

A call for a bridge between 'ontography' and material culture studies

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On responding to a [review](#) of his edited book, written by Danny Miller on this Material Culture blog site a few months subsequent to the publication of *Thinking Through Things* (2007), Martin Holbraad glosses what he perceives to be the crucial difference between his 'ontographic' camp and material culture studies, one, as he argues, curiously motivated by 'decency' on both sides. "Crudely put", he says to Miller, "I think your decency leads you to 'embrace' your informants, and that puts you on the spot when it comes to articulating the assumptions that might allow you to do so.

Conversely, my concern for decency leads me to remain silent about my informants, because, as with God, I feel I cannot presume to say anything 'about' them." While Holbraad argues that we should return to 'analytical innocence', where distinctions between materiality and culture, ideas and things, artefacts and imaginings, obscure more than elucidate, Miller accuses Holbraad of skirting the importance of a prior materiality upon which all anthropology should ultimately base itself. As he says, "material culture is not a subset of social anthropology but more the other way around. Material culture is a condition for anthropology itself"; we should by now be past these divisions. More importantly, he also says of Holbraad's chapter on powder and power, the author's emphasis on dissolving the concept/thing divide has the paradoxical result of ignoring what seems to be most important to the ethnography – the 'being' of the diviner. Thus, for Miller 'silence' here seems counter-productive to the task of anthropology.

In my view we need to be prepared to accept the premises of both approaches – an ontographic one, where we allow persons, objects, and things to be fully 'subjects' of their relations, and a more material culture oriented one, where we try to understand how this 'work' of culture, that is, the achievement of such relations through the physical and material world, creates a particular kind of thinking and feeling person. In a recent panel that Nico Tassi and myself convened at this year's ASA conference in Bristol, we aimed to provoke and expand on some of these debates. Our contention is that in an analysis of religious objects and artefacts, we must be both radically relativist and grounded in our common understanding of humanity, allowing for a plurality of 'worlds', but also attempting to unwind how these 'worlds' can come about and be experienced through 'things', experiences which far from merely conceptual, have an undeniably phenomenological referent. In particular, we want to stress the importance of movement and transformation, as a means of grasping how such worlds 'become' and are continuously 'reborn' (Ingold, 2006).

In an article that re-examines the notion of 'animism', so typically problematic in anthropological history, Tim Ingold sets out to "recover that original openness to the world in which the people whom we (that is, western-trained ethnologists) call animist find the meaning of life" (2006:11). In such ontologies, he tells us, life is not an emanation but a generation of being, "a world that is not

pre-ordained but incipient, forever on the verge of the actual” (ibid: 11-12). Things, such as art forms, or indeed ritual or religious objects, do not represent the world, they make it visible. But in order to understand this we must also reconceive of the person, and especially, give primacy to his or her movement in the world.

We agree with Ingold that the person is not a self-contained entity that interacts with a pre-made world, but a being that actively brings this world forth via their movement in it: in short, the world becomes known to the knower through their ‘entanglement’, social and material, where being is knowing, and vice-versa. And thus, in this sense persons and things simply are their movement, their paths, their becoming. When we speak of notions of ‘agency’ and ‘materiality’, we must acknowledge that very different ontologies have the capacity not to attribute agency to inanimate matter, but to recognize that human beings are as material as they are spiritual, social and biological. As Toren has argued: “Our ideas are constituted in material relations with one another and we communicate with one another in and through the materiality of the world, its manifold objects, and awareness of our common humanity” (1999: 5). Thus, she continues, “our understanding of what is material is always mediated by our relations to others and likewise, the material stuff of the peopled world confirms our ideas of what those relations are or should be” (ibid). Our subjective and objective perspectives always guarantee each other, she says. Mind, body, and the world of ‘things’ are not in dialectical relation to each other. Rather, by tracing out our paths in the world, they come into being as aspects of one process.

In a project that Nico Tassi and I are currently developing together, we wish to emphasize the processual character of human religious experience, one which cannot do without materiality. Objects are not imbued with meanings or intentions as much as they enable these meanings and intentions, which, latent or emergent, are fundamental to a human relationship with the ‘divine’ or the ‘transcendent’. We thus propose a thoroughly relational approach to religious materiality which gives primacy to the achievement of these human-spirit/god/divine relations and the ‘work’ that this achievement implies. Movement, we contend, is key, indissociable to communication; not communication as a manifestation of intent predicated on reference, but as a process of creating selves, deities and things. “The problem with objectivism”, argues Alf Hornborg (2006:27), “is the notion of a ‘knowledge’ that is not situated as part of a relation”. The problem with constructivism is that in recognizing the ‘constructing subject’ (ibid: 28), it fails to acknowledge the subject’s embeddedness and relationality, assuming instead a real world ‘out there’ which the subject re-orders according to their schema.

We thus aim to merge the concerns of the ‘quiet revolution’ put in motion by anthropologists such as Viveiros de Castro and Martin Holbraad, with a focus on being-in-the-world, which enables us to understand the importance of movement and ‘becoming’ to the relationship between materiality and the divine.

References

- Hornborg, A., 2006, ‘Animism, fetichism and objectivism as strategies for knowing (or not knowing)’, *Ethnos*, 71:1, 21-32.
- Ingold, T., 2006, ‘Rethinking the animate, re-animating thought’, *Ethnos*, 71:1, 9-20.
- Miller, D. ‘Thinking Through Things’, materialworldblog.com, posted 14 December 2006, and comments by Martin Holbraad, posted 3 March, 2007

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Toren, C., 1999, *Mind, Materiality and History: Explorations in Fijian Ethnography*. London: Routledge.

Editor's note: this topic was also recently discussed on the blog Savage Minds, by guest blogger Olumide Abimbola (<http://savageminds.org/2009/05/08/towards-an-ontological-anthropology/>.)