Amerindian and Western cosmologies.

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