



religions

Art, Shamanism and Animism

Edited by

Robert J. Wallis and Max Carocci

Printed Edition of the Special Issue Published in *Religions*

Art, Shamanism and Animism

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Editors

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About the Editors

Robert J. Wallis is a Staff Tutor and Lecturer in Art History at the Open University. He is interested in the archaeology and anthropology of art and religion, focusing on prehistoric rock art; the re-presentation of the past in the present, especially by today's Heathens, Pagans, and neo-Shamans; and the art and archaeology of falconry. His books include *Shamans/neo-shamans* (Routledge 2003), *Sacred Sites, Contested Rites/Rights: Contemporary Pagan Engagements with Archaeological Monuments* (with Jenny Blain, Sussex Academic Press 2007), and *Historical Dictionary of Shamanism* (with Graham Harvey, Rowman & Littlefield 2016). His articles have been published in such journals as *Antiquity*, *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, *Folklore*, *Time and Mind*, *World Archaeology*, and *World Art*. He is currently co-authoring a book on contemporary racist and anti-racist Heathenry and editing an anthology with Bloomsbury entitled *The Art and Archaeology of Human Relations with Birds of Prey*.

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Editorial

Introduction to the Special Issue *Art, Shamanism and Animism*

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Art, shamanism and animism are mutable, contested terms which, when brought together, present a highly charged package. Our aim here is not to rehearse the historical origins of these concepts, changing debates over their definition, nor to attempt to resolve (as if such a project is possible) what art, shamanism and animism actually are. Years of academic debate have not yet come to an agreement, and we want to underline the historical, political and epistemological contingency of these concepts. The merit of the discussions to date is that some scholars have stopped asking questions about what these phenomena *are*, to recognise their enduring if variously understood *currency* nonetheless, to adopt *contextual* analyses and to explore what art, shamanism and animism *do* in diverse and specific instances. As debates around these three terms continue to generate interest and strong opinions, we felt the urgency to explore them together in an unprecedented exercise which, to this date, has only been attempted with reference to selected disciplines, periods or regions (e.g., [Fabietti 2014](#); [King and McGranaghan 2020](#); [Porr and Moro-Abadía 2021](#)).

The respective turns to materiality (e.g., [Conneller 2012](#); [Fowler 2013](#)), ontology (e.g., [Holbraad and Pedersen 2017](#)) and relational personhood (e.g., [Watts 2013](#); [Astor-Aguilera and Harvey 2020](#)) over the last decades have impacted across the humanities and social sciences, permeating disciplinary boundaries and their territories. Scholars are now thinking about the cultural situatedness and relative values associated with objects and images—all things made or modified by humans for diverse social ends, which may be loosely termed ‘art’ (e.g., [Ingold 2013](#); [Harrison-Buck and Hendon 2018](#)). New materialism recognises that materials are not inert, passive and only affective when humans do things with them to consider not only how artists and materials interact, but how the rhythm of intra-action between the various agents in processes of making, human and non-human, affect one another and are transformed anew (e.g., [Jones and Cochrane 2018](#)). ‘New animism’ challenges the hegemony of naturalism and recognises perspectival and other indigenous ontologies in which humans attempt to maintain good, respectful relations with diverse, agentive ‘persons’ in a wider-than-human social world. This has transformed Taylor’s ‘old’ idea of a pre-religious and incorrect ‘primitive’ belief investing objects with souls, to collapse modern dichotomies between subjects/objects, minds/bodies, matter/spirit (e.g., [Harvey 2005](#)). Thought on shamanism has shifted away from issues of origins, geography, taxonomy and interior states of consciousness to recognising shamans as social mediators between human and other-than-human communities (e.g., [Harvey and Wallis 2016](#)). Shamans aim to adjust themselves to a unicultural (all persons are encultured) level in order to engage with a range of multinatural other-than-human bodies (all persons are embodied differently). Shamanistic practices are embodied and material, and ‘art’ and other ‘things’ are agentive, indeed collaborative, in shamans’ active accomplishment of meaning.

We are, then, in this Special Issue of *Religions*, interested in critically examining current thinking in the range of fields which have engaged with art, shamanism and animism in the first decades of the twenty-first century. As scholars are coming to an understanding of art through an analysis of the specific contingencies in which human-made artefacts assume certain meanings through their manufacture, use, fruition and/or retirement, our contributors show a concern with ‘when’ and ‘how’ objects and representations may exceed

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conventional understandings of 'art' to fully articulate multiple scenarios in which artefacts, objects, and visual representations interface with academic discourses around animism and shamanism. Their approaches can broadly be situated within the ontological, relational and material turn across a range of disciplines over the last two decades, which, in varied ways, have challenged speciesist hierarchies and Cartesian bifurcations, looked beyond the weak notion of an ultimate, knowable objective reality, to recognise that ways of being and knowing are diversely contingent upon and emergent through relations between things. As [Astor-Aguilera and Harvey \(2020, p. 1\)](#) put it, 'to be human is to relate' and 'our relations are as much with things as with other humans'. This relational mutability interfaces with new materialism in the latter's challenge to linguistic, cultural and representational frames of thought which have neglected materials to recognise the vibrancy of matter and materiality of existence.

The elusive and heterogeneous class of objects and depictions gathered under the term 'art' challenge the language of formalism developed in art history to encompass different forms of material and visual expressions which evade a concern with aesthetics or style. The authors put in sharp focus the materiality of objects and representations while stressing their agentive, emotive, and performative aspects. This promotes a substantial distancing from a study of their appearances to an emphasis on what they do and 'who' they may be or become in their dealings with any number of interlocutors. What unites all the authors in this collection is the recognition that both things and images are deeply entangled with how different communities, human and other-than-human, experience life. This perspective shifts the attention from an obsolete concept of world-'view' to how reality is perceived through all the senses in all its aspects, both tangible and intangible. These papers redirect our theoretical concerns to how humans may apprehend the world they inhabit phenomenologically rather than simply seeing it and merely visualising it. Indeed, perhaps one of the issues' most provocative propositions is that in the minds of the many human actors examined here, there is no ontological difference between something seen, experienced in a dream, and something made, or material. The conventional distinction between visual and material culture here is collapsed in a series of 'manifestations' which reorient our thinking about how peoples around the world deal with the vast sensorium with which they are endowed.

If, as posited by these authors, the materiality of artefacts and images shapes the ways in which humans act, they consequentially have affects upon their phenomenal world. It follows that 'art' objects and images contribute to the construction of specific realities and, in turn, are constituted by humans through a mutual recognition of each other as active agents. This re-evaluation of the place held by artefacts in human society has encouraged further investigations into the multiple ways in which the disciplinary discourses of art history, anthropology and archaeology intersect, and perhaps most significantly, how they have historically skirted each other by maintaining mutually exclusive areas of remit and theoretical focus despite an equal interest in what humans make with intention and purpose.

As the authors here demonstrate with their studies, an examination of the space, role and nature of objects and images which, for analytical purposes, we call 'art' calls into question the very premises upon which its study has conventionally rested, that is, the study of representations. Indeed, the rich materials analysed by our authors in real-life situations appear to function as more than representations and, as it emerges from their conclusions, they ought to be understood through a language of presence, immanence and reality before they can be analysed through the idiom of form and a narrow focus on the visible qualities of images or artefacts.

Asking ontological questions about art is certainly not a new enterprise, as iconoclastic movements throughout history have highlighted many times. However, what this collection does is to reignite the debates around the status of images and tangible creative expressions through the lens of new theories drawn from new materialism, new animism and multi-species and relational thinking, which give credence to all the multifaceted ways

in which humans think or experience ‘things’, images and image making. The strong emphasis on relationality derived from theories developed on studies of animism and shamanism has had the effect of decentering human agency to include objects and images in webs of social relations recognised by all of the groups represented here as being ‘real’ and, therefore, affecting phenomenal reality and behaviour.

The case studies included in this Special Issue present different approaches to the issues highlighted above. Almost half of them have been purposefully taken from current experiences in the ethnographic field from around the world (Matthews et al., Qu, Falck, Äikäs and Fonneland, Kendall) and/or with the purpose of highlighting continuities and ruptures with the past (Aldhouse-Green, VanPool and VanPool, Challis and Skinner, Fowler, Lau, Harrison-Buck and Freidel), to encourage future re-elaborations of the themes that they explore. As editors, we believe that this range of examples can bring further insights into the complexities generated by the multiple intersections of art, shamanism and animism.

In this editorial, we have chosen to introduce the eleven articles in relation to three broad themes: first, how a consideration of ontology, relationality and materiality may enable deeper analysis of certain objects/things as animate and agentive, and with which shamans negotiate specific social and historical contexts (Miranda Aldhouse-Green, Christine and Todd VanPool, Tiina Äikäs and Trude Fonneland); second, the ways in which current theoretical thinking presses analysis on the cosmo-ontological dimensions of certain shamanisms and/or animisms in new directions (Sam Challis and Andrew Skinner, George Lau, Feng Qu, Christine Falck); third, the possibilities and limitations of taxonomy and knowledge facilitated by such etic terminology as art, shamanism and animism (Chris Fowler, Eleanor Harrison-Buck and David A. Freidel, Maureen Matthews et al., Laurel Kendall). Permeating disciplinary boundaries, these themes offer one route by which to navigate the articles, even as they intersect across all of them.

Deeper Analysis of Objects/Things

Three of our contributors press for a deeper analysis of shamanic and/or animic objects/things in light of the ontological, relational and material turn, treating contexts from Europe to the Americas and from prehistory to the present. Miranda Aldhouse-Green considers examples of human–animal, inter-species and cross-gender hybridity and liminality in European Iron Age and later art. La Tene ‘art objects’ and some of those from Rome’s western provinces are well known for their stylised, abstract and sinuous decoration; Aldhouse-Green’s approach negotiates the fluidity of design with fixity of material form in terms of shamans’ liminal status. Shamans, for Aldhouse-Green, subvert norms in order to negotiate beings and different ways of being in different worlds. Playing with, for example, what is normal and what is subversion, what is nature and what is divine, in terms of shamanic ‘oscillatory’ behaviour enables a deeper analysis of the material at hand beyond the surface analysis of decoration.

Taking an operational view of ‘art’ in which objects made by humans may take person-like identities, Christine and Todd VanPool argue that iconographic coherence in creative expressions in Casas Grandes (Chihuahua, Mexico) is a precondition to personhood in human-made ritual and religious objects. Their analysis of Medio Period (AD 1200–1450) representations of other-than-human beings, such as the horned serpent and the double-headed macaw, reveals how consistency of images across media ensures the manifestation of personhood in objects. Things correctly decorated with images of incorporeal beings, the VanPools assert, are persons only inasmuch as they faithfully reproduce intangible persons’ distinctive features. In the world of Casas Grandes, they conclude, aesthetics ensure that reality’s tangible and intangible registers remain connected through the mediation of object-persons handled by shamans. In this way of understanding the relationships between different planes of cognition, ritual objects emerge as expressions of an ontology in which the fusion of the ‘spiritual’ and the ‘material’ turn ‘real’ everything that can be variably seen or experienced.

In their examination of ‘power animals’ at the Isogaisa festival in Norway, Tiina Äikäs and Trude Fonneland explore how past Saami traditions meet present globalised ‘shamanic’ thinking and practice, as participants perform their indigeneity through visual, material and immaterial forms. Reindeer and bears, for instance, are embodied and made manifest through *joik* (song), dance, visualisation on drums and clothing and sacrifice at ritual sites. While there is no agreed-upon format for how shamanism should be done among these contemporary shamans, Äikäs and Fonneland’s research shows how past, present and changing approaches to animist thinking and shamanist practice are entangled and creatively negotiated during this particular festival. While previous research on neo-shamans has focussed more on whether practices are authentic/derivative/neo-colonial and on what practitioners think rather than what they do, Äikäs and Fonneland articulate how shamanic power animals are understood to disrupt conventional categories of subject/object, person/thing and matter/spirit, as performed in the relational intra-action between *joik*, dance, sacrifice and materiality.

Cosmo-Ontological Dimensions

The turn to ontology, relationality and materiality has significant implications for understanding how shamans and other humans engage with corporal and non-corporeal beings as well as animate object-things in the ongoing negotiation of cosmogonies and cosmologies—and the contestation of Eurocentric epistemological hegemony. Four articles take up this theme in case studies from Africa, Asia, Oceania and the Americas. In their paper, Sam Challis and Andrew Skinner re-consider the shamanistic approach to Southern African rock art in light of the ontological turn and new animism. The shamanistic approach has interpreted the imagery as ‘part representation of’, ‘part reference to’ shamanistic practices which facilitate human ‘control’ of such things as spirit-helpers, game, weather and disease. This is problematic for focussing myopically on human trance experience and ritual in an ‘ontology of control’ which subordinates non-human activity to human agency and delineates landscapes into Cartesian culture/nature, persons/resources and minds/bodies bifurcations. They look instead to the ‘intersubjective character of the art’ and ‘the nature of the intercessions that shamans enact’ according to historic and contemporary ethnographic accounts of a universe in which ‘everything is transformative, contingent, momentary and responsive, and all in need of negotiation’. Social obligation in terms of mutually emergent ‘compliance and influence’ afford persons and things the same status and potential of ‘aligning (or failing to align) socially in correspondence with their tendencies, and the ways in which others relate to and with them’. Challis and Skinner contribute to the ongoing theorising and re-framing of the established shamanistic approach to Southern African rock art by using ethnography to demonstrate the intra-action of all things involved in the making of rock art imagery, including the materials themselves, the intersubjectivity of human and other-than-human ontologies and how relationality and respectful comportment are at the core of shamanistic practice.

In his examination of the use of effigies among ancient Peruvians from the Ancash region, George Lau revisits ethnohistorical evidence and archaeological records to reveal how the language of kinship articulates descent relationships with lithified forebearers. The ongoing cycle of reciprocity, in which ancestors ensure prosperity and worshippers adhere to ritual obligations, firmly places stone persons in a cosmology of exchange which pivots around their ‘vitalizing interventions’ in the world of their progeny. Stone effigies, Lau maintains, were involved in social reproduction as agents which were simultaneously the producers and product of their descendants. Ancestors’ simulacra were made to manifest their power in the phenomenal world for the benefit of the living while being energised by their offerings and libations. The genealogical continuity engendered by the production of ancestral effigies emerges as a cosmo-ontology characterised by agents’ mutual recognition of different varieties of people inhabiting the same perceptual dimension across the generations.

Returning to the traditional *locus classicus* of ‘shamanism’ in Asia, Feng Qu reconsiders shamanic ritual among Daur (as well as Evenki, Buriat and Bargu Mongols) in light of the ontological and material turn based on new fieldwork in north-eastern Inner Mongolia. Qu challenges a prevailing religious paradigm for shamanism, as well as modern dichotomies which go along with this view, by emphasising the sociality of the constituents, human and other-than-human, ‘subjects’ and ‘objects’, who all actively participate in making shamanic ceremonies. Qu proposes a relational model in which a ‘social interface’ permeates the cosmological boundaries between corporeal (humans, animals) and non-corporeal (ancestors, ‘spirits’) beings and material objects/things. Shamans are recognised as performing ceremonies which facilitate the participation of a variety of human and non-human agents in meaning-making which is grounded in materiality. Moreover, Daur shamanism enables communities (human and other-than-human, material and immaterial) to actively and creatively negotiate such current concerns as external political pressure, resource depletion and climate change.

In her article, Christiane Falck explores how during the month of Mother Mary (October), Nyaura women in the East Sepik catch a statue of Mother Mary in fishing nets, carry her around the village and are influenced and possessed by her spirit and spirits of God, reifying an origin myth when women caught ancestral clan spirits (*wagen*) in their nets and presided over ritual and social space. Falck extends Strathern’s idea of dividuality, Gell’s agency, Bird-David’s relational personhood and Sahlins’ concept of mytho-praxis (historical action as the projection of mythical relations) to highlight the importance of the ‘cosmo-ontological dimensions’ of historic trajectories of religious transformation (a shift from shamanism to Charismatic Christianity) and disruption of gender dominance (the co-option of men’s ritual space by women) in Papua New Guinea.

Taxonomical Limitations and Diverse Ontologies

Four of the contributors engage critically with the limitations of the terms art, shamanism and animism to emphasise the diversity of ontologies in different contexts as well as the importance of historical change. Chris Fowler explores the possible value of Descola’s four ontologies of animism, totemism, analogism and naturalism with regard to Neolithic Britain. He highlights their relative imprecision in this context and prefers a relational realist approach, recognising how material practices in events of making are relational, contingent and emergent and how the process of research itself reconfigures the assemblage of the archaeological materials encountered. This is not to say that art, shamanism and animism cannot be variously expressed and identified over the *longue duree* of the archaeological record, but Fowler makes the point that it is important to retain methodological and analytical rigour and to attend to ontological diversity and difference rather than to shoe-horn the evidence to fit pre-conceived notions of ‘shamanism’ or ‘animism’.

The Mesoamerican material analysed by Eleanor Harrison-Buck and David A. Freidel dives into the heart of long-established discussions about the nature of animism and shamanism. In this sociocultural context, the impossibility to apply obsolete notions and definitions requires a reassessment of the categories of analysis which, the authors suggest, may benefit from relational approaches to experience, which, while partially resonating with other Amerindian societies, also chime with recent theoretical strands appearing under the rubrics of new materialism and new animism. The different states in which masks and mirrors operate in ancient Mesoamerica offer a backdrop for the authors’ evaluations of animism and shamanism, here presented as contextual epistemological tools to know and exercise power in and over the world and its inhabitants. Through these examples, Harrison-Buck and Freidel offer a version of Mesoamerican ontology which challenges the conventional conflation of shamanism with small-scale societies and the correlation between priesthood and agricultural societies, providing an alternative model which can help us further future analyses beyond established paradigms.

Maureen Matthews, Roger Roulette and James Brook Wilson’s in-depth examination of the role of pipes in Canada’s new museology elicits important and timely questions

about the nature of objects in museums and, in an era of decolonising their role, establishing new ways of relating to the world. At the confluence between spiritual and diplomatic objects, the pipe-protagonists of this ethnographic case study reveal how taxonomical incompatibilities have generated friction and misunderstandings across ethnic divides. First Nations peoples, in this case Anishinaabe and Cree, who believe and talk about these objects as animate and other-than-human persons, strongly defend their right to present pipes to the wider public as actants in their own right. Being simultaneously religious, political and educational agents, pipes open a channel between the visible and the invisible, obliging museum authorities to reassess their interpretative paradigms and educational objectives. This revolutionary and challenging perspective, while rebalancing power relations between settler colonial and indigenous peoples, also indicates a significant shift in perceptions and representations of religious objects in wider society.

In her article, Laurel Kendall uses animism (drawing on, e.g., Viveiros de Castro) as a heuristic to approach material things in Korean shamanic practice. This makes possible not only a re-focussing of attention on certain object-things which have been described as ‘art’ in the scholarship, but also recognition that they have not been analysed well. She finds that animation ‘as an action verb’ facilitates a ‘deeper inquiry’ into these objects. She identifies an ‘adaptable ontology’ in Korea in which ‘mobile, mutable spirits’ become associated with various object-things, be they quotidian, ‘religious’ or part of landscapes. These object-things, in turn, are identified as enabling shamans’ ongoing adaptability in a ‘transformed and highly commercialized South Korea’. Animism, or ‘animation’, then, allows Kendall to drill down into Korean shamanism in order to shed new light on its highly material engagements.

Conclusions

Our aim as editors of this Special Issue has been to enable the coming together of a range of approaches to the themes of art, shamanism and animism, exploring diverse contexts, both archaeological and anthropological, across a wide geographical range and chronological scope. The purposeful juxtaposition of different times and places, we hope, will encourage transversal readings of many potential interconnections between the different case studies presented here. We detected in the articles some commonalities and we grouped them according to these themes. Yet, we are aware that other alternative interpretations, perspectives and relations may emerge as each reader tacks between them, making their own course. The collection by no means attempts to be representative of the field, nor comprehensive, nor to resolve the veracity of art, shamanism and animism. Rather, the authors re-consider the heuristic potential of the intersection of these concepts while remaining critical of their limitations. This collection of new articles, then, does not seek closure on art, shamanism and animism; it re-frames approaches, presses analysis, raises further questions and, we hope, provokes debate.

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Article

Connective Tissue: Embracing Fluidity and Subverting Boundaries in European Iron Age and Roman Provincial Images

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Abstract: There is a mounting body of evidence for somatic exchange in burial practices within later British prehistory. The title of the present paper was sparked by a recent article in *The Times* (Tuesday 1 September 2020), which contained a description of human bone curation and body mingling clearly present in certain Bronze Age funerary depositional rituals. The practice of mixing up bodies has been identified at several broadly coeval sites, a prime example being Cladh Hallan in the Scottish Hebrides, where body parts from different individuals were deliberately mingled, not just somatically but also chronologically. This paper's arguments rest upon the premise that somatic boundary crossing is reflected in Iron Age and later art, especially in the blending of human and animal imagery and of one animal species with another. Such themes are endemic in La Tène decorative metalwork and in western Roman provincial sacred imagery. It is possible, indeed likely, that such fluidity is associated with deliberate subversion of nature and with the presentation of 'shamanism' in its broadest sense. Breaking 'natural' rules and orders introduces edge blurring between material and spiritual worlds, representing, perhaps, the ability of certain individuals (shamans) to break free from human-scapes and to wander within the realms of the divine.

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The premise of this paper is the growing weight of evidence for subversion of the 'real' in the production and consumption of imagery in both Iron Age, La Tène art and in the sacred depictive repertoire of the western Roman provinces. In both arenas, the representation of bodies sometimes challenges 'normative' visual recognitions and twists them so that they transgress the boundaries of gender and species. Additionally, recent studies of La Tène metalwork designs introduce other dimensions of artistic expression, notably the manipulation of space, time and—possibly—even worlds. One of the nodal issues of such a tenet is the recognition that what may be presented to the spectator's gaze is the *process* of change, a subversion of norms, perhaps considered by the artist as more important in visualisation than change itself. My intention with this paper is to consider a selection of key images that appear to exemplify these freeze-framed change processes and then to consider the possible contexts for such imagery, not least the likelihood that the projection of shamanism might be a prime issue in the production of images that twist, subvert and meddle with the realities of the material world.

1. Dissolving Identities: Fluidity and Subversion in the British Bronze Age

Before proceeding to the 'guts' of the paper, I want to cast the net a little wider, for Iron Age and Roman-period images are not the only evidence for somatic subversion. Certain British Bronze Age burial customs exhibit the deconstruction, mingling and reincorporation of dead bodies to become different beings, associated with different timeframes, so that the remains of the earlier dead may be curated and then mixed up with other, later bodies and dwelling places. A prime example of such behaviour is represented at Cladh Hallan on South Uist in the Western Isles of Scotland, a site that dates to about 1000 BC (Parker Pearson et al. 2005; Booth et al. 2015). Bodies of the dead here were deliberately mummified and sometimes curated for up to 500 years before being interred beneath the



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houses of the living. The most likely method of preservation was first gutting and then placing them in an acidic environment, such as a peat bog (as evidenced by the state of the bones, which showed signs of severe demineralisation) (see Aldhouse-Green 2015a, pp. 50–65; Giles 2020, pp. 52–71 for an explanation of bog body preservation).

So, it appears that the bodies of certain deceased individuals were carefully treated in complex ritual ways, the end processes of which involved their removal from swamps after the preservative process had turned them into bog bodies, the wrapping of their remains and their curation over centuries before their deposition in the foundations of their descendants' dwellings. It seems that underlying these complex procedures was the notion of connection: the perceived need to link the past and the present, the long-dead and the living. By changing dead bodies into lasting somatic memorials, the ancestors were enabled to reach out and engage with those living up to half a millennium later. However, connections were not only made over time; there is startling evidence, too, that these mummified bodies were treated in ways that defied and subverted their somatic identity. One interment, in particular, had been subject to some weird (to us) treatment prior to its final burial in house foundations, for it represented the remains, not of one, but of a mingled male 'person' made up of the body parts of three individuals: the head and neck of one, the jaw of a second and the remainder of the body that of a third. Not only were the remains those of a tripartite being but the chronology was also tampered with, for while the head was curated for about 300–400 years before being finally interred, the body was that of someone who died hundreds of years earlier. So, this composite body represents somatic exchange in both the mixing-up of body parts and in time-bending, not only in the original mummification but in the staggered chronology of curation.

Whatever the thinking behind such complex manipulation, it is clear that an important element was the subversion of original identities and of time itself. Was this an act designed to blow boundaries apart and present fluidity and connections in order to enable the crossing of thresholds? If so, then the ultimate deposition as a foundation 'sacrifice' seems to have fed into the significance of border porosity. The construction of houses penetrated 'virgin' land and transgressed the boundaries between the wild landscape and the order of the built environment. The appeasement of the local spirits by subverting human borders—both in terms of people's bodily identity and the time-space continuum—may have been deemed an essential ritual for the settlement to thrive in borrowed space.

The odd, time-warping treatment of bodies was by no means confined to the Western Isles. Recent work by archaeologists led by Joanna Brück at Bristol University has thrown new light on funerary rituals associated with the building of Bronze Age houses and the interaction between the living and the dead (Bridge 2020, p. 15). There is evidence, for example, at Ingleby Barwick in North Yorkshire, that a woman's body was interred with the remains of at least three other individuals: a pubescent female and an adult man and woman, perhaps quarried from a cache of curated remains hoarded to supply material for burial rituals. As at Cladh Hallan, there is evidence for the bending or subversion of chronology, for the human remains here are estimated as being more than 50 years older than objects buried with them. The interpretation offered by researchers at the site is that funerals were the context for the distribution of bones so that mourners could remember their dead and keep them alive through memory. Crucially, such events again took place at boundary places, such as house foundations, perhaps, as postulated for Cladh Hallan, to represent fluidity between different people in different time zones.

2. Connectivity in Iron Age European Figural Art

It has long been recognised that La Tène decorated metalwork is shot through with 'surrealism', the manipulation of themes associated with observed nature to be reborn within a repertoire of strange and powerful imagery. In my opinion, and that of other scholars, European Iron Age art was primarily a symbolic, religious presentation of the supernatural. It may even be, as John Creighton has suggested with respect to coin imagery (Creighton 1995), that the inspiration behind such art was directly associated with or driven

by professional clergy, including the Druids of Gaul and Britannia (Aldhouse-Green 2010, 2021), who acted as conduits between the material and spiritual worlds. La Tène decorated metalwork represents a superlative artistic skillset combined with the mining of an incredible imaginative repertoire of symbols and images worthy of comparison with Greek myth. In fact, I would go so far as to argue that some of the more complex designs perhaps referenced ancient Iron Age oral traditions of storytelling. This is particularly relevant to one object considered later in this paper, the Gundestrup cauldron. First, I want to discuss three pieces of metalwork, each of which brings a different dimension to the theme of dissolved identities, shapeshifting and the subversion of time–space continua, from Weiskirchen and Reinheim in Germany and Tal-y-Llyn in North Wales.

Sometime in the late fifth century BC, a skilled bronzesmith produced a highly complex belt clasp inlaid with red coral (Figure 1) (Megaw 1970, pp. 69–70, no. 62; Megaw and Megaw 1989, p. 66, fig. 65), which was perhaps worn by a high-ranking warrior in life, and after whose death it was placed in his grave with him (though, of course, the belt might have simply been placed with the corpse as a mark of honour). Inside the tomb, one of three barrows at Weiskirchen in Germany was a wooden chamber in which a number of rich grave goods were deposited, including a gold plaque from a brooch decorated with human faces (Megaw 1970, pp. 62–63, no. 46, pl. IIa) and a short iron sword in its decorated bronze scabbard. The belt clasp has been described by Vincent Megaw and Megaw (1989, p. 66) as decorated with ‘Siamese twin sphinxes’ supporting a central human head. However, might not the piece have represented something more challenging—the idea of movement and differing perspectives in a single static image? Laurent Olivier (2014) and Jody Joy (2015, p. 39, fig. 19) have posited the notion that these figures may not represent three beings within a single plane but, instead, a single one envisaged from different viewpoints; in other words, what the artist intended the spectator to see was ‘the left- and right-hand sides of the same creature, together with a frontal view of its human-like face’. If this is right, and it is a persuasive argument, it means that the ‘gaze’ involved the understanding of complex design that subverted the single dimension and made one figure ‘move’ within its frame to display itself as if it were a living being—not just an image stuck within the rigidity of its bronze casing but leaping about, turning this way and that, to represent its essential vitality. In this way, what looks like a multiple being converts, by sleight of hand, into self-connected and animated oneness. What was the thinking behind such manipulation of imagery in space (and time)? Was the production of this ‘magic show’ merely an intellectual exercise or was something more profound intended? I suspect that one factor in the presentation of the weird and wonderful was the understanding that ancestral and other spirits were not bound by terrestrial laws of space and time, so it was apt that supernaturally driven imagery displayed similar freedoms beyond the bounds of what humans perceive as the real.

Fluidity between forms of being is depicted in so much of Iron Age art. The issue of shapeshifting has already been touched on, but some pieces exhibit the merging of human and animal forms par excellence. In 1954, a rich female grave, dated to the early fourth century BC, was discovered at Reinheim (Germany) (Miron 1986, pp. 110–11). As at Wieskirchen, the body was interred in a wood-lined tomb beneath a barrow, accompanied by rich grave goods, including a mirror and a jewellery box full of at least 200 pieces. A quantity of the decorated metalwork buried with her exhibits shapeshifting imagery. The lid of a large bronze wine flagon bore a figure of a horse with a bearded human face (Aldhouse-Green 2001a, p. 207, fig. 1; 2004, p. 161, fig. 6.7) (Figure 2). (This is a theme taken up in later Iron Age coin art, where galloping steeds with human faces pulling chariots driven by horsewomen were frequently depicted, particularly among Breton tribes (Duval 1987, p. 46, 5B; Aldhouse-Green 2006, p. 30, fig. 2). The Reinheim horse has two other boundary-crossing features: its rounded ears are not equine but belong, perhaps, to a big cat, such as a leopard, or even a bear; it has three hooves and one foot that appears to end in human toes.

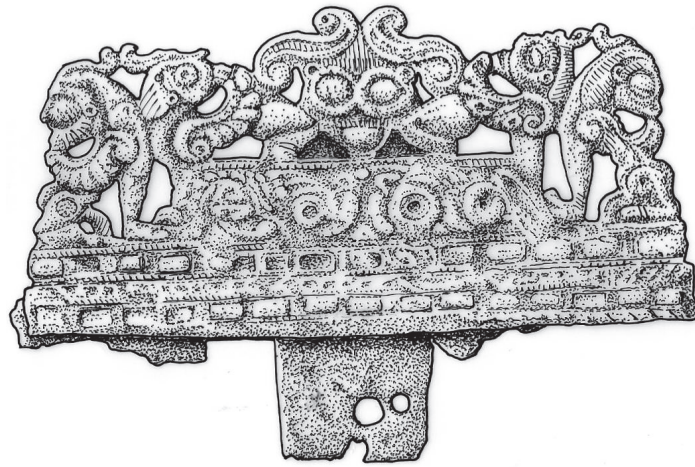


Figure 1. Coral-inlaid bronze belt clasp from a man's tomb at Weiskirchen, Germany; late fifth century BC. © Nick Griffiths.



Figure 2. Human-faced horse decorating the lid of a wine flagon from the Reinheim grave. © Anne Leaver.

The gold ring jewellery (neckrings or torcs and armrings) also features the fluidity and connectivity between human and animal forms, for a recurrent decorative theme is the merged images of a woman, laid out as if for burial, her arms folded on her breasts, and a bird of prey that perches on her head, only its long-beaked head and wings visible, as if emerging from her body (Megaw 1970, pp. 79–80, pls. 79–80; Megaw and Megaw 1989, pp. 90–91, figs. 116, 117) (Figure 3). Is it possible that the emergence of the bird reflects the dead woman's apotheosis? Might the juxtaposed motifs of corpse and raptor represent something darker, though—the claiming of the dead for the underworld? It is tempting to imagine the death of someone, clearly significant in her

society while living, as an apocalyptic event wherein the spirits of the otherworld were perceived to absorb the fleshly remains and thus deliver her to their realm. There is clearly a hidden ‘storyline’ written in the woman’s grave goods. The human/horse decorating the wine flagon might represent what might be identified as a shamanic figure, reflecting the intoxicant properties of strong wine that might enable altered states of consciousness and ‘soul flight’ between worlds. It may even be that the Reinheim woman was herself a spiritual leader, a shaman who had the ability to move between the material and supernatural worlds, and that she earned her grand tomb by reason of her skill as a religious practitioner. This notion has been explored in work by Chris Knüsel (2002).

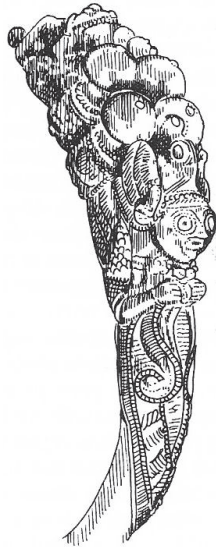


Figure 3. Detail of gold ring jewellery from a woman’s grave at Reinheim, Germany; fourth century BC. © Paul Jenkins.

The third piece of La Tène decorated metalwork comes from a very different time and geographical location from those found at Weiskirchen and Reinheim. It comprises a broken trapezoid plaque (originally one of a pair, the second now lost) of very thin sheet bronze, once mounted on a backplate, probably a shield. It is part of a hoard of metalwork, some military (including shield bosses and horse harnesses), found at Tal-y-Llyn, Merionethshire (North Wales), which includes both insular La Tène and Romano-British material. The cache includes objects of varying dates and is generally accepted as a metalworker’s collection of scrap to be melted down and recast.

The surviving plaque is relevant to this study for its depiction of two identical human heads with hair en brosse, vertically opposed and joined together by a single long, thin neck (Savory 1976, p. 56, pl. IIIa). While Savory put a date in the Middle Iron Age (c. 300–200 BC) on the hoard, a more recent study (Macdonald 2007, pp. 160–61) suggests that it may date to sometime after the Roman conquest of Britain of the mid-first century AD, a view supported by the presence of zinc (adopted as an add-on in bronzemaking in the Roman period) in some of the copper alloy used in the hoard. The Tal-y-Llyn plaque is so fragmentary that only one of the two heads and the neck survive in toto; only the chin, mouth, most of the nose and the lower part of the eyes of the second head remain. Still, this is enough to indicate the identity of the complete plaque. Swirling designs enclose both heads and there is a horizontal motif that serves to divide the two. What is depicted here is the essence of connection, separation and fluidity between the two heads. An important factor in unlocking their significance is their opposition: one is upside down in relation to the other.

I incline to the opinion, one shared by Ian Armit (2009), that a reasonable interpretation of the Tal-y-Llyn imagery is that it depicts the relationship between the worlds of the living and the dead. In speaking of the belief systems of the northern Sámi people, Richard Bradley discusses their view of these two realms and, in particular, their envisioning of the underworld as a mirror image of the mundane domain inhabited by the living. Bradley, building on Tim Ingold's work, notes the frequent Sámi use of the inverted boles of trees as material for sacred image-making, and their credo that the reversal of features between the two worlds involves the imagining that dead people walked upside down, their feet in the footsteps of the living (Bradley 2000, p. 12, after Ingold 1986, p. 246). The interpretation of the opposed twin heads as imagery of two worlds, the upper and lower, the abodes of the living and the dead, raises a number of separate but related issues. The Tal-y-Llyn heads (Figure 4) might simply represent a generic image or, instead, it might be that they are depictions of a specific person, and one possibility is that they are 'portraits' of a shaman, someone who could traverse the divide between the earth and otherworld dimensions. Shamans display fluidity and subversion in their ability to take soul flight and engage with the denizens of the otherworld (Vitebsky 1995, pp. 38–39; Pentikäinen 1998, pp. 26–48; Price 2001; Séfériadès 2018). The Tal-y-Llyn double image might therefore represent the two *personae* of a local shaman at the point of his (or her) transition between worlds. Moreover, it should not be forgotten that there were originally *two* of these plaques, which might contribute further to the notion of 'double spirit' shamanic identities (Aldhouse-Green 2001b; Aldhouse-Green and Aldhouse-Green 2005, p. 205; Jacobs et al. 1997).

There is another issue regarding the Tal-y-Llyn images that has relevance to their interpretation: their military context as shield adornments (martial art). Melanie Giles (2012) has argued convincingly for the importance of psychological warfare as an interpretation for the dramatic imagery on Iron Age swords, shields, war trumpets and other military regalia. In particular, the recurrent use of red enamel and red coral to signify drops of fresh blood bears testimony not just to the love of display but also to the visual power with which arms and armour might have been imbued. This power would have been designed both to bolster up and infuse the courage of the warrior and to put fear into the heart of the enemy. The combination of an aggressive brandishing of weapons and shields, some bearing fearful images of death, and the yells of combat undoubtedly employed in battle puts psycho warfare centre stage. Even in the case of small images, like the Tal-y-Llyn heads, the bearer of the shield upon which the plaques were mounted might have been comforted by their talismanic force, even if they were not highly visible to his opponent. Furthermore, of course, when new, the relief imagery of the heads would have stood out and glinted in the sun and so would clearly have been seen in close, hand-to-hand single combat. Maybe one visual message radiating out from these double heads was the recognition that though battle could result in death, the warrior in possession of such protective power would find solace in his rebirth in the spirit world, especially if so guided by a shamanic helper. Finally, the possible latest Iron Age or Roman conquest period date of the Tal-y-Llyn head plaques may be significant in terms of the broader context of the burgeoning of 'frontier art' in first century AD Wales (Davis and Gwilt 2008). It has been cogently argued that the stress of encroaching *romanitas*, particularly in south Wales in the later first century AD, was instrumental in an increase in high status and military decorated metalwork, with red hot-glass and enamel especially prominent. It may be that this represented a kind of 'resistance' art. Moreover, I wonder whether the recent discovery of a chariot burial in Pembrokeshire (BBC 2019; Hole 2020) might be part of the same local tribal 'defiance', for not only was this tomb situated hundreds of miles away from Brigantian territories in Yorkshire where nearly all other chariot burials have been found (one is from Newbridge in Scotland) but the Welsh example was centuries later, belonging to the mid-late first century AD, whereas those in the north belong to the middle Iron Age (400–200 BC). So, this deviant burial might have been that of a foreigner, but could it also be interpreted as a form of deliberate *Britannitas* in the face of the Roman threat? If

the Tal-y-Llyn plaques can be dated to the post-conquest period, then it could be that the martial art of the shield represented something akin to what was going on in south Wales at this period.

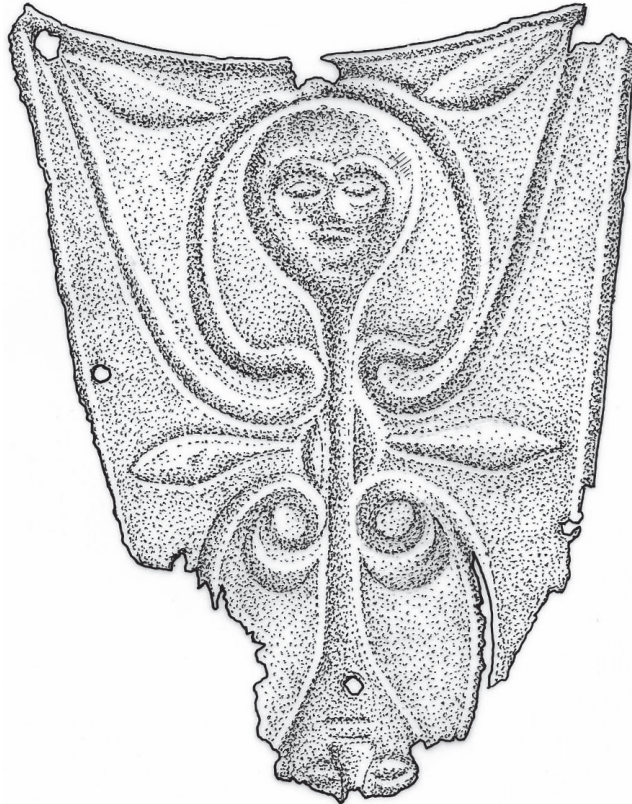


Figure 4. Double-headed plaque from a hoard of late Iron Age or Roman period bronzes, from Tal-y-Llyn, Merionethshire, North Wales, UK. © Nick Griffiths.

3. Fluidity and Shamanism on the Gundestrup Cauldron

‘What comes after them is the stuff of fables—Hellusii and Oxiones with the faces and features of men, but the bodies and limbs of animals. On such unverifiable stories I will express no opinion’ (Tacitus, *Germania* 46; trans. [Mattingly 1948](#), p. 140)

At the end of his treatise on the *Germani* (by which he meant those Germanic communities whose territories lay east of the Rhine), Tacitus ventured into his furthest explorations, speaking not only of the fabled Hellusii and Oxiones but of a people called the Fenni who, he reported, lived close to the border with Sarmatia, a land east of the Danube. In his history of Roman Britain, David [Mattingly \(2006, p. 122\)](#) describes the deployment of Sarmatian cavalry by the emperor Marcus Aurelius in his attempt to control trouble in Britannia in the 170s AD. Mattingly speaks of the Sarmatians as ‘one of the most dangerous trans-Danubian peoples’. Tacitus is clearly alluding to what he considered to be the wild fringes of human civilisation, from hearsay and rumour (perhaps from travelling merchants). The important issue in the present context is that while Classical mythology is steeped in fantastic creatures that blend human and animal in a kind of supernatural soup, the wild otherness of far-off communities, way beyond the bounds of the Roman empire,

was expressed by Tacitus (and other chroniclers, including Horace and Herodian) in terms of the grotesque somatic mingling of species.

The complex and wonderful imagery that decorates the great gilded silver late Iron Age cauldron from Gundestrup in Jutland is well-documented (Kaul 1991; Olmsted 1979). Probably dating to between 150 and 50 BC (Hunter et al. 2015, p. 262), and capable of holding up to 130 L of liquid, this vessel was found in 1891, deliberately dismantled into its 13 constituent plates and carefully deposited on a dry islet in the middle of a peat bog, presumably as part of a ritual event. The cauldron was constructed of 7 outer and 5 larger inner rectangular plates that form its walls, with a 13th circular base plate, which had been a *phalera* (a circular piece of decorative horse harness) before its reuse by the cauldron makers. Each plate is highly decorated in repoussé work, with images of human, animal and composite figures. The outer plates display busts of what are probably deities, but the inner plates appear to represent scenes from a narrative, perhaps a cultic, mythical tale that—in its way—might have been as significant to its producers and users as a written myth and, indeed, might have been deployed as a memory tool for a professional storyteller. The vessel has rightly been termed ‘a visual feast’ (Hunter et al. 2015, p. 270)

The cauldron’s geographical and cultural origins are complicated. Some iconographical detail (such as the weapons and armour worn by warriors depicted on one scene and the images of deities, such as Taranis, the wheel god, and Cernunnos, the antlered god) supports arguments for Gaulish influence. If it were to have been commissioned for use in Gaul, it could have been carried off as plunder by a warring northern tribe, such as the Germanic Cimbri, whose lands lay in northern Jutland, and who, as we know from written sources, raided Gallic territories. (Tacitus *Germania* 37; King 1990, pp. 40–41). However, some of the craftspeople responsible for producing the images (several different artists’ hands have been identified) had at least heard tales of highly exotic—though inaccurately depicted—beasts, including elephants, leopards and hyenas. Some elements of the iconography bear comparison with northern European traditions. The curveball to be thrown into the mix is that large-scale European Iron Age silverwork was almost invariably carried out in the workshops of Thrace, on the Black Sea.

It is the imagery on one of the cauldron’s inner plates (Figure 5) that is of particular relevance to the themes of connectivity, porous boundaries and shamanism, for it clearly reflects the process of shapeshifting between animal and human form and, indeed, may represent the very act of transition. In the centre, although not precisely so positioned on the plate, is a human figure, seated cross-legged in the so-called ‘yogic’ position. The figure is almost certainly male, with no hint of female breasts. Around his neck is a plaited torc, and he holds up another, identical one in his right hand. In his left, he grasps a long serpent, gripping it just behind the head (as if to avoid being bitten, or simply as a sign of control over it). Both the cross-legged figure and his snake exhibit skin-turning: the reptile has the head and curly horns of a ram; the man sprouts antlers from his hair (each bearing six tines), and standing very close beside him is a stag (whose antlers possess seven tines each). The artistic treatment of the antlers is identical on the man and the beast, but the stag’s extra antler tines are a mark of a peak alpha male. I incline to the view that the image-maker’s intention was to display the actual act of shape change between person and stag. The discrepant number of tines on both sets of antlers suggests the direction of change: from human to animal form. The intimacy between the two images is intense; the stag faces the man, whose held torc skims the animal’s lower jaw; the man has adopted his companion’s antlers, yet his are yet to achieve full maturity. The other striking linkage between the two figures lies in the detail of the man’s clothing and the stag’s pelt and ribs; they are all depicted in identical stripes. So, subtle messages associated with movement, time and change are being expressed. The man’s face picks up on his ‘yogic’ pose; it is composed and serene, as if he is experiencing an out of body experience, an altered state of consciousness whereby, in a trance state, he can take soul flight—as a shaman—to connect with the spirits, the stag persona acting as his conduit to the otherworld (Aldhouse-Green 2001b).



Figure 5. Detail of inner plate depicting an antlered ‘human’ figure, from the late Iron Age silver cauldron from Gundestrup, Jutland, Denmark. © Paul Jenkins.

Later in this paper, it is shown that the stag/human/snake image is by no means confined to the Gundestrup cauldron but appears several times in Roman Gaul and occasionally, too, in the westernmost Roman province of Britannia. However, before leaving the cauldron, it is pertinent to point out that the trope of transformation was not confined to the inner plate just discussed. It is presented on the other cauldron’s inner plates too, notably on the so-called ‘warriors scene’. Represented on the lower register is a procession of infantrymen marching left (for the viewer) towards a gigantic figure in human form, who seizes each one in turn, dips him into a vat and releases them transformed into cavalrymen who gallop off to the right in the upper register, divided from the lower by a horizontally positioned ‘sacred’ tree (Kaul 1991, p. 23, fig. 17). The link with the stag/antlered man plate is displayed by the presence, once again, of the ram-horned serpent, perhaps the shaman’s animal helper (or even the shaman himself), enabling transition over the threshold between the world of the living and the dead warriors who, perhaps, underwent a rebirth to fight again in the next world. The snake leads the line of horsemen as if to usher them into the realm of the spirits. (The same hybrid creature appears on a third of the inner plates, this time in company with a bearded ‘god’ figure being offered a large chariot or cartwheel by a small horned ‘acolyte’ (Kaul 1991, p. 22, fig. 16).

The Gundestrup cauldron’s imagery discussed here abounds in threshold motifs. Antlers themselves signify change, the passage of time and the rhythm of the seasons. The sacred tree on the ‘warriors’ plate divides the upper and lower worlds; the vat of regeneration appears to transform foot soldiers into horsemen; composite creatures echo the theme of transition; and the most recurrent figure, the ram-headed serpent, supplies continuity to the mythic story (appearing on three of the ‘narrative’ scenes) whilst itself redolent with fluidity, connection and subversion of the ‘real’. The argument that this peculiar image represents a key component of a mythic composition is strengthened by its continued presence in Gallo-British sacred imagery into the Roman period, as is the likelihood that the sacrality of the cauldron’s figural art was driven by essentially Gaulish traditions of belief. Before leaving this remarkable and unique cauldron, I want to end with a quote from *Celts, Art and Identity*, the catalogue accompanying the eponymous exhibition held in 2015 at the British Museum in London:

“This one object shows artistic influences from Celtic, Thracian and Asian styles, was made in southeast Europe, and ended up in a Danish bog. We are dealing here with a connected world . . . ”. (Hunter et al. 2015, p. 270)

4. From Gundestrup to Gloucestershire: The Corinium Sculpture

In his seminal work *Contributions à L'Étude des Divinités Celtiques*, Pierre Lambrechts (1942) was one of the first scholars to make connections between Gallo-Roman sacred images displaying persons seated in the 'yogic' position (i.e., cross-legged), their wearing of antlers and their recurrent association with ram-headed serpents (Lambrechts 1942, pp. 21–32, 45–63). This iconographic association is relatively common in Gaul but vanishingly rare in Britannia; the only certain stone image that bears a strong resemblance to the Gundestrup being is on a small plaque (Figure 6), a relief carving made of local limestone from Corinium (Roman Cirencester) in the Gloucestershire Cotswolds (Henig 1993, no. 93, pl. 26). Although the surface is worn, it is possible to identify a central 'human' figure seated cross-legged, with vestigial knobs of antlers on his head (perhaps signifying youth or seasonality). The most striking element, though, is the presence of two large ram-headed serpents grasped by the neck in his hands and, seemingly, replacing his legs. The proportions are interesting, for here the snakes are very large in proportion to the central human image. What is more, the reptiles appear each to be eating from an open bag of fruit or corn.



Figure 6. Romano-British limestone relief carving of a composite human/animal figure, with antlers and ram-headed snakes; from the Roman town of Corinium (Cirencester), Gloucester, UK. © Nick Griffiths.

I suspect that this sculpture was commissioned by an immigrant from eastern Gaul rather than from a Briton. There is evidence for the presence of at least one high-ranking individual from Reims at Corinium: Lucius Septimius, a governor of Britannia Prima (one of four provinces into which Britain was divided by the emperor Diocletian in AD 296) (Collingwood and Wright 1976, pp. 30–31, no. 103). However, a British origin for the image type should not be dismissed since a late Iron Age silver coin from the English Midlands depicts an antlered human head (Boon 1982). The fluidity between species is particularly marked on the Corinium image. Not only does the central figure sprout antlers but the ram-headed snake, which, at Gundestrup, was a companion of the antlered being, has—at Corinium—morphed further to merge seamlessly and take the place of human lower limbs. So, the whole composition is full of restlessness, movement, change and porous boundaries. *Humanitas* has been triply subverted.

A further search into cognate imagery in Gaul reveals yet another twist of liminality: that of gender. It is likely that the antlers on Gaulish depictions (and probably also at Gundestrup) are those of red deer. In life, only the males grow antlers (the only species

where both genders have antlers is the reindeer), but, occasionally, antlered human forms represented in Gallo-Roman figural imagery as copper alloy figurines, are women. One striking example, with no firm provenance but thought to be from the region of Clermont Ferrand (in south central France), depicts a mature woman seated cross-legged on a chair or stool, with large antlers sprouting from her hair (Figure 7). She holds a *patera* (offering plate) in her right hand while her left arm supports an immense *cornucopiae* overflowing with fruit (Lambrechts 1942, p. 25; Boucher 1976, no. 317; Aldhouse-Green 2001b, p. 87, fig. 7.10). These extra elements of subversion and transition are emphatically rendered on the multi-layered complexity of a stone sculpture from an important Gallo-Roman temple in Burgundy, now explored.



Figure 7. Gallo-Roman figurine of an antlered goddess. Provenance uncertain but thought to be from the region of Clermont-Ferrand, Auvergne.

5. Transformation, Liminality and Gender Transference at Bolards

‘For spirits when they please
 Can either sex assume, or both: so soft
 And uncompounded is their Essence pure,
 Not tied or manacled with joint or limb,
 Nor founded on the brittle strength of bones,
 Like cumbrous flesh; but in what shape they choose
 Dilated and condensed, bright or obscure,
 Can execute their aery purposes,
 And works of love or enmity fulfil’

(John Milton, *Paradise Lost I*, lines 423–431: Irwin 1962, pp. 31–32)

In a previous publication (Aldhouse-Green 2004, pp. 205–6), I highlighted a curious and complex piece of Gallo-Roman religious sculpture from the town at Bolards (Nuits-Saint-Georges) in Burgundy. Significantly, this settlement and its sanctuary were deliberately founded at the intersecting frontiers of three powerful eastern Gaulish tribes: the Sequani, Lingones and Aedui. The great temple was situated on the site of thermal springs and it was clearly a place of pilgrimage for the sick. There is evidence for its significance before the imposing stone building was constructed in the first century AD (Planson and Pommeret 1986, pp. 26–31). Investigation of the southern part of the religious precinct revealed what may have been the focal image; it has been dated to the second century AD. The stone relief carving (Figure 8) is divided into an upper and lower register. On the lower is a frieze depicting five animals centred upon a tree at the midline. The outermost creatures are a bull and a stag; in front of the bull is a dog, and before the stag is a wild boar, while in the middle, facing the boar, is a hare (both the boar and hare are apparently grazing beneath the tree). So, presented here is a deliberate amalgam of wild nature and domestication, separated by the tree, which, perhaps, represents the conduit or portal between the two states of being. On a jutting shelf above the animal frieze sit three much larger, anthropomorphic figures. On the viewer's left is a woman dressed in a long flowing robe, with a cornucopiae and a basket brimming with food, above which she holds a patera; the central figure depicts a long-haired, semi-clad person with female breasts and male genitals, wearing a mural crown that may signify guardianship of the town and its temple; the third image is that of a bearded male. He is triple-faced, gazing front and to each side, and on his head are antlers. His emblem is a sack of bread (Deyts 2001, pp. 129–42; Pommeret 2001, no. 82, figs. 8 & 9).



Figure 8. Stone carving depicting three 'deities', including a hermaphroditic image and a triple-faced person with antlers; from a Gallo-Roman temple at Bolards (Nuits-Saint-Georges), Burgundy, France. © Anne Leaver.

Bolards was a liminal, ‘thin’, threshold place; like many other Gallo-Roman temples (and some Iron Age ones, including the ‘war sanctuary’ at Gournay-sur-Aronde (Brunaux 1986, p. 7), it was deliberately sited in the no man’s land on the edge of several tribal polities. The shrine’s function was to act as a powerhouse for healing, a place the spirits visited, engaged with its priests and enabled the transformative process of curing the sick. Thus, the crossing of borders—between territories, between physical states and between the worlds of sacred and profane—all converged in this thermal sanctuary, which acted as a crossing place, a fluid and interactive zone, where boundaries might be dissolved. Furthermore, what of the sculpture, packed as it was with contradictory, yet fluid and connected symbolism? The zoomorphic frieze references the wild and the tamed (what the ancient Greeks termed *nomos* (order) and *physis* (chaos), as exemplified in Euripides’ tragic play, *The Bacchae*, first performed in 406 BC (Vellacott 1973, pp. 9, 30)) facing each other, with the crossing line represented not just by the sacred tree but also by the hare. This creature (according to Julius Caesar’s comments about Britannia (*De Bello Gallico* 5.12)) was regarded as special, protected by an embargo on hunting or eating the animal. Another British reference to hares, made by Dio Cassius in relation to Boudica’s rebellion (*Roman History* 62. 6), connects this animal with divine prophecy. If this pertained to Roman Gaul, it is permissible to suggest that it was itself a liminal creature, a wild but protected beast with a fast-track path to the spirit world.

The anthropomorphic figures inhabiting the upper register of the sculpture are rich in oppositional, yet fluidly connected imagery in blatant subversions of gender and species ‘norms’. The attributes with which these anthropomorphic images are associated are redolent with the themes of fertility and abundance, in celebration—perhaps—of the challenges to boundaries and the crossing of thresholds (always dangerous) that may have been regarded as essential in projections of healing and repair. Such border-referencing is carried through in the very placement of the shrine at Bolards at the nodal point between three tribes, in an ‘unordered’, fringe region, paradoxically belonging to no one but everyone, and particularly the gods. The triple-faced image on the triadic sculpture may, indeed, reflect its gaze, its role as protector of the three territories, its rotating view fixed in stone. It is worth taking a sideways glance at another provincial Roman healing sanctuary, in Britannia, far away from Bolards, at Lydney overlooking the great River Severn in Gloucestershire. Founded late in the Roman Empire, in the late third to fourth centuries AD, Lydney was dedicated to a British healer deity, Nodens. The most prominent offerings to the god were the several small images of dogs, depicted in profile. One of them, though, is different; it shows the profile of a dog, but its head, turned full-face towards the viewer and with distinctly canine ears, displays a face that is wholly human (Figure 9) (Wheeler and Wheeler 1932, p. 89, pl. XXVI, no. 119). It is also the only one of the nine canine images from the temple that is visually gendered; a jagged row of teats suggests not only its female gender but also that she is lactating. This overt image of fertility echoes a small bone figurine, from the site, of a pregnant (or newly delivered woman), with a prominent navel and her hands clasping her abdomen (Wheeler and Wheeler 1932, p. 89, pl. XXVI, no. 122). At the risk of stretching the evidence too far, it seems to me as though these images project notions not only of fertility (closely linked with healing, as on many cognate sites) but also of the transition and change associated with pregnancy and birth.

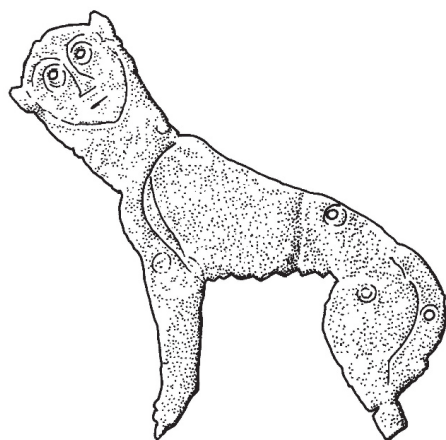


Figure 9. Bronze figurine of a human-faced dog, from the late Roman temple at Lydney, Gloucestershire, UK.

6. Thresholds, Subversion and the Carnavalesque: Theoretical Perspectives

My discussion of the case studies presented in this article resonates with the digressions from the ‘rules’ governing the material world as experienced in real time, as expressed in certain image forms, whether on decorative military Iron Age metalwork or on stone sculptures from Roman Gaul and Britain. What appears to have been happening is that, unlike modern outlooks on the world that see the naturalistic as normative, the archaeological material discussed in this paper persistently disrupts such ‘reality’ viewpoints. In this section, I want to explore possible paths of thinking, in terms of issues that may have been pertinent to the fluidity, surrealism and border-crossing expressed therein and perhaps associated with shamanism.

In a powerful and imaginative interpretation of some decorated Irish Neolithic passage graves—far away from the geo-chronological context of the imagery discussed here—Andrew Cochrane (2012, p. 133) examines the notion that images need not be treated simply as passive, gazed-at objects but as ‘collaborative and dynamic’, to be engaged with in an interactive manner. He speaks of the ability of such art to ‘subvert, invert and deceive the norm’ (Cochrane 2012, p. 135), and to express deep knowledge and issues that transcend the art itself but also address other spheres. These might include those associated with societal relationships, conflict, environment and religion. He goes on to examine the idea of the ‘carnavalesque’, something that happens when the themes of carnival invert, subvert or exaggerate real life. At its centre are the notions of fluidity, change and the desire to express ‘otherness’ in order to draw attention to the instability of and the need to challenge habit (Stam 1989, p. 86). Cochrane argues for the paradox of the ‘permanence of change’ (2012, 143), the celebration of the grotesque and the hidden. Subversion, in whatever form, creates connection by stimulating anxieties and shock that affect individuals but also groups, with a shared experience of the unexpected (Cochrane 2012, p. 154).

Granted that Cochrane is referring specifically to the tomb art inside Irish passage graves, is it appropriate to apply such thinking to any of the ‘subversive’ images from the Iron Age and Roman period considered in this paper? For instance, might the double heads on the Tal-y-Llyn shield plaques have been designed to unnerve, or the complicated and subversive images on the carving from Bolards to engender unrest? I am not saying that the desire to rock or shock was necessarily a primary intention, but that it is worth considering as a factor in the choice of image-making, especially in contexts that were themselves challenging, such as illness, war and death. The Gundestrup Cauldron, with its recurrent transitional, species-shifting imagery, may have been a piece of liturgical, even sacrificial regalia, associated with blood and killing. The subject matter of the circular basal

plate might provide a clue to the vessel's purpose, for it depicts a dying bull, perhaps a wild aurochs, its head once adorned with antlers that were perhaps inserted and removed according to changing seasons and/or changing rituals. However, when in place, the antlers would have stuck up from the bottom of the cauldron, perhaps rearing up from the blood or other liquid contained within it, to visualise and realise the act of sacrifice.

Acting as something akin to a 'drone' in bagpipe music or a subtle undertone to tropes of subversion and fluidity is the theme of the threshold, the subject of a major folklore colloquium hosted by the Katharine Briggs Club in the early 1990s (Davidson 1993b). Any threshold, whether physical or symbolic, involves concepts of both barrier and connection between 'here' and 'beyond'. In many parts of the Indian sub-continent, notably in the states of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu in the south, thresholds are freighted with meaning, whether in domestic or sacred environments. In Tamil Nadu, sprawling and meandering designs, known as *kolams* and made with chalk powder, adorn the thresholds of houses. Drawn by women as soon as they prepare for the day's work, these are gradually erased by foot traffic as the day wears on. 'Thus begins the random process of erasure which is an integral part of the practice' (Dohmen 2001, p. 9). Whilst nuanced interpretation of these designs is not easy for western academics to achieve (and the meanings associated with them are undoubtedly highly complex), there is some mileage in making links between *kolams*—and other Indian threshold art—and transition points, which can be perceived as 'weak' (Dohmen 2001, p. 14) and in need of strengthening. These might vary from ideas about protecting the home or private shrine from whatever may threaten it to the acknowledgement of calendrical changes. On a visit to Karnataka in January 2020, I was very aware of threshold rituals associated with major Hindu religious centres, such as Badami (Michell 2017, pp. 42–75); it is obligatory both to doff shoes before crossing into sacred space and to avoid treading on the decorated threshold stones themselves. (We can relate the latter to seasonal transitions in other cultures—from Hallowe'en to carnival festivals.) Hilda Ellis Davidson (1993a, p. 8) comments on the marking of such boundaries 'sometimes by violence and mayhem, the permitted overturning of customary order during the time of transition, creating a period of confusion before normal living is restored' (1993, p. 8).

A prime example of border-crossing from the past is the Roman festival of the Saturnalia, where, for a week in mid-winter, the world turned topsy-turvy, and slaves made merry, exchanged roles with their masters and were waited on at the dinner table. (Macrobius, *Saturnalia* 1.24. pp. 22–3; Beard et al. 1998a, p. 50; 1998b, p. 124). Rites of passage, too, are often associated with extreme and subversive behaviour; witness the sometimes-rowdy custom, in our own society, of stag and hen parties, including the wearing of bizarre costumes and excessive alcohol consumption, to mark and celebrate the change from single to married status. Thus, thresholds are acknowledged and breached, while a reference is always made to before and after and the connective bridge between. In a sense, shapeshifting is happening in all these examples, and running through many boundary rituals is the notion of risk. For instance, in Irish and Welsh mythology, junctions between temporal periods, such as May Eve, were perceived as perilous, perhaps because these were the times 'of no being', when the spirits could invade the world of the earth. In Ireland, the danger of May 1 was associated with threats to milk and butter (Lysaght 1993, p. 31). In the collection of Welsh medieval mythic tales, known as the *Mabinogion*, May Eve was the time when new-born babies might be spirited away from their parents, as in the story of Rhiannon, Pwyll and their infant son Pryderi (Davies 2007, pp. 16–20; Aldhouse-Green 2015b, pp. 82–83). This notion of danger feeds into the role of the shaman in many societies, past and present, someone who could assume many physical forms and, by so doing, was able to penetrate the otherworld and liaise with its spirit inhabitants. Each shamanic transition is in itself a perilous act that can result in severe injury or death to the shaman for trespassing in the spirit world.

7. Looking Both Ways: Fluidity, Subversion and Shamanism

Boundaries and thresholds look both ways (Richardson 1993, pp. 92–93) in material space, time and a host of other dimensions involving portals: towards the living and the dead; between illness and health; war and peace; the worlds of the earth and spirit; animal and human. Many are expressed or imaged in physical ways that exhibit oppositional forms possibly representing much broader issues. Such are all the images discussed in this paper, and, of course, the case studies selected are merely a tiny proportion of the whole panoply of material culture relating to the symbolic and often contrapuntal iconography of the Iron Age and Roman Britain and Europe.

Is there a case for making links between shamanism and the images considered here? To get a handle on this it is necessary first to set out some of the principles most commonly associated with shamans (past and present) and, second, to take another brief glance at the subjects of the case studies presented in order to test the viability of proposed connections. There is a multiplicity of literature on shamans and shamanism, but I always return to what for me is the most cogent and concise exploration set out by Piers Vitebsky (1995). Shamans are essentially ‘go-between’s, their power residing in their ability to penetrate the boundaries between the earth and spirit worlds, for the purposes of divining the will of the spirits, liaising with them for the benefit (including healing) of people in their communities and maintaining fluid connections between the layers of the cosmos. Fluidity and elision are key elements to both the being and the expression of shamans. The capacity to segue between the porous borders (for them) may be displayed by gender-crossing, subverting species boundaries, transference from material to spirit realms and other forms of transgression, including time, and triplistic expression, which, in some cultures, taps into the notion of the three layers in cosmic geography (Vitebsky 1995, pp. 15–17). All of this ‘grammar’, perhaps interwoven with cosmic geographies and beliefs, occurs in one or another of the images referenced in this paper. I would not go so far as to identify any of the objects studied here as ‘shamanic equipment’ (Price 2001, p. 8), but it is—I think—permissible to allow thoughts about a possible shamanic background to the symbolism encountered therein. Might the triple-faced image at Bolards even reflect a shamanistic association between the three layers of the cosmos (upper, middle and underworld), such a central tenet in the near past and present of so many shamanic communities in the north?

If we are to acknowledge that shamanism might be associated with later prehistoric and provincial Roman cult expression, it is necessary to look at other elements in cognate material culture to see whether they offer support for this thesis. In ‘modern’ interpretations of shamanism, it is trance or ‘altered states of consciousness’ that provide portals for transgression and for entry into the spirit world (Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1990; Lewis-Williams 1997; Dronfield 1996). Vectors for the achievement of trance state—or out-of-body experience—vary across shamanistic cultures, but include altered breathing rhythms, dancing, drumming, chanting, overheating (for example, in First Nation American sweat lodges) and sensory deprivation (none of which leave firm archaeological footprints). However, other mechanisms for entering trance states can leave traces, particularly where psychotropic substances are involved. There is also some tangible evidence that hallucinogens were used in later prehistoric and Roman period Britain and Europe. Andrew Sherratt (1991, p. 52) alluded to the “abundant finds” of cannabis from the rich wagon burial of a chieftain at Hochdorf in Germany in the sixth century BC. Incense burners from a Gallo-Roman underground sanctuary at Chartres were clearly used in esoteric rituals; they are inscribed with obscure god names, summoned up by someone called Gaius Verius Sedatus, who claimed himself the guardian of the spirits (Joly 2012). The ‘Doctor’s Grave’ at Stanway, Camulodunum, dating to around the time of the Roman invasion of Britannia in the mid-first century AD, was that of a high-ranking individual of the East Anglian tribe of the Trinovantes. The objects placed in the tomb included medical equipment, sets of what might have been rods, perhaps used in divination, and a copper alloy bowl whose spout contained residues of *Artemisia*, a known psychotropic plant (Crummy et al. 2007, pp. 201–53). These are just three of many pieces of evidence

suggesting the use of substances perhaps used by people who, in other societies, would be identified as shamans.

8. Conclusions

This paper has sought to offer a shamanic context to certain forms of symbolic image presentation. All the case studies considered here exhibit elements associated with liminality and the subversive manipulation of ‘norms’. Species and gender crossing, together with the expression of restless movement between states of being, all fit into a broadly shamanistic model, where change, fluidity and connections form a network of oscillations between realms of existence: between life and death; stasis and movement; illness and health; war and peace; and—ultimately—between the domains of material humanity and the spirits.

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Article

The Reality of Casas Grandes Potters: Realistic Portraits of Spirits and Shamans

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Abstract: Most Native American groups believed in a form of animism in which spirit essence(s) infused forces of nature (e.g., the wind and thunder), many living plants and creatures, and many inanimate objects. This animism created other-than-human persons in which spirits were fused with matter that allowed them to interact with and even influence humans. Art in Western culture tends to denote “imagination”, and many scholars studying Native American art bring a similar perspective to their analyses. However, many Native Americans do not equate art with imagination in the same way, but instead use art to realistically portray these other-than-human persons, even when they are not typically visible in the natural world (e.g., the Southwestern horned-plumed serpent). Here, we apply a cognitive framework to evaluate the interplay of spirits at various levels that were created as Casas Grandes artisans used art as a means of depicting the inherent structure of the Casas Grandes spirit world. In doing so, they created links between ceremonially important objects such as pots and spirits that transformed these objects into newly created animated beings. The art thus simultaneously reflected the structure of the unseen world while also helping to determine the characteristics of these newly created other-than-human persons. One technique commonly used was to decorate objects with literal depictions of spirit beings (e.g., horned-plumed serpents) that would produce a natural affinity among the ceremonial objects and the spirit creatures. This affinity in turn allowed the animated ceremonial objects to mediate the interaction between humans and spirits. This approach transcends a view in which Casas Grandes art is considered symbolically significant and instead emphasizes the art as a component that literally helped create other-than-human collaborators that aided Casas Grandes people as they navigate ontologically significant relationships.

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“Spirit is more than consciousness, and because it is capable of causing things to happen in this world it is a form of power. Much of the shaman’s work consists of harnessing it.”—Vitebsky (2001, p. 22)

Many indigenous groups throughout the world hold that spirits affect and structure reality (Vitebsky 2001). This view typically takes the form of animism, an ontology that holds that spirit essences animate the universe, structure the world of the here-and-now, and are present in nature (e.g., the wind and thunder), in living plants and animals, and in many nonorganic objects (e.g., certain mountains, stones, and ponds). Some groups throughout Mesoamerica and North America believed spirits have weight and are material (Carr 2020; Carrasco 1999, p. 14; Jones [1906] 1968). This entails that the spirit and physical worlds are not inherently separate, as they are typically considered in Western (Cartesian) perspectives. Given that spirits also have their own volition and agency, they can consequently impact the physical world. Spirits are therefore considered to be “other-than-human beings” that have a physical presence and agency that exists separate from humans, but they can interact with humans in cooperative or antagonistic ways (Hallowell 1960; see also Eliade 1964; Vitebsky 2001, pp. 12–13). Interacting with these animated beings is a substantial focus of many cultural systems, given that there is often no distinction between

the factors that affect daily life and the other-than-human beings that infuse the world (Bird-David 2018; Carr 2020; Hallowell 1960; Harvey 2005; Stuckey 2010). For example, the treatment of illness in many cultures focuses on the underlying spiritual causes. Weather phenomena such as rain are brought by, and are indeed synonymous with, certain types of other-than-human beings. The migration of animals and the success of crops growing in the field is a result of the action of spirits (Vitebsky 2001, p. 106), and so on. Completing any task or asking for any blessing is fundamentally based on social/reciprocal relationships between humans and other-than-human persons (Eller 2007; Halifax 1979, pp. 5–6, 1982; Wallis 2013, p. 315). Thus, in these societies, there is no clear distinction between the physical and spiritual worlds, and most activities are reflective of social relationships among humans and non-human agents. In the North American Southwest, these spiritual relationships are so central and so pervasive that researchers such as Fowles (2013) contend the word *religion* has no real analytic meaning in Puebloan culture. Efforts to negotiate with these spiritual relationships permeates daily activity—*religion*, such as it is, is simply living the Puebloan way of life. This is true as well for many other Native American groups (Lee 1952). Here, we explore the active role of art as a form of animism by using a cognitive archaeological approach. We demonstrate that art directly represents and links the physical and metaphysical/spiritual worlds, and thus acts as a direct conduit between worlds. It is therefore central to the creation and negotiation of the animated world of the Medio Period Casas Grandes people of the North American Southwest.

1. Cognitive Archaeology and the Casas Grandes Medio Period

Cognitive archaeology's core goal is to use the archaeological record in combination with psychological and ethnographic models to understand past conceptual structures (Renfrew 1994; Whitley 2020). Culture provides people with a means of categorizing, organizing, and understanding their world, including its spiritual components. The conceptual structures are embedded in a culture's cosmology (a metaphysical view that defines the nature and natural order of the universe) and ontology (view of the nature and structure of being), in that these create but are also challenged and/or are reinforced by the cultural framework. There are many ways that cultures can organize their world, but there are repeated ontological frameworks reflected across culture and through time. Human minds and human bodies lead to cultural similarities even as they produce cultural differences. One of the most common reoccurring patterns is animism, which is reflected cross-culturally in various ways. Even in Western society, animism is common as children often conceive of their toys as alive and as certain religions view otherwise inanimate objects as empowered with special spiritual potency (e.g., Catholic relics and many religious pilgrimage sites) (Harvey 2013, p. 5). Yet, this kind of spiritual potency is especially common in hunting and gathering cultures and even among more politically complex cultures across the New World (Bonvillain 2001, pp. 4–5; Carr 2020; Evans 2004, p. 34; Friedel et al. 1993) (see also Newman 2018, who talks about more implicit forms of animism in current American society). So prevalent is animism worldwide that Marvin Harris (1989, p. 399) suggests that it is "the basis of *all* religious thought" (see also Moro et al. 2008, p. 16; our emphasis).

The North American Southwest is one area where animism is common (Brown and Walker 2008; Conti and Walker 2015; Mills and Ferguson 2008). This includes the Medio Period Casas Grandes occupation (AD 1200 to 1450) (VanPool and Newsome 2012; VanPool and VanPool 2016; Walker and McGahee 2006). The Casas Grandes culture spread across northern Mexico (especially the northernmost portion of Chihuahua) and the southwestern United States (especially the southern edge of New Mexico). The Medio Period system was centered on Paquimé, a large settlement on the west bank of the Rio Casas Grandes (Di Peso 1974; Figure 1). Paquimé reflects a higher level of political complexity than is typical of surrounding communities (Cunningham 2017; Douglas and MacWilliams 2015; Rakita 2009) and was a religious and political center that dominated a 100,000 square kilometer region (Whalen and Pitezel 2015, p. 121). As the economic and ritual heart of the Medio Period system, Paquimé included a large apartment-like room block filled with

habitation and ritual rooms, platform mounds where public ceremonies were completed, a reservoir system that brought running water through the community, two I-shaped ballcourts and a T-shaped ballcourt, and large agave roasting ovens (Di Peso 1974). The architecture is atypical for most Southwestern groups in terms of its size and embellishment (Figure 2). It is massively ‘overbuilt’ with adobe walls often over 50 cm thick and is ornately constructed (Bagwell 2006; Di Peso 1974; Whalen and Minnis 2001). When the Spanish first visited the site in the 1500s, they likened its beauty to a Roman city, filled with colorful paved alleyways and beautifully painted mosaics on walls rising three or more stories tall (Gamboa 2002, p. 41). The elites who lived there set themselves at the apex of one of the most politically complex New World cultural systems north of Mesoamerica (Cunningham 2017).

The economic system at Paquimé included specialized craft production above the household level, including the likely specialized production of Ramos Polychrome, a distinctive variant of Casas Grandes polychromes (Figure 3). Ramos polychrome was likely made by specialists at or near Paquimé (Rakita and Antillón 2015, pp. 62–65; Sall 2018; Topi et al. 2018; Triadan et al. 2018) but was found in substantial quantities throughout the region (Carpenter 2002). It appears to be specifically associated with the rise of Paquimé’s elites (Cunningham 2017; VanPool and VanPool 2020; Whalen and Minnis 2012). The polychrome is decorated with symbolically significant designs that include the horned-plumed serpent, a strong emphasis on duality, and highly structured and repetitive design elements (Guzmán 2015; Hendrickson 2003; VanPool and VanPool 2002; Whalen and Minnis 2012). Ramos Polychrome is one of the most widely distributed ceramic types in the Southwest, and its relative proportion in a settlement’s ceramic assemblage is often viewed as a measure of integration with the Paquimé elites (Carpenter 2002).



Figure 1. The location of Paquimé.

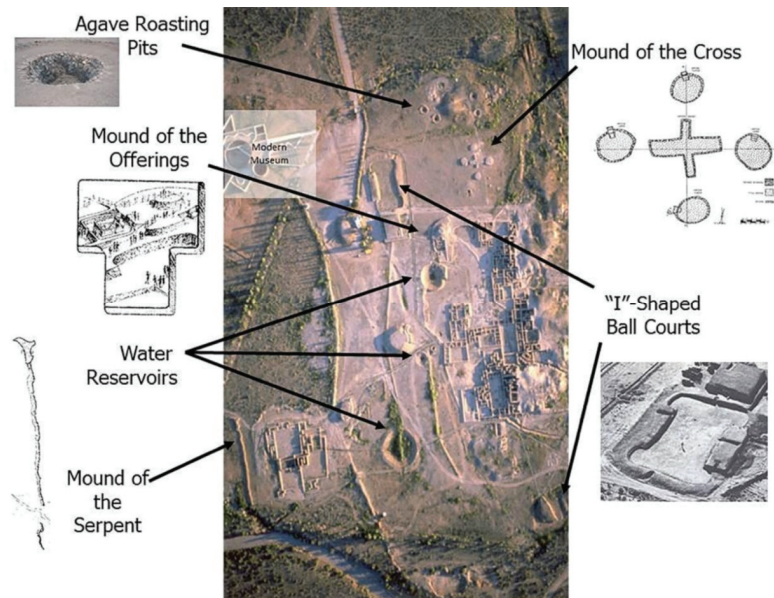


Figure 2. An aerial view of Paquimé, with significant locations indicated.



Figure 3. An example of Ramos polychrome. Courtesy of El Paso Centennial Museum, University of Texas, El Paso (cat. no. 38.4.1).

We have suggested elsewhere that the underlying theme reflected in Paquimé's architecture, pottery, and general material culture was the concept of shamanic transformation associated with the ruling elites (VanPool 2003a; VanPool and VanPool 2007). We based this argument on a curious design, the pound sign, that was primarily found on male effigies, painted figures with headdresses, and painted anthropomorphs. The male effigies were sometimes shown smoking cylinder pipes while kneeling on one knee or were simply shown kneeling. These male effigies depicted men wearing sashes and distinctive ceremonial sandals that were indicative of high-status clothing (VanPool et al. 2017). The pound sign was also depicted on painted images of males wearing horned-plumed serpent headdresses, individuals with horns growing out of their heads, and anthropomorphic individuals with macaw heads who were shown interacting with supernatural creatures, including horned-plumed serpents (Figure 4; VanPool and VanPool 2007). These images reflected shamans starting their shamanic journey by smoking sacred (hallucinogenic) tobacco, dancing, and then becoming macaw-headed beings who flew to the spirit world to interact directly with spirits while in altered states of consciousness (VanPool and VanPool 2007). They would then return to the mundane world of the here-and-now as they regained consciousness (VanPool 2003a; see also Wilbert 1987). Each stage of this transformation was reflected in the shamanic art depicted on the Casas Grandes polychromes (Figure 4). No single vessel reflected the entire shamanic transformation and spirit journey. It was the pound sign that connected the male smoker effigies, the painted individuals in headdress, and the macaw-head anthropomorphs into a related class of shamanic vessels and imagery.



Figure 4. The sequence of Casas Grandes shamans smoking tobacco depicted on Ramos Polychrome. The sequence starts with the bottom left male effigy jar, continues to the painted dancer adopting a ritual position while wearing a horned-plumed serpent headdress (bottom middle), to a transforming shaman with his headdress off to the side (bottom right), and then as the fully transformed shaman with a horned-plumed serpent tucked under his arm and a spirit bird helper riding on his leg (top image is a rollout from a bowl). Note that the pound signs are consistently depicted on the figures.

The Medio Period shamanic practice built on previous traditions found throughout West Mexico, northern Mexico, western Texas, and the preceding Mimbres Mogollon tradition (AD 1000 to 1115). These include shamanic traditions based on peyote, datura, tobacco, and other entheogens (Berlant et al. 2017; Boyd 1996; Huckell and VanPool 2006; Robinson et al. 2020). The type of shamanism practiced during the Medio Period may have spread into other areas of the Southwest. VanPool (2009) suggests that datura and tobacco, which produce different visual and neurological perceptions, were used in rituals at Pottery Mound based on kiva murals, recovered datura seeds, and pipes. Ethnographers debate the degree to which Southwestern people practiced shamanism, but it is generally agreed that a shamanic world view is present throughout the Southwest (Ellis 1979, p. 444; Hays-Gilpin and LeBlanc 2007, p. 127; Lamphere 1983). In fact, Lamphere (1983, p. 755) states, “Pueblo religion seems to be based on an essentially shamanic worldview adapted to the needs of an agricultural people.” This includes the animistic perspective we discuss here.

2. Animism and Non-Human Agents

For animists, “humans” and “objects” are potentially equally “things” and “persons”—things-as-persons and persons-as-things—with diverse agentive qualities, situated within wider-than-human communities. (Wallis 2013, p. 314)

Related to the use of spiritual power within an animistic framework are concepts such as the “soul,” “personhood,” and “spirit.” A. Irving Hallowell was one of the first anthropologists to realize this. In his initial exploration of “Bear Ceremonialism,” Hallowell (1926) clearly showed that Cartesian ontology, which distinguishes between the spiritual and physical worlds and is the intellectual basis of modern Western science, was useless for understanding the Ojibwa (Harvey 2005). The Ojibwa and many other Native American cultures did not adhere to the Cartesian divide (Harvey 2005; Morrison 2015; Stuckey 2010; VanPool and Newsome 2012). To the contrary, the world could only be understood within these frameworks as the union of spirit and matter—spirits have physical components and physical matter can be inalienably imbued with spirit. Underlying this union was spiritual power, either conceived of as an impersonal force that helped structure reality or, more common in New World native groups, as distinct, conscious entities that animated the world. Ojibwa and other Native North America ontologies generally focused on interacting with these forces. Hallowell (1960, p. 43) found that the Ojibwa conceived of the spirit agents as “persons,” with their own agency and volition. Humans were “persons” but there were other-than-human persons too. The other-than-human persons had emotional states and volition like humans, which allowed humans to interact with and negotiate with them.

Thus, for the Ojibwa and many other Native American groups, there is a world full of persons that have human qualities such as an internal vital essence, self-awareness, personal identity, autonomy, and volition, although it is equally important to note that not everything has a personhood (Carr 2020; Hallowell 1960; Stuckey 2010). Some stones, plants, or walls are just stones, plants, or walls. This makes it even more important to recognize those objects that have personhood and treat them accordingly. Again, Southwestern Native American cultures reflect this general pattern. Entities such as the kachina animate and permeate the Puebloan worldview (Parsons [1939] 1996) and have both a physical and spiritual presence that is tied to but not constrained by the kachina masks that masked dancers wear during ceremonies. The kachina themselves live in their own village as other-than-human persons and with their own social ties among each other and other spirit beings. The kachinas will leave their village for part of the year to inhabit the masks (Bunzel 1992). The masks in part gain their volition and power from the fact that they accurately depict the kachina they represent. This complex relationship among humans, ceremonially created objects that are human-made other-than-human persons, and the underlying spirits is not unusual. Sometimes, the objects can actually become part of the spirit entity. For example, a stone in the plaza of Tsi’ya (Zia Pueblo) is animated with *Gacitiwa* (Whiteman), an other-than-human person who is given offerings of ground maize

and can grant supernatural power to virtuous people (White 1962, p. 114). Rituals are used among the Pueblos and Navajo to animate houses. Webster (2010) notes that Navajo consider their *hooghan* (a.k.a. hogan, which are semisubterranean structures traditionally used as houses and meeting places) as other-than-human persons who are created using the Blessingway ceremony, with the active participation of supernatural entities called to the event in part through sand paintings. The *hooghan* mediate the social relationships among humans, directly reflect the structure of the Navajo universe (which is conceived of as a giant *hooghan*), and share “blessings and a reciprocal relationship with the Diné [Navajo] who share his/her space” (Webster 2010, p. 9). As such, the *hooghan* “have rational faculties, will, voice, desires, and needs held in common with human persons” (Webster 2010, p. 126).

We suggest that a Western scientific view that looks at *hooghans* as structures and *kachina* masks simply as ritual paraphernalia misses the important social and conceptual roles they play in creating and maintaining social relationships in Native culture. They are not objects but are instead people. From such an animistic perspective, the important issue is *who* they are as persons. This is remarkably different than the scientific perspective that tends to focus on functional/systemic classification related to *what* something is.

3. Shamans, Spirits, and Art

A Siberian shaman's costume “represents the mysteries experienced by the shaman, and is the dwelling place of the spirits”. (Vitebsky 2001, p. 83)

Although everyone within animistic societies interacts with other-than-human persons, some individuals are specifically tasked with mediating human interaction with the potent spirits animating the world around them. The spirits themselves may select who they wish to serve in this role, often over the objections of the chosen humans (Black 1973, p. 55; Eliade 1964; Vitebsky 2001). New World ethnographies are replete with examples of shamans, mediums, and other ritual specialists that actively resist the call to become a ritual specialist after a dream or other event made it clear they were selected (Eliade 1964). These individuals frequently acquiesce to become shamans only after a prolonged illness forces them to obey the spirits’ call (Eliade 1964; Halifax 1979, 1982; Vitebsky 2001, p. 57; Whitley 2009). For example, shaman initiates among the Yuki of northern California reportedly are called by being directly confronted by *Taikomol* (their chief deity) or another deity, which often causes the chosen person to bleed from “his body openings” (Miller 1979, p. 24). Often, the only way to relieve themselves of the pain and physical ailments was to acknowledge the spirits and let them guide the afflicted through the transformation process to become a shaman (Eliade 1964; Kasten 1955, p. 64; Vitebsky 2001). Incipient shamans among the Huichol of Western Mexico likewise are selected for their future profession by *ʼUrukáme*, a benevolent deity that helps with hunting, curing, fertility, and other beneficial aspects of human efforts (Furst 1967, p. 101). When *ʼUrukáme* selects a man, he will become ill until cured by another shaman. The illness is easy to cure but can only be cured by a shaman recognizing the illness for what it is and performing the correct ritual to begin the process of transitioning the ill person into a shaman. The healing requires the new shaman to “journey to the Other world” (Furst 1967, p. 101; see also Eliade 1964; Halifax 1979, p. 12). Quoting personal communication from Johannes Wilbert, Furst (1967, p. 102) suggests that the illness caused by *ʼUrukáme* is not a malicious act but is better understood as the recipient having not yet “transcended his physical limitations, i.e., [he] has not achieved that breakthrough in plane which is essential to shamanism and which manifests itself in the classic shamanic phenomena of initiatory ecstasy, sickness, death and rebirth.” In other words, *ʼUrukáme* has provided the incipient shaman with spiritual power his body and soul are not yet able to contain. Only through his own transformation into a shaman can the afflicted person gain the capability of dealing with the gifted spiritual power he cannot discard. Refusing to accept the spirits’ invitation can lead to death (Kroeber 1970, p. 245; Vitebsky 2001, p. 57).

While shamans hold a special place in animistic frameworks, other people are also impacted by and influence spirits and spiritual power. Here, we suggest that artists and craftsmen (who may or may not be shamans themselves) also serve a significant role. Within animistic systems, art transcends the physical presentation and contains active spiritual power (see also [Vitebsky 2001](#); [Zedeño 2009](#)). Put more directly, the art can be and often is either its own other-than-human being or is a significant part of an other-than-human being that helps determine the entity's characteristics. As such, it is a means of both invoking certain spiritual properties and negotiating with independently existing non-human agents. Our focus thus is on the active role artists play in regulating and fostering beneficial spiritual interactions among their people and the non-human agents that animate their world. Often, artists use their art in tandem with other practices. For example, shamans are frequently also significant artists in their societies. It is the spirits who guide shamans while they create their songs, poems, and images that are portrayed in various mediums, including paintings on wood and hides, carved wooden and stone effigies and palettes, sand paintings, and pecked or painted rock art. Much of the art itself acts as the conduit of literal interaction between humans and spirits ([Vitebsky 2001](#)).

The intricate designs painted on the shaman's drum often help him/her traverse the cosmos by providing a map, for example ([Halifax 1982](#); [Potapov 1999](#); [Vitebsky 2001](#), p. 82). Often, the designs on the shamans' regalia and equipment are thought to be the spirits themselves ([Potapov 1999](#); [Vitebsky 2001](#), p. 83). These examples of art do not just symbolize the spirit world, but instead serve as active, spiritually potent participants in ritual, exercising their own volition that helps people transcend the world of the here-and-now. The drum as a map represents the reality of the realms that shamans travel through during ACS ([Potapov 1999](#); [Vitebsky 2001](#)). The art's very existence demonstrates the reality of these typically unseen worlds, just as a photograph of Niagara Falls reflects its reality to someone who has never visited them. As [Halifax \(1982, p. 11\)](#) paradoxically notes, then, "shamanic art is not art." These items and images make the unknown knowable by materializing the metaphysical world. They also enable the shaman to have some control over the powerful forces of the *mysterium* ([Halifax 1982, p. 11](#)). Shamanic "art" itself thus has animistic powers, a view that exceeds the typical perspectives of Western, Cartesian ontology (see also [Roe 2004](#); [Wallis 2013](#)). While Western scholars readily accept that art presents religious themes that describe aspects of the spirit world (e.g., the Sistine Chapel's famous depiction of Adam and God reaching out to each other), art within New World societies is often an active, literal component of the spirit world. In fact, it can sometimes be understood (both in terms of its presence and its significance) based on its functional linkage to other aspects of reality (including spirits) ([Roe 2004, p. 101](#)).

Our use of "art" also fits the processual relativist approach outlined by [Svašek \(2007\)](#), who suggests that it is more useful to define "when is art" instead of "what is art." Art is discursive frameworks in which conceptual structures (in our case, a formalized religious and symbolic structure) and social structures (in our case, shamanic specialists) interact to give the art a social relevance. Such "expressive culture" facilitates and indeed requires discursive interactions, as the art prompts responses from those involved in its production and use. The production and use of art may not even be considered distinct steps, as illustrated by [Roe's \(2004, p. 101\)](#) discussion of "doneness," and the idea among many Native American groups that "art" is never completed. In our case study, discourse occurs at different scales: the shaman and the artist (who might be the same individual filling linked roles), the shaman and the object (as living beings), the object and the spirits (as distinct or possibly linked beings), and the shaman and the spirits (with their discourse facilitated by the object). This is an operational view of art, that defines it based on what it does, as opposed to what it is, but this approach also fits the creation of Navajo sand paintings used to gather and focus spiritual energy for healing, a shell trumpet used to summon the kachinas to human villages, spoken words and songs that are considered alive in-and-of-themselves, and other animated "art" found throughout the New World.

Shamanic “art” (and indeed shamanism itself) is inherently linked to animism. As such, shamans must *realistically* portray the embodiment of spiritual principles and creatures. In other words, the art must accurately portray the underlying reality of the world, including the parts that are typically hidden (e.g., the physical reality of the Under World). A drum with incorrectly drawn designs will lead the shaman astray, potentially causing his spirit to endlessly wander the world looking for his way back to his people. Likewise, a poorly drawn sand painting will not attract the Holy Wind or will fail to place the spirits in the right framework to cooperate with humans (Laughlin 2004). While Bear (a powerful spirit) can help Puebloan and other Native American healers cure illnesses, he can also cause human death (Hallowell 1926; Parsons [1939] 1996; Vitebsky 2001). Bear and similar other-than-human persons must be approached carefully and with the proper respect, using the appropriate prayers, icons, and talismans. Failure to do so can be catastrophic for the individual and even a village. Art as volition is central to this effort. As a result, a significant part of shamanic ritual focuses on ensuring that the art properly reflects the other-than-human persons involved and to ensure they are approached in a manner that encourages their benevolence (Goodman 1988, 1990; Laughlin 2004).

In keeping with the general structure of animism, the ethnographic and archaeological records indicate that much of Southwestern art is focused on religious themes and establishing relationships with other-than-human beings. It might be created by either shamans/priests or under the direction of these religious specialists in order to facilitate human interaction with them. Take, for example, the Southwestern horned-plumed serpent, which is a powerful deity that can be benevolent or vengeful, depending on the context. The horned-plumed serpent (sometimes perceived as an individual and other times perceived as a race of creatures) spans and negotiates the Upper, Middle (terrestrial), and Lower Worlds. He can herd clouds in the air or move across the land to create arroyos, but most of the time he is an underground creature that can cause earthquakes and control underground water (which comes out as springs and ponds). When benevolent, he can provide gentle rains, snow, and allow springs and rivers to flow (Dutton 1963, p. 49; Parsons [1939] 1996; Schaafsma 1980, p. 238). He is also associated with maize and natural fertility (Taube 2000). He has prescribed rituals and sacred items that are used to communicate with him and to represent him in significant ceremonies. Some of these include a six-foot-long effigy used in Zuni ceremonies and shell trumpets that Puebloan priests blow to represent his voice (Mills and Ferguson 2008, pp. 341–42; Parsons [1939] 1996).

The horned-plumed serpent is also represented as painted images on pottery, pecked images on rock art, and in conjunction with Puebloan kachinas (Frank and Harlow 1990: see inside of the bowl of Figure 57; Schaafsma 1980). He is associated with clouds and frogs when depicted on historic pottery (Frank and Harlow 1990, pp. 56, 66, 72; Stevenson 1904: Plate XXXVI). The utility of these images is defined by how well they correspond to the underlying (culturally specific) reality of the spirit world. Further, the objects themselves are often other-than-human entities that are animated and work to negotiate among humans, the horned-plumed serpent, and other agents (e.g., the shell trumpets that call and impersonate the voice of the horned-plumed serpent are animated other-than-human beings (Mills and Ferguson 2008). As Mills and Ferguson (2008, p. 343) observe, horned-plumed serpent effigies at Hopi and Zuni “are animated in these performances” and “are the beings they represent, not simply images of them, because their spiritual essence gives life to their physical form.”

Likewise, the prayer sticks of the Pueblos are created by combining specific elements, each with their own meaning based on color and material, into combinations that create a more elaborate spiritual message. Just as words can be used to create sentences, the various feathers, paints, clays, beads, and so forth used to make a prayer stick can be placed in specific combinations to carry the appropriate message/information (Bunzel 1992; Parsons [1939] 1996). The artisan is thus creating a new other-than-human person as they create a prayer stick, which helps the artisan interact with (previously existing) beings.

This framework is made explicit in the following prayer recorded by Bunzel (1992, p. 485) that was said by Puebloan artisans as they made their prayer sticks:

We made our plume wands into living beings.
 With the flesh of our mother,
 Clay Woman,
 Four times clothing our plume wands with flesh,
 We made them into living beings.
 Holding them fast,
 We made them our representatives in prayer.

Animistic sensibility like that mentioned above is equally applicable to shamanic crafts. In the case of shamans, the creation of art can serve at least two purposes: it is a means by which they create spirit helpers imbued with the necessary characteristics, and it can record aspects of the spirit world, thereby making the intangible visible. This process parallels the process whereby the spirits reform and reconstruct the incipient shaman to be their own spirit helpers through shamanic illness and the subsequent transformation.

4. The Spirit in Casas Grandes Art

“Spiritual beings are held to affect or control the events of the material world, and man’s life here and hereafter . . . ” (Tylor 1891, p. 426)

Southwestern art acts as a fulcrum for interacting with other-than-human beings. Shrines and religious structures like kivas can act as staging grounds where spiritual power and influence can be gathered and used. As illustrated above, artisans make new animated beings in the form of a shell trumpet, a kachina mask, a pottery effigy, a prayer stick, a shamanic drum, or innumerable other artifacts or features. When shamans are involved, it creates a circular, reciprocal relationship in that the spirits transform the shaman, the shaman makes spirit helpers (their ritual paraphernalia), and the spirit helpers in turn help interact with other-than-human persons. Shamanic creations thus enable shamans to have some control over powerful forces (Halifax 1982, p. 11).

Harkening back to our previous discussion of animistic ontology, we think the subtle but major conceptual shift in archaeological perspectives, from studying *what* something is to *who* something is, is sometimes lost on some scholars who have written on indigenous materiality. Archaeologists and others who have studied prehistoric Southwestern art tend to think about “*what*” is being portrayed on pottery, in rock art, murals, stone carvings, and other media. They may seek to identify the species of animals reflected in painted images (Jett and Moyle 1986; VanPool and VanPool 2009), the activities people are portrayed doing (Munson 2000; VanPool and VanPool 2006), the layout and design structure of decorated fields (Di Peso et al. 1974; Hendrickson 2003), and so forth. These studies are worthwhile, and we do not want to take away from them. Determining that a specific icon reflects a Mesoamerican-inspired horned-plumed serpent provides meaningful insight into past and present artist traditions (Schaafsma 2001). However, in an animistic ontology, such an approach misses a central aspect of the art—its spirit. The spirit of the art may in fact be most central to understanding the art, given that it is the reason the artist made it in the first place (Roe 2004).

For our analysis, we wish to grapple with who specific features and objects from the Medio Period are. One example, a pot, was likely made in conjunction with shamans to serve as a spirit helper. The other, a public ceremonial mound, was likely made at the community level, and likely had roles that tied into but also transcended individual shamans. Our approach to understanding these other-than-human individuals will focus on reconstructing their identity within the animistic world of the Medio Period. Identity is another great anthropological concept that is almost as old as animism. According to many anthropologists, social identity is multifaceted and situationally constructed to include aspects of age, gender, class, ethnicity, religion, and much more. For example,

Kroeber (1917) found that the Zuni constructed their identities based on family units and clans, as well as on membership in fraternities and kiva societies. Furthermore, the Zuni share an identity as members of the Zuni Tribe, as Southwestern Pueblo people, and even more broadly as Native Americans (Ferguson 2004). According to Ferguson (2004, p. 29), “individual Zuni people use all of these identities to define themselves in various social contexts.” This pattern of hierarchically and horizontally organized and context-flexible identity is typical for humans (Jenkins 2014). Other-than-human persons likewise fit within social structures that shift based on context. As a result, these non-human agents have distinct identities that parallel the identities of humans. The Zuni kachina demonstrate this well, as their roles and relationships with humans shift based on the ceremonial calendar, the specific ceremony, and the requirements of the community (Bunzel 1992).

Notions of personhood therefore necessarily involve issues of social identity, which we use as our foothold to consider the cognitive structure underlying examples of Casas Grandes art. The composition of the art, the context of its presentation, and its association with other objects (however defined) will provide information about the other-than-human person’s social identity. Medio Period art focuses on the horned-plumed serpent, the central deity of the Casas Grandes world. Although the horned-plumed serpent and its relationship to humans is literally emphasized in every aspect of Medio Period religious imagery, we focus here on two examples—a painted pot that reflects the structure of the Casas Grandes cosmos and an effigy mound used to divert water at Paquimé.

Our first example is painted designs on a Ramos polychrome that reflect the spirit world through which the Medio Period shamans travelled (Figure 5). Figure 4 shows a sequence of images reflecting the transformation of the shamans into macaw-headed anthropomorphs. Based on ethnographic analogy to New World shamans, as well as shamans from around the world, it is likely that these anthropomorphs could travel through the Middle World of the here-and-now but could also access the Upper World and Lower World, which are typically not fully visible. In their travels, they can perceive the animating essences of the animistic world in a way that emphasizes the spiritual relationships and characters of the other-than-human persons that animated the Casas Grandes world. Figure 5 reflects this shift in perception and location, as the shamans interact with deities that are typically hidden in the world of the here-and-now. This is a rollout drawing of a jar portraying the macaw-headed anthropomorphs. These figures have pound signs on their chests, which reflect that they are part of the same cluster of individuals portrayed in Figure 4 and are shown interacting with supernatural entities, including the horned-plumed serpent, the double-headed macaw diamond that is also portrayed on Figure 3, and the bird spirit helper that is also depicted in Figure 4. This vessel also lacks the highly structured layout typical of Ramos polychromes (and other Casas Grandes vessels). Most Medio Period polychromes (regardless of ceramic type) are decorated using two nearly identical panels limited only to the side of the vessels, such that the vessel can be spun to see a continuous band of similar designs reflected around the entire circumference of the vessel (e.g., the other side of the Ramos polychrome in Figure 3 is similar to the visible side) (Brooks 1973, p. 11; Kidder 1916, p. 261). These panels are often divided into four triangular panels (Hendrickson 2003, p. 23; Kidder 1916, pp. 261–62). Only rarely do designs extend to the lip and bottom of the vessels, as is the case for the designs reflected in Figure 5 (Brooks 1973, p. 11). This repeated structure provides the Medio Period polychromes with a rigid, predictable layout, regardless of type (VanPool and VanPool 2002). The image rolled out in Figure 5 breaks these norms and is unique to our knowledge. The image extends to the bottom of the vessel and lacks the panels and subsequent symmetry reflected in nearly every known Medio Period polychrome. There is little “empty space” on the pot, and the iconography is more complex than typical of other vessels. The intentional abandonment of the normal Casas Grandes polychrome design layout likely reflects that the structure of the physical world of the here-and-now is gone. It instead reflects the world of the shaman, which is “the underlying chaos of the unconceptualized domain which has not yet been made a part of the cosmos by the cultural activity of naming and

defining” (Myerhoff 1976, p. 102), or, to use Turner’s (1969) term, they reached *antistructure*. The shamans’ shift/return to the world of the here-and-now is implied by the fact that their journey is portrayed on this pot. This pot thus makes “the unobservable” visible and as such is a literal, physical depiction of the underlying nature of reality.



Figure 5. Casas Grandes spiritual realm. Drawn and colored based on a rollout from Justin Kerr, private collection No. K1548.

The reality of the spirits and the shaman are reflected in their repeated representation on other pots and various media, including rock art. In fact, the horned-plumed serpent as an icon is frequently pecked into rock faces at springs throughout the Casas Grandes region (Schaafsma 1998). It is also painted as an icon and a motif on pottery and is disproportionately found on male effigies (VanPool et al. 2017). Another important spirit being is the double-headed macaw diamond (Figures 3 and 5). It is a painted design that is disproportionately associated with women effigies and other feminine designs (VanPool et al. 2017). We do not know what the Casas Grandes people called the double-headed macaw diamond or what it meant, but we speculate that it brought together the concept of the twins in a single deity, with one looking up and the other looking down. Perhaps the directionality of one head pointing up and the other pointing down invokes the notion of rotation and the upper and lower worlds being united. Due to its placement with macaw-headed shamans, the horned-plumed serpent, and the tutelary birds (which we discuss in the next paragraph) in Figure 5, we suggest that it was of comparable importance to the Casas Grandes folks as the horned-plumed serpent, although it is not as commonly depicted in other aspects of iconography.

We suggest that the distinctive bird represented with the shamans in Figures 4 and 5 is a tutelary spirit. Casas Grandes artisans frequently depicted animals with enough detail to allow their genus and even species to be determined; for example, effigies and painted images depict the same distinguishing characteristics modern biologists use to determine animal species (VanPool and VanPool 2009). Among the animals that are clearly depicted are snakes (e.g., western coral snakes, *Micruroides euryzanthus*; Sonoran Mountain kingsnakes/New Mexico milksnakes, *Lampropeltis pyromelana*/L. *triangulum*; western diamondback rattlesnakes, *Crotalus atrox*), birds (e.g., barn owls, *Tytonidae* sp.; horned owls, *Bubo virginianus*; killdeer, *Charadrius vociferus*; as well as the previously mentioned macaws, *Ara macao* and *Ara militaris*), and even likely mud turtles (*Kinosternon sonoriense*) (see VanPool and VanPool 2007, p. 107; 2009). Yet, no bird in the Casas Grandes region has the distinctive characteristics of the tutelary bird, with its distinctive head crest and body shape. This bird is depicted in different styles (VanPool 2003b), but it typically has a triangular body and two pairs of two feathers on its head, one pair of feathers are pointing forward and one pointing backward, or a set of feathers pointing straight up. Sometimes, it has explicitly human feet. Note that the feet of the bird shown in Figure 4 are likewise odd, showing a bird with four toes as opposed to the anatomically correct

pattern of three forward facing digits and a backward facing digit for stability and support. Based on the lack of correspondence to recognizable species and the occasional depiction of actual human feet, we conclude that these are not naturalistic representations of “real birds” (VanPool 2003b, p. 166).

The tutelary bird is consistently portrayed with anthropomorphs (transformed shamans), but it sometimes occurs on the sternum of female effigies. Its association with transformed shamans prompts us to conclude it is a spirit creature that does not correspond to a typically observable animal, just as are the horned-plumed serpent and double-headed macaw diamond (i.e., they are deities typically hidden from view). We have also suggested that the association of the tutelary bird on the breastbone of female effigies indicates that females were active in aspects of shamanic rituals watching over the shaman as he made his soul flight into the spirit world (VanPool and VanPool 2006).

The repeated nature of the three spirit creatures depicted in Figure 5 attests to their reality in the Casas Grandes worldview, despite the fact that they do not correspond to physically observable creatures in the physical world. The artists painting pottery and making rock art chose to accurately portray their basic characteristics as described by Casas Grandes shamans. Shamans may in fact have been some of the artists themselves. We cannot overstate how much of the Casas Grandes art focuses on horned-plumed serpent imagery. It is reflected on nearly every Ramos polychrome in the form of the half-spade figure similar to the horned-plumed serpent held under the shaman’s arm in Figure 4 (Schaafsma 1998). Di Peso (1974, p. 548) considered it the patron deity of the Casas Grandes world. Again, shamans may have painted the pots with the actual icons, given their first-hand interaction with these deities. As icons, they normally have a forward pointing horn, often backward pointing plumes, a checkerboard collar, and a two-fin tail. We suggest that these repeated characteristics found on many pots indicate that they were as real in the minds of the artists as were coral snakes and the other serpents they accurately depicted. In fact, the accuracy of the representations was likely crucial to the shamans and other elites who focused on interacting with these other-than-human persons.

Another medium in which the horned-plumed serpent was portrayed is the Mound of the Serpent (Figure 2). The Mound is a 113 m long, north–south-oriented mound. At one end is a raised platform (14.0 m long by 10.3 m wide by 1.2 m high) shaped like a serpent’s head; a road damaged the serpent’s horn/plume, preventing us from knowing its specific form. The head is attached to a sinuous body/retaining wall (70 cm high and ranging in width between 3.5 and 1.3 m). The Mound was an important water control feature that directed water away from the community (Di Peso et al. 1974, p. 478). After the city was abandoned, an arroyo cut through the serpent’s body and damaged part of the site. The serpent’s tail points to a large spring 6 km away that is decorated with horned-plumed serpent rock art and is the source of water for Paquimé’s main canal (Walker and McGahee 2006, p. 197; Schaafsma 1998). Embedded in the Mound’s head were two caliche (stone) eyes. The eastern eye (which faced toward the city) had a mortar hole ground completely through it and may have been used for ceremonial grinding of maize or other materials. The western eye had an incised Mesoamerican-style “plumed serpent,” which is distinct from the Casas Grandes horned-plumed serpent (Figure 6); it lacks a horn, is more sinuous compared to the more jagged body structure of the Casas Grandes serpent, and has feathers flowing from the top of the head and from the middle hump of the back. The horned-plumed serpent on pottery lacks the feathers coming off the middle of the back. These artistic differences are certainly intentional, and likely reflect distinctions in the spirits being referenced in the iconography.

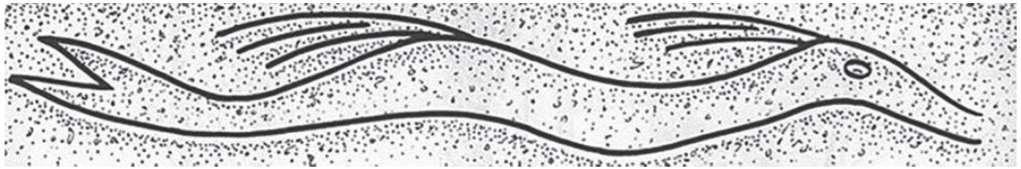


Figure 6. Plumed serpent image incised into the western eye of the Mound of the Serpent (adapted from Di Peso et al. 1974, p. 477).

Above, we said that the horned-plumed serpent had no physical counterpart, but that was not quite right. There is no animal that looks like the horned-plumed serpent, but the Mound of the Serpent gave it a real, physical presence at Paquimé that would be evident to everyone. It personified the horned-plumed serpent as a literal water-controlling, terrestrial serpent that was tied to the landscape both at Paquimé and the more distant spring, and the large head (14 × 10 m) was likely used for public ceremonies, as was the case for other platform mounds at Paquimé (Di Peso et al. 1974, p. 478). In this personification, the horned-plumed serpent was an active agent impacting the daily life of Paquimé’s inhabitants. The eyes provide further insights. The etching on the western eye indicates that the Serpent Mound was either seeing a reflection of himself in the sky or was viewing another plumed serpent to the west. Given the morphological differences between the Casas Grandes horned-plumed serpents and the fact that the western eye’s serpent is different with feathers on its back, we suspect this second interpretation is more likely, and the Casas Grandes Mound serpent is seeing a different deity in the distance. The mortar hole in the eastern eye, which faces the city and its occupants, would have been of limited utility for grinding maize or other materials. Instead, it resembles a pupil, indicating that the serpent was keeping a watchful eye on the inhabitants. Thus, we suggest that Mound of the Serpent has one eye watching the spirit world while the other eye is watching the mundane world. Perhaps like Zia Pueblo’s *Gacitiwa*, it could reward or punish people and the community based on how well they maintained their respectful relationships with the other-than-human persons that animated their world.

5. Discussion

Within our cognitive framework, we can recognize both the presence and form of the primary deities of the Medio Period Casas Grandes world. The consistency of the presence and design of the horned-plumed serpent, double-headed macaw diamond, and the tutelary bird reflected their reality, even if they were not typically visible in the world of the here-and-now. The transformed shaman further attested to the shamans’ potency and legitimacy. The physical representation of the horned-plumed serpent as a literal mound and water-controlling feature created an additional animated other-than-human person that contributed to the interaction of Paquimé’s inhabitants and these other-than-human persons. The eyes and other features helped animate this mound and gave it the ability to monitor and react to the world around it as an active agent. Casas Grandes art thus provides insights into the Medio Period world that transcend a simple statement such as, “The Mound of the Serpent was a water control feature.” While this is true, it ignores *who* was the mound. So, who was this person? The Mound of the Serpent was a protector that controlled water and kept the city safe from physical and spiritual dangers. He was a physical version of the horned-plumed serpent that brought rain to the dry Chihuahuan desert and made life possible. He was an ally that if treated correctly would help the community and its people prosper.

So, who was the pot (Figure 5)? She was a storyteller who spoke of primordial time—a time before division and naming. While other polychrome pots also told stories, this pot was unique to our knowledge and flaunts the conventions that constrained the others. She told of central deities and how these other-than-human persons danced with shamans that travelled through the cosmos with tutelary birds.

6. Conclusions

The Casas Grandes shaman cannot exist without spirits, and the spirits cannot be understood without the shaman. As illustrated by the Mound of the Serpent and the storyteller pot, art is one of the ways that the shamans and spirits create other-than-human persons who are a focus of spiritual power and ritual negotiation. If (1) the shaman was not present, or (2) the artifact/feature was not properly formed, or (3) an appropriate step in a ritual was not taken, or (4) a spirit decided not to inhabit an artifact, a feature, a painting, or regalia, then the object person could not achieve the power associated with personhood, and therefore was not “animated” (Penny 2004, pp. 19–20). Many agents (shamans, other-than-human persons, person objects) work together in reciprocal relationships to animate what we might call art. When designs on pottery, rock art, prayer sticks, or even horned-plumed serpent puppets are animated, they become powerful beings. This art reflects aspects of both the seen and unseen worlds, and thereby make the invisible visible. Yet, to manifest the unseen world, the art must accurately reflect it and its denizens. We suggest this is in part why we see high fidelity and consistent depictions of horned-plumed serpents throughout the Southwest and Mesoamerica. It is in fact their consistency and accuracy that make the link to the unseen persons, and thereby create the relationships people need to interact with them. These associations are powerful and long-lasting; M. Jane Young (1985), for example, reported that the Zunis would not allow her to visit a rock art site where *Koloowsi* (the Zuni horned-plumed serpent) is portrayed, although she was able to visit other Zuni rock art sites. Her presence as an outsider would be inconsistent with the animated character of that specific location and dangerous to her as an individual.

Central to the conceptual framework we outlined above is the acknowledgement that the division between spirit and matter is not present in many shamanic ontologies. Instead, the physical can be inherently imbued with spirit. For many shamans, art animates the material, and is therefore inextricably linked to the spirits of the material.

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Article

Animals in Saami Shamanism: Power Animals, Symbols of Art, and Offerings

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Abstract: In this paper, we study the role of power animals in contemporary Saami shamanism and how past and present are entwined in the presentation of power animals. In the old Saami worldviews, in addition to animals, spirits and sacred rocks (*sieidi*, SaaN) were also considered to be able to interact with people. Animals were an important part of offering rituals because livelihood and rituals were intertwined. Past “religions” are used as an inspiration for contemporary shamanistic practices, in line with one of late modernity’s core concepts, namely creativity. Present-day shamanistic practices can be described as ritual creativity, and they combine traces of old and new ritual activities. At the shamanistic festival Isogaisa, organized in northern Norway, these different roles of animals and ritual creativity become evident. Here, animals appear as spirit animals, as well as decorative elements on drums and clothes and as performance. In this paper, we combine material culture studies, interview data, and participatory observations in order to reflect the meanings and use of power animals in contemporary spiritual practices. How are traces of the past used in creating contemporary spirituality? How are animals and their artistic presentations entangled in contemporary shamanism?

Keywords: Saami shamanism; animals; power animals; ritual creativity; Isogaisa

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1. Introduction

We lay on our backs on the smooth, warm reindeer fur. The air smells of the smoke from the fireplace, and the soft rhythms of the leather drum surround us. We are asked to reach for our spirit animals. Could it be the totemic bear of the past or the reindeer that has been offered to sacred stones for centuries?

Saami shamanism is a contemporary phenomenon with links to the past. To invoke “tradition” in order to legitimize one’s religious beliefs and practices is central to Western religious history, from antiquity to the present. The aspiration to activate the past contains a creativeness in which people continually construct their traditions, values, and myths and, thus, a connection in their own lives (see Fjell 1998; Selberg 1999). The importance of the past can be seen, for example, in the celebration of early religious holidays and in the use of old sacred places, as well as in the reconstructions of drums (Jonuks and Äikäs 2019; Joy 2020).

The idea of fusing together cultures to create a shamanic expression can be said to originate from Mircea Eliade who invested shamanism with its current meaning in Western religious practice. Eliade, through his extensive work *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (Eliade 1964), transformed the term shamanism into an academic category sui generis and established a cross-cultural “classic” pattern of shamanism (see Znamenski 2007).

The “shaman” is an example of the complexities often involved in translation processes over time and across space (see Johnson and Kraft 2017). As Chidester (2018, p. xi)

points out, the shaman is a religious specialist that initially was identified in Siberia, colonized by Russia, and later transferred to a global arena. The term is widely regarded as having entered Russian from the Tungus *samán*, transferring to German as *schamane*, and then into other European languages in the seventeenth century. It was added to academic vocabularies by anthropologists and historians of religions and further related to indigenous people elsewhere (see Wilson 2014, p. 117). In the 1960s, the term spread to the neo-pagan milieu, where the shaman is not only recognized as an indigenous religious specialist, but as a potential enshrined in all humans. Based on Eliade and on the works by the anthropologist Castaneda (1968) and Harner (1980), a view of shamanism as the oldest and most primal form of spiritual practice emerged. According to these scholars, shamans are found in all “traditional” cultures, but in Europe and America, these traditions have been bolstered by emerging Christianity and later industrialization. Even though shamanic practices are shaped in relationship to contemporary Euro-American society and rooted in the mythology and symbolism of Western culture, they also include a critique of Western, industrialized society (Fonneland 2010). Shamans aim to reconstruct a lifestyle that has been disrupted and threatened by the industrialization process. Thus, in these communities, nature represents a source of power, a door-opener for establishing contact with the magical and spiritual world, and the goal for the individual is to move forward in his or her own spiritual development by being in close contact with nature, which in shaman circles is described as a force that can be used for the cultivation of self. The idea is that nature has the power to “release” ancient energy and knowledge.

One way to get in contact with the forces of nature is through power animals. The concept, power animal, was introduced by Michael Harner in the book *The Way of the Shaman* (Harner 1980, pp. 57–72) and is inspired by animistic practices in cultures from all over the world. In shamanism, power animals are often connected to inner personal growth, and they can be reached with the help of drumming (Boekhoven 2013, p. 245). Power animals can present themselves in immaterial forms by making an appearance in thoughts and dreams. However, they are also presented in a more material form via artwork and crafts. Art can be used to bring forth one’s power animals, and power animals can be used as motives in art and craft in order to create a bond to the depicted animal. Immaterial art forms such as dance can also include presentations of power animals.

Animals were essential in the old Saami worldview. Offering rituals were often negotiations for success in livelihood, especially in fishing, hunting, and later reindeer herding, with the offerings consisting mostly of animals, their meat, and antlers (Äikäs 2015). The world around humans was seen to be inhabited by different actors with whom people could communicate: animals but also sacred stones (*sieidi*, SaaN), *stallo* giants, and *gufihtar* (the invisible people). Drawings of animals were present on the *goavdásat*, the Saami drums, which were used by ritual specialists, *noaidit*, but probably also by other people¹. According to several sources, *Noaidit* had help from *sáiva* animals, guardian or helping spirits living in sacred lakes, but ordinary Saami could also come in contact with these spirits (Hultkrantz 1987; Pulkkinen 2005).

In the Saami worldviews, animals and all living creatures were seen as subjects, persons, and companions. (Helander-Renvall 2008, 315–17, 330; also de Castro 2004, p. 481) A worldview in which the relationship between humans, animals, and natural elements is seen as interactive has been called relational. Relational worldview is described by the idea that certain things that are considered non-living according to the current view had characteristics that made them a part of the network of social interactions. Spirits, animals, and natural elements were defined as living according to how they reacted and were reacted to (de Castro 1998; Bird-David 1999; Herva 2006).

When searching for past traditions, animals have become a key concept within Saami shamanism, in the form of power animals that are said to be able to protect and guide

¹ It is likely that using the drum for divination in some Saami areas was not a right reserved for the *noaidi*, it could be done by a number of people. This may explain the large number of drums in some areas compared with others.

the individual shamanic practitioner. Shamans in contemporary society, nevertheless, draw on a wide repertoire when looking for inspiration. Even though animals had a central position in Saami worldviews, the term “power animal” is not known from the sources depicting the old Saami religions. Sjamanforbundet (The Shamanistic Association), which in Norway is approved as an official religious association, equates it with the term “totem animals”—“spiritual beings that select human persons to follow and contact (during trance journeys or in other ways), and provide sources of wisdom, guidance and friendship.” (<http://sjamanforbundet.no/filosofi/2013/03/02/hva-er-totemdyr/>, accessed on 30 March 2021). The Shamanistic Association emphasizes that even though there is no direct parallel to power animals in the old Saami worldviews, there are living beings with a similar function in both the Norse (*Fylgje*) and Saami mythology:

In Saami they have several names (*Noaidegàssi* (Gadze) or *Sueie* are perhaps the most common). These can take the form of both a human and animal (and forms that are partially human and animal). Such helping spirits have different functions, but the common denominator is that they are there to provide learning, advice and guidance. (<http://sjamanforbundet.no/filosofi/2013/03/02/hva-er-totemdyr/>, accessed on 30 March 2021)

In this paper, we scrutinize the changing role of animals in Saami spirituality and how traces of the past are used in contemporary spirituality. We also explore how animals and their artistic presentations are entangled in shamanistic practices. Our data derive from material culture analyses, interviews, and participatory observations conducted at the shamanistic festival Isogaisa in Norway. Trude Fonneland has participated in the festival since it first opened its doors to the public in 2010. In 2017, we organized multidisciplinary fieldwork at Isogaisa together with Siv Ellen Kraft, Suzie Thomas, and Wesa Perttola with an aim to combine data gathered from the perspectives of religious sciences, heritage studies, and archaeology (Åikäs et al. 2018). During this fieldwork, we conducted 15 semi-structured interviews with the festival participants and organizers.

2. Background: Isogaisa and Ritual Creativity

Shamanism is not a unified, organized movement, but a patchwork of shifting and elastic networks, stretching across both regional and national borders (Fonneland 2010). There are still some events that can be said to act as focal points where shamans from all over the world meet to socialize and share their knowledge. The shaman festival Isogaisa is one such focal point. The festival saw the day of light in 2010 and has for the last ten years been arranged in the municipality of Loábak (Lavangen), Troms and Finnmark, northern Norway (Figure 1).

Isogaisa provides a window to the processes of ritual creativity, which Magliocco (2014, p. 1) has defined as “the self-conscious crafting of new rituals, or the reinterpretation of existing ones, with the expressly subversive purpose of bringing about cultural change, in the context of both mainstream religions and new religious movements”. Creativity can include both invention of traditions and merging and fusion of traditions (Palmisano and Nicola 2017).

The Isogaisa festival is a clear example of how religious labels are formed in ever-changing contexts as a byproduct of broader historical processes. The festival can be described as a major venue for shamanic, as well as indigenous, religious meaning-making. According to the festival program, the motivation behind the festival is to unite an indigenous Saami worldview with modern ways of thinking and thus create “a spiritual meeting place where different cultures are fused together” (<https://isogaisa.org/>, accessed on 31 March 2021).



Figure 1. Map of the location of Isogaisa (Map: Wesa Perttola).

At Isogaisa, different indigenous cultures and prehistorical traditions are highlighted as sources of inspiration for religious practice and an environmentally friendly relationship to the earth. This involves a projection of desired states or abilities of various indigenous populations, which are then perceived to provide the answer to what is experienced as an alienating and oppressive culture. What is expressed here are notions of a global indigenous spirituality, presented as a shared, symbolic repertoire for indigenous, as well as non-indigenous, people worldwide. Participants point out that this type of spirituality is colored by different local grounds, but, primarily, it is global and accessible to all. Presentations such as this are representative of how many non-native shamans choose to perform and market their services at the festival and reflect high regard for indigenous people and indigenous religious traditions in contemporary shamanism. This high regard has become increasingly visible since the late 1960s and is at present more prominent than ever. Isogaisa is precisely such a space where “performers, and audiences, public and individual subjects continually interact to shape emergent Indigenous identities” (Graham and Penny 2014, p. 4). The Isogaisa festival in this perspective constitutes an intertwined stage where notions of being and belonging are recast.

Contemporary shamans’ use of indigenous spiritual customs and objects have become a source of concern to indigenous political bodies, artists, and communities. From the very start, consciousness about ecology and fascination with the world’s indigenous peoples have been central in contemporary shamanism. Indigeneity here appears increasingly as a form of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1973), which is valued and considered worth pursuing, owning, and consuming. Both Saami and non-Saami practitioners of shamanism at Isogaisa are introduced to Saami traditions. At the festival, old and local traditions are merged with global discourses on pagan rituals, spirituality, and indigeneity, practiced by Saami and

non-Saami alike, and incorporated in a contemporary shamanic context. Still, to avoid accusations of cultural appropriation and colonization, there is a reluctance to don Saami clothing and to use the *joik* among shamans who cannot display Saami descent. Festival leader, Saami shaman Ronald Kvernmo, emphasizes that his ambition is to bring Saami spirituality to life, after years of condemnation. In his view the festival is a means for Saami people to retrieve and control their own spiritual heritage. The festival leader presents Isogaisa as a learning arena where a dynamic process of remembering brings elements from the past forth and where religious traditions that have been lost can be retrieved and shared through the festival.

3. Power Animals and Shamans

Power animals, also often called guardian spirits, have a central position in the rituals and ceremonies performed at Isogaisa.

Drawing on Harner, shamans at Isogaisa highlight power animals as necessary for any shamanic work. The power animals that Harner chose to highlight when developing core shamanism are animals with a high symbolic capital in Western culture and mythology: bears, foxes, deer, and porpoises, as well as dragons (see Harner 1980). At Isogaisa, some of these spirits are accompanied by animals grounded in an Arctic fauna, such as the ice bear, the reindeer (and particularly the white reindeer), the polar fox, and the eagle. The preferred guardian spirits seem to be wild and physically powerful animals that are related to heroic images of strength, smartness, and wisdom. Domestication, in this perspective, stands out as a sign of loss of power with the semi-domesticated reindeer making an exception with its long roots of ritual symbolism (Äikäs 2015; Heino et al. 2020).

A shaman is said to have the ability to speak with animals, and some of them express that they can shapeshift into animal forms by using hallucinogens or a combination of dancing, drumming, and singing. Dancing, drumming, and singing also have an important role in the festival program at Isogaisa, whereas drugs are forbidden. Even though special reference to shapeshifting is not made, drumming is used as a technique to enable contact with power animals.

Lately, several shamans have begun to oppose Harner's emphasis on powerful, wild animals. As shaman Kyrre Franck from the Shamanic Association argues: "I need to talk to you about spirit animals. You know wolf is getting overworked. And squirrel, well squirrel, he's getting a bit lonely". The Shamanic Association has also published an article about power animals on their homepage, which emphasizes domestic mythologies and traditions and relates power animals to a Nordic and Saami context: (<http://sjamanforbundet.no/filosofi/2013/03/02/hva-er-totemdyr/>, accessed on 31 March 2021)

All humans have power animals. One animal we are born with, while some are with us for a shorter or longer period of time. The power animal that often comes to us during a drum journey is an animal that possesses qualities that we need to be able to survive and continue our life path.

Power animals choose a person they want to follow, a friend. You may think that I want an eagle because it is powerful to believe that you can choose them. The power animal will choose you and announce its presence to you, not the other way around. All you have to do is pay attention. Having a power animal means that you have something to learn and you also have a powerful friend.

Our domestic mythologies and traditions have many helpers. They are often known as little people, elves, goblins or *gufihtar* and other names. All are the creatures that have coexisted with man at all times. If we stay with them, they are a great help to us, but you should not upset them. The helpers also include the ancestors. Every step we take is supported by generation after generation with ancestors, so it is important to take care of the inheritance after them.

The Shamanic Association opens the category of "power animals" to a broader content, also embracing domestic mythological beings such as *gufihtar* and ancestors.

In addition, the power animals' agency is emphasized. They are spiritual powers that themselves choose to appear or not and who can be upset if man acts in certain ways. The personal connection to one's power animal and the role of the power animal in presenting oneself is also evident at Isogaisa. The festival goers are told that each and every one of us can have a power animal. A relation to power animals is not restricted to shamans but can be achieved by all genuine spiritual seekers. This is an example of the universalizing turn within contemporary shamanism where spiritual concepts are presented as a shared symbolic repertoire.

In our interviews with festival participants, they emphasized the shamanistic interpretation of power animals as individual helpers. No connection to Saami mythology was made with the exact framing of the words power animal. The festival promotes an agenda of emphasizing local roots and local connections. Our interviewees embraced both Saami and Norse traditions and underlined how important it is to connect to the Saami and Norse ways, for example, by talking about following the traditions of their ancestors. Similar mixing of elements from Saami and Norse traditions is evident on the top of Offerholmen, Norway, where a stick with carved runes is found at a Saami sacred site, which has been interpreted as a possible sign of contemporary pagan practices at the site (Äikäs and Spangen 2016). Saami and Norse traditions have been connected for centuries; for example, Germanic runes were used in Saami areas and by Saami people in the Middle Ages (Price 2001; Äikäs and Spangen 2016, p. 12). On the other hand, to connect to both Norse and Saami traditions can be seen as a strategy of inclusion that dissolves the taxonomies of insider and outsider and of who has access to the traditions of the past. Norse traditions were eliminated by the expansion of Christianity; practitioners can thus see themselves not as oppressors, but as victims of the same forces that have marginalized indigenous peoples. As Magliocco (2004, p. 233) argues, this bit of historical revision is a powerful metaphor, which underlies their identification with oppressed or marginalized peoples: "Oppression such as that suffered by indigenous peoples at the hands of colonizers becomes an indicator of genuine spiritual knowledge or power—the same kind of spiritual authenticity they imagine pre-Christian European peoples must have had".

At Isogaisa, the scenery, with its plains, lakes, and mountains, is interpreted as an open door into the world of the ancestors and the power animals. The landscape is interpreted as having the imprints and traces of the ancestors and the power animals, and this crossover between time and space gives places a touch of mystery. The interviews show how local pasts, places, and characters are woven into global discourses on shamanism, and in this melting pot, new forms of religion are taking shape.

The various cultural performances that are expressed at the festival can be simultaneously commodities, spiritual rituals, and transformative political projects: "these are not necessarily mutually exclusive, nor are they without occasional contradictions and tensions" (Phipps 2009, pp. 32–33). Isogaisa, with its seminars, fair, and ceremonies, is similar to other festivals in that it is a place for socializing, enjoyment, and leisure; nevertheless, it is also a place where the local and global are merged, where power relationships come into play, where political interests are materialized, where cultural identities are tested, and where new visions take shape.

4. Staging Power Animals at Isogaisa

Pike (2001) notes that Pagan identities are primarily expressed at festivals through music and dance. According to Pike, shamanic identities are performative. They seek to control the impression they make upon others in ways that vary according to the context. It is primarily at festivals and other major happenings that the performance of a shamanic identity reaches a peak point concerning both costuming and performances. This is highly relevant in terms of what is expressed at Isogaisa. From start to finish, Isogaisa is a festival packed with shamanistic ceremonies, rituals, and performances. Participants and performers dress up in clothing inspired by indigenous customs, indigenous religions

are sought to be revitalized along with traditional handcraft, such as the making of ritual drums, and people taking part in the festival week have the opportunity to explore and cultivate their shamanic identities. Power animals are intertwined in all these performances, as they are approached via drumming and depicted in clothing and dancing.

One artist at Isogaisa is Saami musician Elin Kåven (Figure 2), a Saami recording artist, who, for ten years, has aimed to bring listeners into the Arctic sphere of shamanic folklore and the mythology of Saami people. Through her music, she manifests the mythological creatures from the Arctic, and her concerts are described as fairy tales in notes. When performing at Isogaisa, Kåven, wears a pair of reindeer antlers on her head, and through dance and *joik*, she highlights the reindeer's movements and qualities.² Kåven's choice of costume and adornment adds to a bond between power animals, ritual creativity, and shamanism. Kåven is also behind the Isogaisa festival dance. The dance was published on YouTube and on the Isogaisa homepage prior to the festival in 2011, and people are encouraged to learn the steps before arriving at the festival (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wXxqa_BJCOs, (accessed on 31 March 2021). Kåven describes the meaning of the dance and its connection to Saami tradition as follows:

I was asked to make a dance for the upcoming Isogaisa festival this year 26–28 august. The idea is that people will learn this dance before they come, or at the festival, and whenever they hear this song at the festival people can start dancing it. This dance is easy to learn, suits everyone, and has very typical Sami moves (<http://elinkaaven.blogspot.com/2011/05/>, accessed on 16 February 2021).

The dance, which is accompanied by a *joik*, imitates the journey to the Isogaisa festival by mimicking the movements and sounds of various Arctic animals and the natural elements. The *joik* and dance portray the sparrow, the bear, the reindeer, the eagle, the sun, and the water and pictures Isogaisa as a power center where the animals and natural elements seek to gather. In the festival area, the dance imitating the animals' movements and the *joik* contribute to a sense of community and a bond to the portrayed natural elements and animals. The simple dance steps symbolize a project of coming together, in which participants of all age groups can take part according to their abilities. The Isogaisa dance and *joik* also serve to highlight how formerly taboo cultural expressions, such as the *joik*³, are currently entering popular culture. This was also evident as Kåven performed in the Eurovision Song Contest final in 2017 in a duo "Elin & The Woods". In the performance, a *joik*, a Saami shaman drum, and three "spirit animals"—a polar fox, a wolf, and a reindeer/stag—were present (Kalvig 2020).

Isogaisa acts as a contact zone where people negotiate their identities, among other things through clothing. At the festival, shamans such as Lone Beate Ebeltoft through her design firm, Alveskogen, market new clothes and accessories inspired by the Middle Ages and Arctic indigenous clothing. Motifs from the animal world such as wolves, bears, eagles, and reindeer combined with Saami symbols found on drums, as well as symbols from prehistoric rock art, are depicted on the clothes and accessories that are sold at the festival. These clothes are popular among shamanic practitioners.

² Joik is a traditional form of Saami music and is still contested in some Saami contexts (Kraft 2015; Bøe and Kalvig 2020).

³ The Laestadian revival movement related the *joik* to pagan beliefs and saw it as sinful. Currently, the *joik* is also performed in churches, but this still raises discussion (Kallio and Lämsman 2018, p. 13).



Figure 2. Artist Elin Kåven wearing reindeer antlers (Photo: Freddy Ludvik Larsen).

Miller (2010, p. 136) states that “It is usually through the medium of things that we actually make people”. At Isogaisa, clothing does not represent people, but actually constitutes who they are. Ebeltoft herself underlines in our interview that, “Many people, inspired by Harner and his core shamanism, would choose a large, powerful animal like the bear, the eagle, and the wolf, and by decorating clothes with these animals, they would highlight and claim their ‘shamanistic identity’”. However, Ebeltoft also adds that in part of the Saami environment, this has been considered as something negative:

Some people criticized this type of design. They pointed out that it was unrighteous to have symbols on the clothes, and especially symbols of animals and from nature. In the old *noaidi* tradition, there was a saying that the most powerful *noaidit* could bind an animal spirit to themselves and use this spirit as a helper in the spiritual world. Also the *noaidi* could send his or her free soul into a living animal, a bird, a fish, or an insect, and partly control it to find out things and gain insight. I still do not see many Saami shamans who put animal symbols on their clothes, but an awakening is happening right now. Due to the increasing presentation of Saami symbols in social media, more people request clothes with these kinds of motifs. (Interview with Lone Beate Ebeltoft, February 2021).

An example of this change is a *luhkka* (a Saami cloak with a hood) that Ebeltoft designed on commission by Saami shaman Eirik Myrhaug’s students for his 70th birthday in 2013. The *luhkka* is decorated with the Saami *beaivi* (sun) symbol on the front and a *noaidi* symbol on the back (Figure 3a,b). Ebeltoft’s clothes and design point to a material engagement in the production of Saami shamanism (see also Kalvig 2020), in which

contested symbols with roots in the pasts are highlighted to form shamanic identities in the present.⁴



Figure 3. (a) the Saami *beaivi* (sun) symbol on the front and, (b) a *noaidi* symbol on the back. *Luhkka* made by Lone Beate Ebeltoft.

The symbols on the clothes show how global shamanic concepts and practices connected to power animals are slowly translated to a local Saami context and function as trademarks for shamanic identity.

Power animals are not used as decorative motifs only on clothes, but also on Saami drums, *goavddis* (SaaN). Professional *duodji* (Saami traditional handcraft) artist, Fredrik Prost from Viikuskjärvi—a small village in the northernmost part of Sweden—has held several workshops in the making of ritual drums at Isogaisa. Prost trains participants for three days in creating their own ritual drums inspired by the traditional Saami *goavddis*. These drums, according to festival organizer Ronald Kvernmo: “Will be very special and exclusive drums with enormous energy”. On the other hand, ready-made drums are also sold at Isogaisa (Figure 4). These also contain depictions of power animals. Selling ready-made *goavddis* can be seen to democratize the spiritual experience as it also makes the drums available to those who do not have the time or ability to make one (cf. Meskell 2004, pp. 177–219), but in the drum-making course, the personal relationship with the drum is emphasized as an important feature.

⁴ In 2020, Lone Beate Ebeltoft at Alveskogen Design won a complaint against Tana Gull og Sølvsmie AS, who had enrolled the Saami-inspired sun symbol at the Norwegian Patent Office’s design and trademark registration. The victory means that Lone Beate and all other *duodji* practitioners in Norway now can use the symbol freely.



Figure 4. A drum with a reindeer symbol at the fair in Isogaisa (Photo: Tiina Äikäs).

The old ritual practices at *sieiddit* are mainly evident in archaeological data and written sources, the latter which date to the late period of the use of the offering places. Written sources depict that rituals at *sieiddit* could include joiking, slaughtering an animal, and eating at the *sieidi* (Äimä 1903; Paulaharju 1962). The offerings consisted mostly of animal offerings. In some cases, alive animals were left at the *sieidi*, but more often, meat, bones, or antlers were offered. Offered animals were often connected to livelihood, such as fish, birds, sheep/goat, deer, and reindeer (Äikäs 2015).

Through Isogaisa, parts of old Saami religious practices and symbols are incorporated into new contexts and interpretive frames. One such symbol is the *sieidi* and the heritage site Rikkagallo. Every year since 2012, during the festival, shaman Eirik Myrhaug has organized a hike to the *sieidi* to conduct a ritual inspired by the traditions of his Saami ancestors.

On the first page of the note that Myrhaug hands out to the participants is a story about Rikkagallo written by Schøyen (1943):

Right in the valley where people, reindeer and dogs had their trails, the nomadic “Lapps” [sic] did sacrificial offerings to big stones deeply embedded in the soil, stones that never had been touched by human iron-tools but rough and untouched by God’s hand. Vuoitas-gallo, the anointed stone stands in Budalsskaret close to the water drain, tall and freighting and surrounded by the cold from the springs that fall in the shadow of the mountain. Different is the accursed stone, Rikkagallo—it dwells heavy and resting as well as open in its own valley close north of Harvečokka. In addition other sacrificial stones existed—and with these, in our landscape, the nomads rested, they splattered these with reindeer blood, and to these stones they brought animals antlers and other gifts, while begging the God in the stone for luck, prosperity and good fortune (reindeer luck) on the summer trails. These stones in addition had an outreached hearing capacity, supporting the Lapps’ ability to call upon the stone from miles away and out in the sea-mountains, turning to the east and after joking (chanting) to these stones they would strengthen their capacity and prosperity for their herd.

The story strongly binds the trip to Rikkagallo to old Saami offering traditions and especially to the lifestyles of reindeer herding Saami. It also describes stones as interacting entities in the Saami landscape.

On the journey to Rikkagallo, the participants are advised to reach for their power animals, which could present themselves during the walk. Hence, animals are part of the whole journey, not just at the offering site, and the journey itself is highlighted as important, not just the ritual at the *sieidi*. This became evident when the first author was forced to turn back halfway due to the difficulty of the terrain combined with her pregnancy, and she was told that this was her journey and meaningful as such. The connection with a *sieidi* and personally meaningful animals was highlighted in one of the interviews: “My uncle he talks about that every day I should go there [to the family *sieidi*], and I will go there [. . .], I’m really looking forward to go[ing] there. And to see the white hawk who’s there. It’s my grandfather’s, well every time he was there, the white hawk was there”.

Before the offering ritual at Rikkagallo, Myrhaug gathers the group in a circle, and with the use of a bird wing and sage smoke, he cleanses each participant (Figure 5). Then, the forces from all directions are invoked. Myrhaug calls on the serpent from the south, the white reindeer from the north, the polar bear from the east, the eagle from the west, mother earth, and the forces within the human world. This call is a regular feature that introduces many of the ceremonies and rituals at the shaman festival of Isogaisa and can be seen as part of an established repertoire of shamanistic rituals. After the forces have been summoned, participants go to the stone and make their personal sacrifice by throwing a gift into a large crack in the *sieidi*.

Animals have typically been sacrificed at *sieidi* stones (Åikäs 2015). During the Isogaisa festival, offerings were also made to the fire in the middle of the main festival *lavvu*. As in the old Saami worldview, here, some offerings were also related to livelihood. One of the interviewees told us how he made an offering to the fire when he was preparing food—for example, meat. When he arrived at the festival, some moose hunters had killed a moose, and together, they gave some of it to the mountain, to the earth, and to the fire. He told us that he also made offerings when he was hunting: “And when I play a drum, I hunt, I go out into the woods at night and make offerings, make fire, ask for, for good hunting. [. . .] So I can offer the heart of the animal, usually I offer that. I dry it, salt it, dry it, keep it . . . ”. One of the interviewees told us how the relation to the offered animals had nevertheless changed: “I sometimes use blood, you know blood. And that blood can come from me or it can come [. . .] from the shop. You know today you won’t have to cut the head out of something. You can buy the blood from the shop. It’s very modern”.



Figure 5. Ritual at the Rikkagallo *sieidi* using the wing of a bird (Photo: Suzie Thomas).

Buying blood does not diminish the ritual's importance but makes this kind of offering more accessible to those who do not want to kill an animal or who do not have the means to hunt, similar to the ready-made drums. A personal connection to one's power animal could also be attempted in the sense *lavvu* (a Saami tent) in the festival area, where festival goers could relax and try to evoke their senses. There, participants are asked to close their eyes, listen to the drumming, feel the warmth of the fire, and try to connect to their personal power animal (cf. Boekhoven 2013, p. 245). Some of the participants described seeing or feeling the presence of a power animal. Here, power animals are connected to a multisensorial bodily experience of the festival goers. Thus, the relaxing atmosphere of the sense *lavvu* is more of a retreat from the modern rhythm of life than in any way connected to past ritual traditions.

5. Conclusions

Our article shows how material culture plays a central role in tying together Saami traditions and contemporary shamanistic practices. At Isogaisa, the traditional Saami drums, *goavddis*, the Saami *sieidi*, clothes, dance, and the *joik* are used as the basis for new constructs, and they become symbols of continuity with the traditions of the past. In shaping their festival drums, taking part in an offering at the *sieidi*, and learning to *joik*, Isogaisa provides the festival attendants with access to a first-hand personal taste of the past. The "objects", the Saami drum, *sieidi*, and the *joik* are, in this context, messengers that enable a dialogue between the past and the present. As folklorist Frykman (2002, p. 49) says about the role of objects in cultural production: "Things like this—and many more—have become something more than symbols. They bear secrets and have to be induced to speak". At Isogaisa, the performances, objects, and spiritual beings are ascribed to indigenous

“characteristics” that are associated with an indigenous past that has significance in the present.

This article highlights how the role of power animals is intertwined with the use of traditional objects in ritual creativity. Power animals are present in many forms—both material and immaterial. They are approached in thoughts, music, and dance, but also depicted in drums and on clothes. Together with power animals, the role of offered animals takes multiple forms from self-hunted game to bought blood. At *sieidi* offering sites, various non-human actors are present: the offered animals, power animals, and other spirit animals.

The *sieidi* is an example of the importance of the past, not just as material traces, but as living ideas. Even though during the festival, an old offering site was visited, some of the interviewees told us that for them it was not important to visit old *sieiddit* but to find their own *sieidi* places as their forefathers had done: “In my belief, you make your own sacred places. Because when my ancestors were shamans and they had a sacred place they built themselves. And I have my sacred place, in my place. So, it’s, I don’t think it’s necessary to go to the old ones when you can make your own”. However, the past also had its value; another interviewee said that there is special energy at places that have been used for centuries. She added that places can become important because of an individual connection or because they have been acknowledged by multiple people for many generations.

Similarly, the importance of reindeer and bears as power animals emphasizes the connection to past traditions. Reindeer have been the most important offerings since the fifteenth century. Semi-domesticated reindeer replaced wild deer as an offering material at a time when the herding was at its early stage in the area (Heino et al. 2020). Hence, it was ritually significant already before it became an important part of livelihood. As a semi-domesticated animal, reindeer set themselves apart from the idea of wild power animals. The ritual meaning of the bear is evident both in bear offerings, the bear cult, and in special bear graves (Äikäs 2015; Piha 2020). However, animals with no historical background as ritual animals have also gained the role of power animals in contemporary shamanic practices, such as wolves and squirrels.

Ritual creativity and the use of new symbolic animals can be seen as a way to democratize rituals and make them available to all. New offering traditions, such as buying blood, the commercial distribution of drums and clothes with power animal symbols, and festival dances performed on YouTube, make it easier for people to participate in these ritual activities and to highlight their shamanic identity. At Isogaisa, there are different actors performing spiritual relations to animals in various ways. The organizers created an arena that enable the merging of shamanistic elements from different parts of the world. They encouraged a symbiotic view of shamanism, where not only different indigenous traditions, but also different religions meet. Not all festival goers identified themselves as shamans, but they had a background in, for example, nature religions, Norse ways, and Catholicism, with others coming in search of their spirituality and/or as spiritual tourists. The performers each brought to the venue their personal way of performing shamanism and interacting with animals. These varied from personal experiences in the sense *lavvu* to performances organized for festival goers, as well as to commercial activities. At Isogaisa, people communicate with the animated world around them in various ways, including offerings to the *sieidi* and to the fire and seeking a connection to power animals. Spirituality, art, and animals are intertwined in the festival dance, drumming, and decorative use of animal motifs in clothes and drums. Influences from the past and ritual creativity are entangled as people personalize such rituals. The role of personal experience is central; the *sieiddit* and power animals choose people and present themselves to individuals. Power animals were present in many ceremonies, performances, and rituals, as well as in the decorations of the drums and clothes. People were encouraged to find their power animals during the festival and present them in different artistic ways from clothes to dance. At the festival, art, shamanism, and animism are re-deployed in creative ways to empower

the individual participant, as well as the shamanic community. Animals are given new meanings through their use as decorative elements in clothes, as well as through their inclusion in performances, from offering rituals to the festival dance.

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Article

Art and Influence, Presence and Navigation in Southern African Forager Landscapes

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Abstract: With earlier origins and a rebirth in the late 1990s, the New Animisms and the precipitate ‘ontological turn’ have now been in full swing since the mid-2000s. They make a valuable contribution to the interpretation of the rock arts of numerous societies, particularly in their finding that in animist societies, there is little distinction between nature and culture, religious belief and practicality, the sacred and the profane. In the process, a problem of perspective arises: the perspectives of such societies, and the analogical sources that illuminate them, diverge in more foundational terms from Western perspectives than is often accounted for. This is why archaeologists of religion need to be anthropologists of the wider world, to recognise where animistic and shamanistic ontologies are represented, and perhaps where there is reason to look closely at how religious systems are used to imply Cartesian separations of nature and culture, religious and mundane, human/person and animal/non-person, and where these dichotomies may obscure other forms of being-in-the-world. Inspired by Bird-David, Descola, Hallowell, Ingold, Vieiros de Castro, and Willerslev, and acting through the lens of navigation in a populated, enculturated, and multinatural world, this contribution locates southern African shamanic expressions of rock art within broader contexts of shamanisms that are animist.

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1. Introduction

Southern African San forager worldviews exhibit topo-ontological domains characterised by persons who are human and persons who are not. There are places that are the realms of certain persons and their concordant ways-of-being, the inhabitants characteristic of the place, and vice versa. Human persons are those who occupy the human range of territory and behaviour, while non-human persons are those who occupy theirs respectively; an animal is what it is for being in certain habitats and expressing the behaviours of things you might expect to meet in such a place. Throughout, however, they remain persons irrespective of their habitats or behaviours, and as [Viveiros de Castro \(1998, p. 470\)](#) observes, this requires a break from the Western “implication of the unity of nature and the plurality of culture” (cf. [Willerslev 2007, p. 183](#)).

This is because persons are the reproductive unit of culture: where there are persons, be it in nature or in ‘civilisation’, among communities of human persons or those of animal persons, there is culture, dissolving any potential binary separation between natural and cultural worlds (cf. [Descola 2013](#)). This has interpretive implications for the world behind San rock art in southern Africa—as has been observed in other ethnological settings, the forager world is oft ‘multinatural’ in this sense, and San idioms are no different. The topographies of this ethnographic domain are both evidently practical but also vitally social ([Riley 2007](#); [Skinner 2017](#), pp. 101–5, forthcoming; [Guenther 2020b](#), pp. 71–79). Navigation of such a world is accordingly an exercise in negotiation—not of static boundaries, but in those moments an individual might find themselves in a boundary state, strung tenuously

between the norms and expectations of the communities around them, the variant ways-of-being those communities express, and the places one encounters both these beings and ways.

The centrality of this idiom to foragers' lives has recently come to the fore, at least in anthropological terms (Guenther 2015). Archaeologists have been slow on the uptake, however, owing to the dominance of certain established interpretations of material culture, of which the shamanistic approach (e.g., Lewis-Williams 1980, 1992, 1998; *inter alia*) is the most well-known. The significant internal integrity of the approach is both reason for its longevity and part of why it may struggle to adapt to expanding ethnographic datasets (discussion in Skinner 2021b; although see McGranaghan and Challis 2016), and why the anthropological emphasis has taken so long to shift in southern Africa, a region known for its autochthonous shamanistic beliefs (discussion in Guenther 2015).

Here we examine rock art, the material-cultural artefact whose study arguably made southern African archaeology, in light of recent developments in New Animist approaches. We illustrate the characteristics of relational ontology that anthropologists might recognise in San idioms. Using the lens of navigation, this process of movement across social topographies, we foreground the ontological consequences of place, position, and perspective. Most of all, we look to the social universe in which this painted imagery resides, and to the practices which have been so central in negotiating life within it, with the art being both a record of prior interaction between communities and outcome of mediations-in-progress, this animist shamanism (re)producing its norms in the art.

To this end, we first outline how shamanism in southern Africa has been seen, and how it is seen today by outsiders (scholars), as well as how it is seen by insiders (foragers) in the ethnographic present of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. From there, we develop an account of forager navigation-as-negotiation, and the ways in which certain San idioms resolve the consequences of presence on a social landscape, amidst its human and non-human cultures, through a process of constant brokering of relations between agencies. Finally, we present examples of rock art we argue was produced as part of this process of brokerage, the images produced to maintain 'proper' relations between the communities of these landscapes.

2. An Animist Shamanism

The cast of southern African forager arts as shamanistic is well-established (Lewis-Williams 1972, 1980, 1998; Dowson 1989; cf. Vinnicombe 1976). The shamanistic framework notably rejected the account of the art as literal representations of 'scenes of everyday life' that had flourished in the early- to mid-twentieth century (e.g., Burkitt 1928; Breuil 1948; Willcox 1956; discussion in Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2009, p. 49), and took issue with the common misconception that the art offered a glimpse into the pristine lives of a primordial human population (see Gordon 1992, pp. 194–95). Perhaps ironically, the religious orientation marked a return to an earlier position, held a century earlier by George Stow and Joseph Orpen, that the images had a "mythological meaning" at the very least, and likely encompassed "certain quasi-religious rites" (Orpen 1874, p. 1; cf. McGranaghan et al. 2013, p. 151) and which Wilhelm Bleek (in Orpen 1874, p. 13) thought was rather self-evidently "a truly artistic conception of the ideas which most deeply moved the Bushman mind, and filled it with religious feelings."

As it developed, the shamanistic, hermeneutic approach (following Blundell 2004) envisioned the imagery as part representation of (Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1988), part reference to (Lewis-Williams 1998) the ritual experiences of shamans (see a recent summary of this position in Lewis-Williams et al. 2021, p. 44; wider theoretical contexts in Whitley 2014; Whitley et al. 2020; wider applications in Wallis 2002; Rozwadowski 2014; deep-time application in the European Upper Palaeolithic in Clottes and Lewis-Williams 1996; Lewis-Williams 2002). In particular, it centred the altered states of consciousness achieved through ritual dance. The dances in turn permitted the shamans of various southern African forager societies to traverse a visionary, spiritual world, deploying animal potencies under their

control, and using this power to make intercessions in the lives of their communities (Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2004, p. 206) such as controlling the movements of game and weather, and healing disease and other social ills.

The hermeneutic model is not uncontested (e.g., Bahn 1988; Solomon 2000; Helvenston and Bahn 2003; Hodgson 2006), though its neuropsychological implications are among its strongest facets (discussion in Froese et al. 2014; Froese et al. 2016) and there is good reason to continue self-aware implementation of its general principles (see discussion in Wallis 2002). In this critical spirit, we are obliged to consider the representations the approach makes of both the ethnographic source domain—Qing in the Maloti-Drakensberg (Orpen 1874); the Xam in the Karoo (e.g., Bleek and Lloyd 1911; Hollmann 2004) and the many extant groups of the Kalahari (e.g., Marshall 1976; Katz 1982; Guenther 1999)—and the art to which it is applied in interpretation. In particular, the ways in which it models the world around the images. We are interested in the elements of other approaches that such an outlook might reject for their proximity to problematic positions—that it might, for instance, reject a ‘narrative’ or ‘representational’ implication on account of its resemblance to these earlier positions, rather than as a factor of their applicability or ethnographic support (see discussion on ‘reconfiguring hunting magic’ below, and in the New Animisms; McGranaghan and Challis 2016).

Indeed, owing to the heuristic device that descends in tandem from the rejection of ‘empirical’ (viz. that they are quotidian visual-representative) perspectives of the images, and that of ritual dance = altered states = paintings, there has evolved a representation that altered states, and the ‘passage’ they provide between worlds, is evidence for a tiered and divided cosmos in the belief systems of the informants, reminiscent of Eliade’s (1972) axis mundi (see topical discussion in Lewis-Williams 2004, pp. 29–30). In this, there is a realm in which spirit people and animals exist, inaccessible except through trance, separating the everyday from the extraordinary (e.g., Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1990) in a broadly equivalent form to those registers compartmentalised as either ‘real’ or ‘religious’ iconography in rock art. Correspondingly, the people who traverse in this way have their practises rendered distinct from domains of practicality (pace Lewis-Williams and Challis 2011, pp. 192–99), enacting their craft in domains of sacredness discrete from those profane.

This presents a universe delineated into a Cartesian ‘nature-and-culture’, with nature being a realm of resources/bodies, and culture that of persons/minds, both governed by an ‘ontology of control’ (after King and McGranaghan 2020) in which animals are controlled and their powers deployed for human endeavours, subordinated to those categories of human (visionary) experience which are central to interpretation. As Mathias Guenther (2020a, p. viii) has recently pointed out, this resembles the positivist *Man the Hunter* (after Lee and DeVore 1968) works of Kalahari anthropologists of the 1960s and 1970s, which has led southern African anthropology and archaeology down the materialist ‘optimal foraging’ route for decades. Even religion, it seems (see Guenther 2020a, p. 2), has come to be analysed for its optimising characteristics (e.g., Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2004), one among a suite of tools and adaptations with practical outcomes in a human-centred world.

This paradigm has led researchers of San religion to focus symbolically and phenomenologically on how the shaman-dancer intensifies his human self through a neuropsychological experience of an Altered State of Consciousness, rather than being transported out of this self and into another, non-human being and subject, through a phenomenological experience of transformation (Guenther 2020a, p. 2).

Following Guenther (2015, 2017, 2020a, 2020b), McGranaghan (2014a, 2014b), and our own related works (McGranaghan and Challis 2016; Skinner 2017; Challis 2019; Skinner 2021a, 2021b), we discern how the rock art reflects the artists’ interactions with ‘non-human’, or perhaps more accurately ‘other-than-human’ (after Hallowell 1964, p. 36) entities, with whom their communities sought to broker relations.

The nature of the intercessions that shamans enact, and how these are negotiated, are factors by no means ignored in the hermeneutic approach, but they remain far from fully explored. Thus, we see good reason to pursue a New Animist analysis for its de-

centring of human experience, its implications for a world characterised by the relationships between communities living within it, and analytical outcomes that expand our frame of reference beyond the inherently ritual elements of shamanistic practice. Elements of rock art that do not explicitly feature the dance have previously been explored in terms of sympathetic ‘hunting magic’ (McGranaghan and Challis 2016) and the effects of excessive potency in certain landscapes (Challis 2019) as expressed in the idiom of both the Karoo !Xam (Skinner 2017) and the southern Maloti San (although cf. Skinner 2021a, 2021b). In this contribution, we present an account of the ways the art ‘populates’ the landscape, affecting the relationships between communities by providing a material record and cultural reference point for interactions between them, drawing on the past to navigate their present, sometimes tenuous, social conditions (e.g., Skinner 2017). There is a spatial dimension to these occurrences; to hunt, for example, is to traverse boundaries between communities and ways-of-being in numerous respects, often incorporating dangerous transgressions of place, personal identity, and bodily integrity, the consequences of which are a central subject of inter-species negotiation. We look to the ethnographies of southern African shamanistic societies past and present, and consider the ways in which their contributors relate(d) to their worlds and how those relations structure(d) their experiences and intentions.

3. Nature and Culture in an Inhabited World

When rock art interpretation references harnessing the power that animals contain or represent (e.g., Lewis-Williams 1981, p. 10; 1998, pp. 93–94; Lewis-Williams et al. 2021, p. 44), it follows common language of ‘owning’ or ‘possession’ built on ethnographic precedent (see Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2004, p. 206, citing Marshall 1962). However, we consider it necessary to recognise the ideological technology at play amongst researchers. Describing the powers of the world as ‘owned’, and playing up exclusivities and personal accumulation of resources, resembles ideological developments that emerged in tandem with sedentism and agriculturalism; in particular, arrangements of economy and social topography that fed the evolution of private property (see Bowles and Choi 2019). Powerful animals thus ‘harnessed’, inasmuch as they might be literally yoked, positions this discussion within a domesticated framework¹, and particularly a Western one, with animals as non-persons contained and subordinated to human purpose, and downplaying perhaps more dominant invocations of the inter-reliance of species (cf. Descola 2012a, p. 463; ‘common purpose’ in Guenther 2020c, pp. 380–81) in forager idioms. Communities and cultures of the landscape attend to a balance of energy transfers, incorporations, and reconfigurations that necessarily make any one community reliant on others. This may take the form of predation, production (by contributing to an ecosystem in/directly), or a multitude of other entanglements with the lives of others, across a range of intimacies or alienations, their paths interrupting or intervening for better or worse.

In this frame of reference, some recent readings have tended towards presentations of ‘ownership’ as something akin to intense degrees of influence or connection (Challis 2005; McGranaghan 2012, p. 144), which we believe can be seen portrayed in the ‘taming’ idiom in rock art (McGranaghan and Challis 2016) and we explore this presently.

On a practical level, the broader problem in rock art research remains, so long as a materialist analysis emphasises individual, human accumulation akin to private property (e.g., Lewis-Williams 1982; Campbell 1987; Dowson 1994; Blundell 2004), while also relying on ethnographies whose dominant themes are egalitarian social interdependence (Wiessner 2005, p. 116; see Guenther 1999, pp. 34, 41–43; cf. Barnard and Woodburn 1991, p. 25; Myers 1991, p. 56; Willerslev 2007, pp. 36–37; McGranaghan 2014a) and mitigations of egregious consumption (the latter sufficiently concerning that it was the characteristic of monsters in !Xam ethnography; McGranaghan 2014a, p. 9; see McGranaghan 2012, pp. 156–157, 182–183; Challis 2019).

Indeed, the communal access of altered states of consciousness seems itself to be something of a feedback-loop, the high value of transcendental experiences both a factor

of its wide accessibility, and the cause of its importance to individuals who partook of it (Froese et al. 2013, pp. 201–2). In this collaborative mould, interdependence would seem more in keeping with wider ideologies of sharing, as altered-state experiences were brought back and distributed within the social conditions of the camp. The animal potencies, it seems, were perhaps one among other forms of energy deployed for communal good; just as meat, one iteration of transformed energy, would have its distributions regulated by networks of kin and obligation, so would communal religious life be governed by its own forms of redistribution and sharing (McGranaghan 2015, p. 537).

4. The Problem of Personal Property

A slow-burning axiom that has come to bear is the orthogenesis of hierarchies in erstwhile egalitarian societies; owing to cross-cultural contact with farmers and settlers, the changes wrought in forager societies endowed them with new approaches to personal accumulation. This has been extended to religious forms, through the suggestion that certain powerful shamans had unique accumulations of power, permitting them to rise to prominence, and creating a spiritual inequality of sorts. It is further argued that this is discernible in the art of the Maloti-Drakensberg (Campbell 1987; Dowson 1994, 1998; Blundell 2004).

This position stems from (Guenther's 1975) *The Trance Dancer as an Agent of Social Change*, in which he observed modern 'Farm Bushmen' achieving renown for his ritual abilities. To support this, some paintings have been presented as exhibiting the progression from egalitarian group, through consortia of powerful individuals, to singular pre-eminent shamans who were able to dominate their social groups (Dowson 1994). Unfortunately, the model is simply not demonstrable, either as a response to contact or otherwise, since no dated paintings have been produced to support a chronological sequence that proceeds from (early) egalitarianism to (late) social stratification (cf. Mitchell 2002, p. 407; Smith 2010, pp. 348–49; Mullen 2018; Challis forthcoming).

In a resource-focussed discussion of the dance, 'supernatural potency' permits access to the 'spirit realm', harnessed from the essence of the animals being sung/summoned at the dances (Lewis-Williams et al. 2021, p. 44). In this account, particular shamans might be able to accumulate this power in support of personal status. There is a question, then, about whether there can be an accumulation of the capacities of persons beyond themselves as resources—the energy comes from animals, yet if animals are persons, how are they to be accumulated? In this line of reasoning, they are in fact accumulated, conceptualised as 'reservoirs' of power (ibid.). Yet, as comes to light increasingly, relations are in fact maintained with individual non-human persons through shared understanding, the functions of consent, reciprocal obligation, and normative alignment (see 'care' in McGranaghan 2015, pp. 537–38; 'nice treatment' in McGranaghan and Challis 2016; Guenther 2020c). Some of the language of a domesticated frame of reference applies (discussion in McGranaghan 2015; King and McGranaghan 2020), though where we find descriptions of a hunter 'possessing' an animal species, for example, this is not in the sense of 'property' but rather that of 'influence' (Challis 2005, p. 18). It is through salient demonstrations of understanding between persons that 'ownership', in this idiom, is achieved (McGranaghan and Challis 2016, pp. 583, 591).

It appears that shamans do this equivalently (Challis 2005, pp. 12–14; see below). When they draw upon animal energies, they are appealing to specific agencies personally (McGranaghan and Challis 2016, pp. 592–94), and responding to the ways such an agency would present itself and draw upon them in turn (see Hoffmeyer 2008, pp. 15–16; 2010, p. 37; McGranaghan 2012, p. 338; cf. Viveiros de Castro 1998, pp. 470–71). This is particularly true if it occurs in ways that suggest the animals are 'significant' individuals (viz. those amenable to approach, or able to act on behalf of their community; discussion in Skinner 2017, p. 185). The implication that animal capacities could be stockpiled robs them of personhood, rendering the non-human inhabitants of the landscape so much like those of a Westerner's nature, replete with material to be harvested, as opposed to the "theatre"

(after Riley 2007), whose occurrences are characterised by the desires and intents of many forms of agency. Correspondingly, this historical-materialist emphasis characterises the world, and navigation of the world, in terms markedly reminiscent of a Western frame of reference (cf. Challis forthcoming).

Is a landscape under control or domination one possessed of persons beyond the human frame? We would say not. However, in the ethnographic sources, we recognise a general contiguity between the ways humans assess the behaviours of other human communities, and those of other-than-humans. Notions of ‘sympathetic control’ (McGranaghan and Challis 2016, p. 580) such as *!nanna-se*, are one example. Their translation is as ‘respect practices’ (e.g., Hollmann 2004, pp. 66–75), less as the hard formulation of control, and rather something more like concentrated influence. This, in turn, we find representative of a world determined at the confluences of multiple agent-perspectives, its norms determined by the interrelations of those agents’ knowledge, attention, and forms of attachment (following Descola 2012a).

In our ethnographic sources, we observe the extension of personhood between communities, and across species’ definitions, through the equivalent ways informants assessed the behaviours of (human) family, and those of hunted animals: animals treated as persons. While *!nanna-se* “dealt primarily with non-human contacts” (McGranaghan 2012, pp. 193–94), it bears close structural and practical resemblance to the *!k’werrit’an* complex (v. to show respect, to be ashamed; Bleek 1956, p. 510), tied into manners of address between kin, avoidances of conflict, and recognition of seniority within extended families (fathers/mothers in law; see McGranaghan 2012, pp. 193–94). *!nanna-se* enjoined hunters to meet their commitments to their prey, and from “dealing immodestly” with their kills (McGranaghan and Challis 2016, p. 587), thus inviting ontological retributions for their inappropriate actions, or problematic entanglements of their identities with those of their prey (e.g., McGranaghan 2012, p. 140).

In similar terms, just as humans would shame noncompliant extended family members, and through shame mitigate problematic social consequences, it functioned in equivalent ways when applied to other-than-humans, with surprisingly little variation across species. Kicking a proud lion between the legs would shame it (LL.V.8.4593’) and neutralise it as a threat; telling a baboon that arrows or hunting dogs belonged to a girl would cause it to relent to a hunt (LL.V.20.5920–5922; LL.V.24.5953–5956). This extends further, applying to the likes of the rain, even, another force of the world capable of being shamed (see McGranaghan 2012, p. 190); inasmuch as the failings of a family member would bring recrimination from their affines, the rain could be shamed, connected as it was to human communities by formalised obligation.

As humans in one’s own community could expect repercussions from social faux pas, failure to meet the reciprocal requirements placed upon them by another party’s observances would bring failure upon any inter-community engagement. Thus, in the way a hunter could expect failure from an inability to meet the requirements of prey, even prey animals could expect a range of problematic outcomes from non-compliances of their own, even if their obligations were to the humans predated upon them (McGranaghan 2012; cf. Willerslev 2007).

We can infer social continuity between human and non-human settings based on this principle. Shame is a function of taboo-recognition; one cannot shame something that does not present or experience social injunction, or that does not recognise the principle of reciprocity. Culture is the necessary milieu to these occurrences; it orders these injunctions and principles, and aligns and defines frames of reference. If one crossed into passive nature at the boundaries of human communities, there would be no reason for social frameworks to extend further into the world than those enacted by humans themselves. There is no nature/culture boundary as implied by materialist analysis that frames the world as resources outside, and persons inside, because culture is what orders social interactions between persons human and non-human and structures the world in terms of its social relationships.

Indeed, this “is why some specialists . . . prefer to use the term “procurement” rather than “production”, the better to underline that what we call hunting and gathering are primarily specialised forms of interaction that develop in an environment peopled with intentional entities that are comparable to humans” (Descola 2012a, p. 458).

In this way, social skill is the requirement for any kind of traversal of space, as much as it is for dwelling in it. The logics of the home range (the places and behaviours with which a community is familiar) are reproduced at moments of understanding of the home-logics of social others, as they are encountered at various points of transit across a landscape. In so doing, they position themselves at various points on the social indices that species maintain of the other communities of the landscape with which they do or do not relate. Reproduction of specific behavioural tropes on demand is insufficient, however; skilful “understanding [of required social norms] was developed not only from having heard the requisite information, but by ‘agreement’ with it” (McGranaghan 2012, pp. 180–81). Internalising social education, replicating cultural forms, and interpreting those presented by the world (e.g., LL.V.12.4937–4938) are essential to enacting safe passage, as it permits one to meet their obligations to those with whom they make contact, and preserving their agreeable forms with others. At once, those erstwhile others reciprocally offer their own understandings (e.g., LL.V.20.5544–5545).

Internalise and replicate these norms, and the world will act with you, and your navigation will proceed as planned. Fail, and it will judge your passage as transgression, and punish you for your failures to set up appropriate relationships, presenting a world that is capricious and full of dangerous intent.

Social norms are demonstrated and reinforced by the appropriate and inappropriate behaviours of personages in myth, persons enacting the everyday, persons in trance, and by animal-persons navigating their own social universes. Antisocial figures in myth were both risible and terrifying, and presented sometimes as models, though often as contrasts for personal behaviour. For the nineteenth-century !Xam, lions of the Early-Race were inappropriate with their food, killing indiscriminately, never sharing their meat and consuming immodestly and rapidly (WB.XIV.1367–1368; LL.II.1.256’–1258’ in McGranaghan 2014a, p. 11), hardly different from ‘real’ lions observed today in the Kalahari, and to whom the Ju!’hoansi attribute a personhood that is powerful and malevolent. It is possible for people to change into lions during the dance, whether by accident or by design, and this transformation may carry all or any of the associations here mentioned, cumulatively the characteristics of social monsters. Monsters, in turn, are both the characteristic of, and characterised by their residence in, the dangerous and distant (viz. socially unintelligible) reaches of the world (discussed in more detail below). In rock art, such connotations can convey many meanings but, as we shall see, “all of this operates within a ‘connective cosmology’ underwritten by myth and belief” (Guenther 2020a, p. 27), in which what one is is determined primarily by who they are to others, their ‘species’ such as it is, determined by their alignment with the norms of one or other community of persons. Accordingly, this landscape is one in “which human and animal identities are merged, thereby dissolving species boundaries and, more generally, Cartesian dichotomies. And underwritten by experience, whenever a shaman or initiand, painter or storyteller or hunter becomes him/herself an animal” (Guenther 2020b, p. 27).

All of this points to a strongly reciprocal modelling of communities by one another. As the social/cultural units of topography that one may encounter, navigation by these communities leaves them all in a constant state of mutual definition, in accordance with their various states of normative conformance. Those communities, in turn, are predominantly determined by disposition, assessed equivalently between humans and non-humans. Where ‘Grass’, ‘Mountain’, and ‘Flat Bushmen’ were among the range of human iterations, they were evaluated by the ways their defining technological and behavioural traits would make them more or less compliant with social expectation (see discussion in McGranaghan 2012, pp. 219–22).

In places furthest from familiar frames of reference can be found the communities least compliant and most hostile (see Skinner 2017, pp. 156–57, 2021a), such as the archetype of the Korana (an historic raider combine of the northern cape frontier; Engelbrecht 1936). The Korana were characterised by their possession of suites of violent material culture and correspondingly dangerous dispositions, though they still possessed sufficiently coherent ideologies to demonstrate their ‘difference’ from the !Xam in terms that the latter understood (McGranaghan 2014b, p. 679). Colonists were similarly rendered in violent stereotype, likened to hyenas (another stereotypically antisocial creature), described as inclined to attack at night, and having “hair like lions” (Raper and Boucher 1988, p. 194) in reference to their stereotypically blonde locks and beardedness (McGranaghan 2012, p. 205; 2014b, p. 681).

It is notable that these physical characteristics were both cause and effect of their inclinations. This is demonstrated in the ways that social ‘difference’ (viz. strangeness, normative noncompliance; see !xarra; D. Bleek 1956, p. 363) manifests physically. This may be in foul odours (see LL.II.14.1442), hairiness (LL.II.2.333; LL.II.30.2693–2694; LL.V.3.4127–4128; McGranaghan 2014b, p. 674), and yellowness (!kai:nja; ‘yellow, green, or shining’; D. Bleek 1956, p. 297; LL.II.18.165; McGranaghan 2014b, p. 674), which are all characteristics of a ‘beast of prey’. When, in myth, the primordial Caracal became embroiled in the identity of a hyena (i.e., began to reproduce its mores), it assumed the latter’s beastly mantle, and manifested yellowness and hairiness in the process (LL.II.18.1654–1657), taking on the definitional features of dangerous or antisocial things to accord with its behaviour. Form, in this way, accords with content, yet the two are each as mutable as the other. A shape is taken on account of tendency, intent, and the (in)ability to answer social obligations. This means that a judgement of species is, in effect, an assessment of what cultural characteristics an agent deploys at a given moment, and how those characteristics interface with their social surroundings.

This imparts a significant reliance on how one agent is perceived by others, as compliance and influence will render one more or less sociable, and thus, more or less alike in form and tendency. The landscape thus ordered is in shades of relative similarity, its proximities more enmeshed in one another, and more similar, its distal regions more different, replete with dangerous strangers, less inclined to operate in sociable terms. The general mirroring of ‘in-community’ social assessments over the landscape suggests that an assessment of ‘non-human’ largely mirrors the assessment of ‘non-!Xam’, for instance, suggesting they should be considered more or less equivalently, with relatively little impact on the ontological personhood they imply. A distant person (human or otherwise) is a bad and strange person, and all of those things in turn, but they remain a person nonetheless. Culture extends across them almost by necessity, as it is a determining feature of either classification; intelligibility is both the cause and effect of normative (mis)alignment.

It follows that discrete natural/cultural delineations are incompatible with a system in which “ways-of-being (or doing)” (McGranaghan 2014b, p. 683) are so inherently connected to perceptions others make of one’s identity. An animal is itself by the expressions of specific animal culture, read as such by another. For socially skilful humans, these expressions can be understood if one has a “way into” (McGranaghan 2014b, p. 683) the animal; that is, knowledge of its culture, and ability to recognise its behavioural signalling. Similarly, one is something other-than-animal by expressions of the forms of human culture, and reproduction of those defining human norms where others can recognise it. The differing extents of both human and animal are determined at moments of their mutual observation, constrained by their relative knowledge of one another and their respective abilities to understand. In this way, each is defined by the behaviours they manifest in moments of contact with the other, their social obligations met or missed as a factor of knowledge or ignorance.

Indeed, a human is !Xam, for instance, for all the reasons a hyena is a hyena, and a baboon a baboon. None of these are immutable categories, and no one of their communities have a unique claim on culture, nor surplus or paucity of internal social life. A good

example of this is the baboon, a population given much attention by the !Xam as a (topographically and ontologically) neighbouring community. Baboons are accorded an explicit self-awareness and fear of death (LL.V.24.5957–5964); further, they have language (LL.V.24.5926; see Bleek 1931, p. 167; Hollmann 2004, pp. 10–11), practise marriage (LL.V.24.5924'), and utilise characteristic medicines (LL.V.24.5924'–5925'; cf. Challis 2009, pp. 104–7; 2012, p. 276; 2014, pp. 259–60). These relative proximities to human communities place them on the border of the human definition, though partly 'outside' it as well, as a factor of their known violent tendencies.

Of interest is that historic human communities have employed these logics to themselves. An example is the AmaTola, an ethnically composite community in the nineteenth century Maloti-Drakensberg who incorporated parts of Maloti San culture. They utilised the medicines that defined baboons and were known to herder and farmer societies as raiders, pillagers, and inhabitants of socially marginal conditions. Their arts acknowledged their humanity alongside a boundary condition determined by their violent ways of life, taking on baboon-ness (see Challis 2014; e.g., Figure 1) in a way that reflected their status on the edges of other human communities (McGranaghan and Challis 2016). They were humans whose social status, ontological status, and defining range of territory and behaviour overlapped the definitions of baboon communities. Thus, their relative intelligibility (mis)aligned with both other humans, and other baboons to varying extents, at any given moment changing both who and what they were. They used baboon potency, which at the same time held the essence of its qualities, to cheat death as the baboon does, and they signalled this in their rituals, paintings, and practices (Challis 2014).



Figure 1. Re-drawing from tracing of a 'horse site dancing group' in the Maloti-Drakensberg. Humans in various stages of transformation 'take on' the qualities of baboons. Colonial-era sources point to their integration of baboon abilities, alongside a social position that mimicked the position of baboons relative to human communities. Thus, as the AmaTola raiders aligned their behaviours and capabilities to baboons, so did they literally and figuratively become them (after Challis 2012). Re-drawing by Challis.

In this way, both presence and navigation of the landscape are acts contingent on the maintenance of relations. 'Closeness' with or to a given community, their behaviours, or their territories is what determines both the form and character of interactions with others, because one's relative similarity or difference to others will practically determine what one is (cf. Viveiros de Castro 1998). Correspondingly, humans do not extend unique agency into a passive world, nor represent isolated expressions of culture on an asocial plane, but are simply human nodes of relation in a socially relativistic universe. As relations in this

space have causal impact on identity, so does the ability to understand others determine how dangerous a place is; failures to understand produce dangerous interactions, and populate the world with dangerous agencies, while knowledgeable means of approach reproduce favourable results. Thus, to traverse the landscape is to appeal not only to human perspectives, but to the animal ones that determine the character of a given experience in the world. Our sources recognised that they could not just go into the world and take, but that everything is transformative, contingent, momentary, and responsive, and all in need of negotiation, or brokerage, as we would have it.

5. The Social Basis, and Equivalence, of Practice

The world's encultured character means that interactions between persons, human or otherwise, must be negotiated as normative performance. In ethnography, we observe this in the way that assessments of social efficacy apply to nearly all activities. This is the basis of the general "contiguity between ritual and mundane activity" (McGranaghan 2012, p. 203) that accords with observations made by commentators on !Xam ethnography (Hewitt [1986] 2008, p. 185; Guenther 1999, p. 104; Riley 2007, pp. 292–93; Dowson 2009, p. 380; McGranaghan 2012, pp. 202–3, 338; McGranaghan and Challis 2016, p. 591; cf. Lewis-Williams 1992, p. 57), and in discussions of the material collected in the Kalahari (Katz 1982, p. 52; Biesele 1993, pp. 21, 23; Guenther 1999, p. 236; see also Silberbauer 1981, p. 130). Realising desirable outcomes in any practice could be broadly described as 'skill'. As social nous governs how favourably one's endeavours will be, skilful behaviour of any kind is accordingly a display of social ability overall.

We can infer a social character, and thus imply a social environment to even what might otherwise be considered 'spiritual' activities. We extend these social conditions on the basis of the very clear equivalence in the assessments as social activities, irrespective of their apparently 'spiritual' or 'mundane' settings. Magical occurrences, and the application of magic ('sorcery'; e.g., LL.V.20.5544–5545), has common, essential and overlapping restrictions of social logic that apply elsewhere. The central determiner of success is as that above; the salient demonstration of "proper relations between species [viz. persons]" (Hewitt [1986] 2008, pp. 92–95; see McGranaghan 2012, p. 148; 2014a, pp. 14–15; 2014b, pp. 678, 680–81) determined an action's prospects of success, spiritual or not. This is a principle condensed as *!kwaakka*, the notion of behaving with 'understanding' (Bleek 1956, p. 596; McGranaghan 2012, pp. 169–70), as the social conditions of the world variably oblige.

Actions demonstrating this form of understanding were done 'nicely' (see *twai:i*; Bleek 1956, p. 243), and thus met with favourable outcomes. The judgement of 'niceness' here broadly accords with what one might think of as 'nice' behaviour. For example, when making arrows,

Stones used to straighten the reeds imparted a 'smoothness' that allowed the arrows to fly 'nicely' (LL.VIII.14.7235), implying that within a technical trueness of trajectory lay a kind of socially objectified agreeableness; smooth arrows behaved themselves. (Snow 2021, p. 60)

This follows the reciprocal cycles that both determine and cause intent and form. The 'ugliness' of iron-tipped arrows (LL.VIII.1.6086) contrasts the state of 'looking well' (*a:kən*; Bleek 1956, p. 7; McGranaghan 2012, pp. 40, 139–40, 169–71; McGranaghan and Challis 2016), that would have been achieved by the artful use of a more socially apt material. Materials are judged in the same capacities as species in this sense, aligning (or failing to align) socially in correspondence with their tendencies, and the ways in which others relate to and with them.

In this way, the perhaps most overtly 'practical' elements of the world are governed by essential social logics. The making of arrows to be used in hunting is not "a virtuoso fashioning of a raw material, but rather as an incomplete actualization, in slightly different forms" (Descola 2012a, p. 460) of the elements of living things evoked as "transformed bodies" (van Velthem 2001, p. 206), rendered into material objects. By virtue of their

animated origins, they required as much social consideration as something more obviously sociable.

Within this framework, both hunting and trance are designated as domains of skilled (as above) behaviour, amenable to assessments of their relative ‘niceness’, or the ‘understanding’ they represented, both indicators of desirable states of (social) artfulness (e.g., LL.II.11.1111; LL.II.13.1308; [McGranaghan and Challis 2016](#), p. 588). Indeed, ‘magic’ could be seen as merely the communication of a particular social capacity that agents have (e.g., [McGranaghan and Challis 2016](#), p. 594), which follows the same rules as everything else. This is demonstrated by the general equivalence between arrows and hunting; antelope could ‘fire back’, using ‘magic arrows’ that would cause illness (LL.VIII.15.7263’), to punish improper approach.

This, too, is the background to the ‘owning’ of animals. A hunter might ‘possess’ an animal through a salient demonstration of understanding that animal; often, in their capacity to enmesh themselves in the lives of that animal, recognise their obligations, and deploy the correct social cues ([McGranaghan and Challis 2016](#), p. 591). Shamans did so in similar terms when they engaged animal agencies (e.g., [Challis 2005](#), pp. 12–14), rendering them ‘tame’ ([McGranaghan and Challis 2016](#), pp. 592, 594) through similar appeals to obligation.

To have the understanding of an animal was to be particularly adept at dealing with it, to observe all social protocols and rituals; carrying the correct accoutrements, smelling the correct way, and using respect terms or, as | | kabbo put it to Lucy Lloyd in 1872, “we must approach nicely. Our killing the springbok . . . [we] approach with understanding” (LL.II.10.1111). Springbok hunting specialists among the nineteenth-century |Xam had special insignia; Springbok-eared caps were real items of material culture made from the animal’s scalp. In Maloti-Drakensberg paintings, such caps are commonplace, although importantly they are often found alongside and in a spectrum of equivalence with therianthropes; that is, human–animal composites, in which shamans partially transform into antelope ([McGranaghan and Challis 2016](#); see [Figure 2](#) below). Both the caps and the antelope transformations are overwhelmingly rhebok (as Qing made plain to Joseph Orpen in 1873, [McGranaghan et al. 2013](#)). The eared caps denote the specialist’s inclination towards that antelope, the transformation shows the inclination the specialist has to take on the form, and thus the qualities of that antelope:

For sorcerors have things whose bodies they are. These things which they have seem to see. When these things seem to have seen something which the sorceror does not know the sorceror feels in his senses that something is happening (Dia!kwain to Lloyd, LL.V.25.6011–6013).

In this passage, Dia!kwain emphasises part of the purpose of the relationship insofar as the animal (whose body the specialist has) helps the specialist to become attuned to its perspective. In the Kalahari, the healer Kxau Giraffe told Megan [Biesele \(1993, p. 70\)](#) that his animal, the giraffe, facilitates travel when in trance: “Just yesterday, friend, the giraffe came and took me again”.

Conversely, just as hunters transferred destructive energies through arrow-media in the hunt, so too did particular kinds of shaman (as well as other anti-social agencies) cause sickness and death through ‘arrows’ of their own ([McGranaghan 2012](#), p. 204). The word for “shoot with magic arrows”, | *xāu* ([Bleek 1956](#), p. 363), is particular to such transfers enacted by shamans, but descriptions of the action of shooting occur extensively as metaphors for the transfer of energy in practically all settings, nearly exclusively through arrow-like media. These transfers, in turn, are of a great stature in the idiom, as they represent a transgression of boundaries; the influence that one agent may perhaps forcibly, often problematically, place upon the body of another.



Figure 2. Trance dancers in transformation bleed from the nose, owing to purposeful hyperventilation. One takes on rhebok antelope form, while others wear rhebok-eared caps. KwaZulu-Natal (Redrawing by Patricia Vinnicombe, courtesy African Rock Art Digital Archive).

The topological element implied by such transgressions is apt. Both hunters and shamans traverse the semantic, symbolic, and topological demarcations of species, their skilfulness determined by their abilities to read the turn of the social landscape, and navigate it appropriately. Because of the relationship between form and intent—inasmuch as predatory, ‘monstrous’ behaviour makes one a monstrous predator (McGranaghan 2012, p. 413; 2014a)—this would likely involve changing form, as they aligned themselves with the norms of another community or invoked the behaviours of social others. As they would probably be enacting energy transfer across species/community demarcations as well, the likelihood of success and mitigation of problematic (monstrous, predatory) consequences would be determined by how socially adroit they were able to be in the process.

The traversals and transfers made by both hunting and ritual disciplines encounter the same prominent tension. Approach to other communities is a normal part of life, both as one merely traverses physical or metaphorical domains, and as one engages in the transfers of energy and substances that drive shamanic, forager life. Yet, such an approach requires a simultaneous mimesis and distinction (cf. Willerslev 2007, p. 191). ‘Nice’ approach is that which permits one to realise their intended outcomes and requires the reproduction of norm and form. Where one begins within a human frame of reference, one does the things that humans do to contrast oneself to others (cf. Descola 2012b); to traverse the boundaries between communities and achieve the uptake of useful energies (meat/calories, fat/power), one must as both shaman and hunter temporarily invert their defining contrasts, and come as close as possible to their ontological target.

That there is bleed-over is inevitable, and this is reflected in ritual observances that impart these norms to adolescents in rites of passage. In a review of examples in which Kalahari foragers equate themselves with animals, Mathias Guenther (2015, p. 292) highlights the girl’s initiation ceremony in which she is named both hunter and eland—the mimesis and metamorphosis of eland lending itself to, and in some ways creating, the

socially tense, liminal state that the initiand occupies between adolescence and adulthood. A similar sympathy bond is inculcated in the boy's initiation, during which he is imbued with eland medicine rubbed into cuts in his skin, and his anointment with eland fat, rich with the agency and power of the antelope. These actions prime the young man for the connection that he might possibly achieve with the antelope during his lifetime, and offer a glimpse into what it is to be eland—an intrusion of its body into his.

Such a bond might in future manifest in the 'presentiments' of the southern !Xam (Bleek and Lloyd 1911, pp. 330–38) or 'tappings' of the northern Kalahari Ju!'hoansi (Keeney and Keeney 2015, p. 171; Guenther 2017, p. 5); these are subconscious and somatic, feelings that announce the presence of, and precipitate the hunting of, an animal. This might be read as the non-human signal being 'picked up' by the human who has understanding (Guenther 2015, p. 297; cf. de Prada-Samper 2014), the two agencies' ways-of-being temporarily enmeshed to the extent that it ascends to preternatural detection.

This process will be reciprocal; the ontological target will align their norms and thus their forms in turn, the shared moment of understanding one in which each comes close to the other (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Re-drawing from tracing of panel at Phuthing 11 in the Eastern Cape, Matatiele, South Africa. The coiled, rhybok-headed serpent (centre) permits itself to be approached and touched by the base-human therianthropes (right, surrounding). The mutual alignment of norms is indicated by the shared expressions of form by the agencies present, all taking on the bearing of a 'nice' rhybok (McGranaghan and Challis 2016, p. 594). Re-drawing by Challis.

For hunters and shamans to return to their frame of reference at the end of this process, there must be an invocation of their original contrasts once again, and a return to what made them what they had been before. To do so safely, there is a need to 'broker' relations, to appeal to established relationships, give guarantee of what will come after, mitigate the

contrasts where they appear, and make the norms match the forms, or vice versa, as social contexts dictate.

6. Powering Social Navigations: The Role of Potency

Navigation is thus an inherently transformative experience, bridging multiple ways-of-being and multiple spheres of existence, and in so doing, changing who and what one is. Successful application of *!nanna-se*-type respect observances permit hunting transformations, in which a tracker ‘becomes’ the animal desired—whose energies are acquired in its meat and fat; and dancing transformations in which the dancer ‘becomes’ the animal desired—whose potency is acquired for the purpose of transcendence. It is not possible to undertake any of these acquisitions of potency without ‘understanding’, or what some might call a sympathy bond (Guenther 2015, p. 278). The bond with any particular species, however, is not a privilege afforded indefinitely, but one that follows the general relativity of social judgements made elsewhere, and thus needs to be routinely re-established. The brokerage of relations between people whose skill permits them to connect with animals lies at the heart of the ‘understanding’ mentioned by !Xam informants, and informs our understanding of rock art that features it. Thus, when people who have the ‘understanding’ of an animal take on its characteristics, interior and/or exterior (Guenther 2015, p. 306), they are not summoning something that is rightfully theirs, but negotiating and asking respectfully from someone with whom they have built up relations over the course of many encounters.

If these relations mean the animal’s social obligation is to give up its body to the hunter, then so be it—the protocols have been observed (cf. Willerslev 2007, pp. 102–4). If the animal entity that is being summoned to the healing dances by the women who dance and clap its song is summoned ‘nicely’, the dancers who have an affinity with that animal may access its supernatural power to enter the trance healing state. In so doing, they feel themselves become that animal and, like the hunter who feels himself become the prey, the deliberate mimesis becomes a metamorphosis that can facilitate travel, supernatural feats and perspectives otherwise unachievable (Guenther 2015, p. 291; cf. Willerslev 2007, pp. 12, 94). Perhaps the best visual representation of the hunter’s experience of becoming the animal desired is in the Foster brothers’ Kalahari documentary film *The Great Dance: a hunter’s story* (Foster and Foster 2000), in which Karoha, the !Xo hunter, called the Runner, ‘becomes Kudu’ while persistence hunting. These are traversals and transformations brought about in the dance and in the hunt, sharing “neuropsychological [and] psycho-phenomenological [characteristics]—which in turn produce changes in body state and consciousness . . . Altered states of consciousness arising as a result of physical exertion as practised in the healing dance find expression in San painted imagery” (Rusch 2016, p. 891). The rigors of one experience recall both the neurological state and phenomenological characteristics of the other. The energies that govern one govern the other. The availability of the energies that permit these traversals is subject to social assessments, with the consequences of mismanagement or normative misalignment shared in these contexts as well.

We can observe these principles in the example of J08 in Highland Lesotho (see Figure 4). The image is located in a shelter overlooking a valley noted for its richness of game during the summer months (Challis 2019, pp. 173–74), and thus possessed a richness of agencies able to offer their powers. In this case, we see the struggle to ameliorate the difficult and dangerous, overtly monstrous characteristics imbued in its form by the social and spiritual consequences of consumption: claws, hair, tusks, and a bulbous stomach. An overabundance of supernatural potency in this valley landscape, so full of eland—spiritually and literally housed in the *!gi* (potency) of the eland fat. At a very high altitude (2387 m), we find this image in a setting far from the normal spaces of human life, in a place defined by its inhabitation by the powerful, ur-shaman deity *kaggen*. Characterised by this formidable inhabitant, and by its distance and thus strangeness, access to this place would challenge all but the most skilled practitioners. Painted in this setting, we find a

figure whose monstrous expressions are undoubtedly the result of uncontrollable forces and potency acting on hunter and/or dancer, and the problematic consequences of their consumption. It is apposite, then, that in the same shelter there are painted two figures with rhebok- and eland-eared caps—individuals bearing expressions of the ability to tame (Challis 2019, pp. 179–80); that is, to mitigate these problematic outcomes.



Figure 4. Image of the large anthropomorphic image at J08, possessing three legs and one arm, all clawed and hairy, and a human visage occluded by tusks and whiskers. Its belly is distended, indicative of a ‘devourer’ in a dangerously high-potency, high-altitude locale (Challis 2019, pp. 176–77, Figure 3. False colour to bring out details. Image by James Pugin).

7. An Atlas of the Social Universe

Taking these principles in aggregate, we can begin to map the social universe that surrounds the images. At its core, it is socio-centric (following Viveiros de Castro 1998, p. 474), in the sense that the inhabitants of the world mutually define each other, their aligned norms and expressed forms both assessed by one another, and in the process, determined by each other. To be ‘tame’ is for this alignment to be more complete, while to be ‘wild’ is to fail to meet obligations, intentionally or otherwise, or to respond negatively to another’s breach of taboo, often with aggression (see ‘axis of wild-to-tame’ in McGranaghan and Challis 2016, p. 584), and to take the correspondingly contrasting form (e.g., a leonine one). Intelligibility is in this way a key part of how the world determines itself; if an actor within it cannot understand the others to whom they relate at a given moment, and there is thus no way to align, the world is wilder as a factor of their ignorance (see Orpen 1874; discussion ‘failures of intent’ in Skinner forthcoming).

The relationship of form to intent means that social aptness comes also from the ability to read what is presented; a predator is known by its antisocial indicators, while ‘human’ is a constitution through human behaviour and perspective, just as animals are of theirs. That these inclinations are responsive is what drives relations in the world; if an animal will be tame, it will thus take a corresponding form. By this form they make themselves known in a format intelligible to an observer, hypothetically able to understand them and their social signals, and skilfully enact the correct responses. The world is in this way a “field of relations” (Olwig and Hastrup 1997, p. 8; Jiménez 2003, p. 139), its varied conditions determined by the ways agencies engage within it. By interpreting environmental responses and characteristics, and enacting an above all cultural assessment

of them, “the things of the world will tell [a skilled observer] what they are, and, in so doing, who” (Skinner 2021c, p. 191; following Viveiros de Castro 1998, p. 480; Descola 2013, pp. 121–22).

Engaging socially, understanding one’s obligations and meeting them would render the world safe and stable: it is then a place less predatory, and that thus permits navigation. The longer one has resided in situ, and spent time meeting their obligations, the greater the precedent in that place for familiar forms of behaviour, the more knowledge one would have to negotiate future encounters. Traversing away from this familiar state and these established conditions would elicit ‘different’ responses from the environment; that is, socially unintelligible, strange ones (see McGranaghan 2014b), scaling in difference and danger as those familiar locales slowly faded from view.

It is ‘strangeness’ in this sense that seems to define encounters that occur in particularly distant (from one’s social frame of reference) locales, amidst unintelligible expressions of culture and identity, and correspondingly dangerous conditions. This is also the setting in which magical occurrences come about. ‘Magic power’ (*lko:ξoξ-de*; D. Bleek 1956, p. 320) is the term used to describe this, referring to the capacities of sorcerers, especially in the extents to which they cause illness (e.g., LL.V.19.5484–5485; retaining the equivalence to hunting as it takes the form of “invisible arrows”; D. Bleek 1956, p. 318). It is also the form that the environment enacts expressions of danger and caprice in moments of violated taboo or social failure (an example being the case of the rain’s ‘magic power’, manifest alongside the dangerous/taboo capacities of New Maidens; LL.V.6.4400; LL.V.13.4989), so consistent in the ethnography that *lko:ξoξ-de* was originally mistranslated as ‘evil things’ (LL.V.19.5528–5529; McGranaghan 2012, p. 409).

Read within a framework that positions capacity and behaviour as markers of identity, ‘magic’ functions ably as both cause and indicator of danger, and thus it is naturally a thing that comes about at the margins of social agreeableness, intensifying as social conditions reach their terminal, antisocial locales. Indeed, there are various points of confluence between magic and illness, coming about in raised and choking dust (e.g., LL.V.20.5537–5546, 5557; “that ‘earth/dust’ is not a ‘good/friendly’ thing”, LL.V.20.5542; the “haze that brings illness”, LL.V.20.5557), and expressed in the actions of predatory animals, such as lions (e.g., LL.II.20.1775). They are brought about at the overlaps of antisocial and different behaviours, assessed as magical and dangerous in equivalent extents, and for the same reasons (exemplified in the *lkhā-ka-mumu*, a “lion ghost”; WB.XIII.2190; McGranaghan 2012, p. 447; see also D. Bleek 1956, p. 139; Skinner 2017, p. 83).

At the conceptual apex of distance, one could find the *l nu-ka-!k’e* (LL.II.36.3242), translated as “spirits of the dead” (D. Bleek 1956, p. 350), a term representing archetypal villains, and figures suffused with magic. In contrast to the connotation that ‘spirit’ has in Western idiom, this was a community that lived within obtainable reach (specifically, some way north of the !Xam informants’ home range, across the Orange River; D. Bleek 1956, p. 352; LL.VIII.10.6892’), their identities assessed in the same way as any community would be; through assessment of the culture they expressed, and the norms to which they did (not) align.

They were thought to shoot arrows into the sky, which would fall down upon the !Xam (LL.VIII.22.7972–7974), and are in this way a cornerstone of !Xam theories of disease; they are the ‘dead people’ from which sickness originated (see McGranaghan 2012, pp. 222–23; cf. “harm’s things,” Lewis-Williams 1980, p. 471; Lewis-Williams 1992, p. 57; “arrows of sickness,” Lewis-Williams 1998, p. 94). Their behaviours are explicable in terms of their distance from the communities assessing them, and thus their implied inability to perform or interpret social cues. Their danger stems from their lack of understanding, which is both cause and effect of their inclination to transfer destructive energies through arrows, in almost exactly the equivalent forms as hunters, vis-a-vis prey, and shamans, vis-a-vis other antisocial agencies (e.g., McGranaghan 2012, p. 204). What is important is that the *l nu-ka-!k’e* were a distant and antisocial community that could be encountered when travelling too far from home (LL.VIII.22.6892’), or when travelling in trance, for both

were inherently transgressive and transformational, and indeed, dangerous by virtue of the distances covered, and the magical implications of such distance (LL.VIII.26.8309').

In as much as there is a “basic contiguity” between ritual and mundane activities (as above), there is a profound overlap in their theatres. A person far enough from home could experience “numinous” encounters on the hunting ground (e.g., LL.VIII.8.6713–6715), and observe similarly ‘non-real’ mechanisms playing out (cf. [McGranaghan 2015](#), p. 277; [Skinner 2017](#)), but remain firmly in a standard state of consciousness. This is because, ultimately, the world is not demarcated by its spiritual or profane dimensions, but by its gradients of sociability, the experiences of which would be profoundly determined by one’s own abilities and relations.

Responsibility to one’s obligations determined success in the hunt and in trance; thus, sensitivity to the cultured communities of the landscape, and the ability to put into practice the fundamentally social assessments of those communities, determined not only the outcomes but also the experiences of both. While there would certainly be some sensory differences between foot-travel (running) and trance (flying), it is not the precise mechanisms involved, nor the field in which they occur, that differentiates them. Accordingly, when we consider the atlas of social fields that surrounds the art, or is implied by the oral record, it is one notable for its continuous character between these planes, lacking specifically sacred or profane dimensions. Indeed, its dangerous and magical reaches are accessible under varying conditions, though all require a fundamentally social understanding to traverse.

This offers a tantalising avenue for understanding what rock art is, by the factors of what it does. By representing an animal in an image, and perhaps including elements of its substance in paint for instance, such as blood, a record is made of an interaction between hunter/painter and animal communities. As so much of what a place is depends on the agreements and arrangements that have previously defined it, this suggests that traversal can be guaranteed, and ‘common ground’ engineered. By recording these past interactions in a way that makes them capable of being referenced in present and future interactions, the essential function of brokerage—pointing to mutual understanding—is replicated. Establishing precedent: ‘See, we have met here before’, is served well by showing an imagistic record of human–animal relations in paint or stone. An example of this can be found in the engraved hilltops of the Strandberg, in the Northern Cape, South Africa, a site with great prominence in the ‘heartland’ of the !Xam (see [Deacon 1986](#); [Skinner 2017](#)).

Particularly notable of the site is its steady decay, the doleritic formation slowly becoming a field of boulders (see Figures 5 and 6), themselves developing a dark patina of iron and manganese oxides. Upon these boulders are hundreds of horses, engraved through the patina, and into the pale dolerites beneath (see Figure 7).



Figure 5. The landscape between the hills of the Strandberg formation, inhabited at the time by both stones and cattle. Photo credit: Eric Wettengel.



Figure 6. View along the side of the Groot (Great) Strandberg formation, and its prominent exposure of boulders. Photo credit: Eric Wettengel.



Figure 7. Horse engravings on the Strandberg, ‘emerging’ into view as a factor of the contrasts between dark oxide and pale dolorite. Photo credit: Eric Wettengel.

Their marked contrasts make them visible under specific lighting conditions, and at certain angles this causes them to ‘pop’ into view as the solar angle changes (Skinner 2017). Although this style of engraving is not typical of San art, the site possesses deep connections to the source community and their context and is amenable to interpretation within the corresponding idiom (Skinner 2017). More to the point, their distribution and the construction of the site as a whole, within the social conditions described above, is one that ‘populates’ the landscape. As previously, significant others are those with whom a human community may entreat, and they will reveal themselves in ways that can be interpreted. This will often be in particular and “conspicuous degree[s] of volitional motility” (McGranaghan 2012, p. 338), and the images do that here. An animal intentionally revealing itself, or hiding itself from view, is practically represented here by the slow appearance and disappearance of their images from the landscape they have been used to populate. This constitutes the images as those of (significant) individual horses, and the horse-community implied by their distribution across this landscape, in such a way that

would signal amenability to negotiation. This, in turn, positioned the animal community as one with a history of contacts with the human one, the erstwhile tenuous conditions of the colonial frontier, in which these images originate, are negotiated in moments of interaction between significant individuals. This, in turn, solidified common ground; the place was a site of communication, characterised by the relations agencies had upon it and more importantly, within it. This site is an engineered social context that permits an open opportunity for humans and animals alike to present their understandings and be understood in turn. (Figure 8)



Figure 8. Horses show themselves along the scratched surface of a boulder. Differential weathering and exposed dolorite substrate visible. Photo credit: Eric Wettengel.

8. Conclusions: Navigational Symbology

In his classic defence of the ritual, trance emphasis in the hermeneutic approach, David Lewis-Williams successfully addressed the dilemma posed by the realisation that any image can have many meanings—that it can be ‘polysemic’—and that from the many meanings it might encompass or overlap, perhaps just one can be discerned to be the focus (see discussion in [Lewis-Williams 1998](#)). This draws strongly on the perhaps self-evident principle that an image draws meaning from the substrate on which it is depicted. Given that the rock face may be considered to bridge the immediate realm and that of the spiritual, the world of trance experience that sometimes takes shamans ‘underground’ ([Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1990](#)), it can be said that the images produced on this permeable ‘veil’ have their meanings mediated by the lens of a spiritual substrate. What is missing from this analysis, however, is the way in which any given image fits into the rock shelter or boulder as it is located in the landscape, not in terms of portrayal of the features

of the physical environment (Solomon 1997) but why, perhaps, it came to be placed there (cf. Smith and Blundell 2004). An image's landscape placement, but more significantly, the social conditions of the landscape in which it occurs, also provide this kind of focus to the polysemic image.

The logic that the 'frame' upon which something is placed is key to unlocking its meanings continues in our analysis. However, we find that in the implication of the 'veil' between the mundane world and the spiritual, this scope of potential meanings is limited to ritual aspects. Unpicking what the broader context represents—what the universe is beyond the 'canvas' immediately observable behind the image—is a much more difficult proposition, as not all of the relevant symbology and mechanisms are visible in frame. However, once broadened to include the social topography in which these images reside, and the continuous plane of spiritual and mundane but ultimately social cosmos, the focus of an image begins to align with the concerns that anyone would have when navigating the world. It can include perception and understanding, normative alignment, and the brokerage of relations (whether hunting, in trance or otherwise).

The imagery reflects this. It presents a record of prior relations, against which new interactions may be juxtaposed, and a representation of the transformational consequences, positive and negative, of these interactions that necessarily bridge communities and identities. The mutable nature of individual and community identity, and its mutually constitutive relationships with the other agencies involved, lend the social landscape a shifting and often uncertain quality. Navigation in the hunt or trance is an essential part of life, and mediating the transitions, transfers, and problematic consequences of interpersonal transgression are thus focal elements of myth, practice, and art making (for alternative views aligned to this see Guenther 2020a, 2020b). The inherently social world is navigated through negotiation, but in these topo-ontological territories, both self and other are moving targets.

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Note

- ¹ Forager sources do use terms such as 'own' or 'tame' (McGranaghan and Challis 2016), though we contend that these are domestic tropes used to 'speak into' and across the idioms of agriculturalists, but do not necessarily reflect the same frame of reference amongst themselves. This comes with some complexities, explored in King and McGranaghan (2020).

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Article

Animating Idolatry: Making Ancestral Kin and Personhood in Ancient Peru

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Abstract: Historical and archaeological records help shed light on the production, ritual practices, and personhood of cult objects characterizing the central Peruvian highlands after ca. AD 200. Colonial accounts indicate that descendant groups made and venerated stone images of esteemed forebears as part of small-scale local funerary cults. Prayers and supplications help illuminate how different artifact forms were seen as honored family members (forebears, elders, parents, siblings). Archaeology, meanwhile, shows the close associations between carved monoliths, tomb repositories, and restricted cult spaces. The converging lines of evidence are consistent with the hypothesis that production of stone images was the purview of family/lineage groups. As the cynosures of cult activity and devotion, the physical forms of ancestor effigies enabled continued physical engagements, which vitalized both the idol and descendant group.

Keywords: ancestor veneration; animacy; materiality of stone; Andes; Quechua; extirpation of idolatry; funerary cult; Ancash; Cajatambo

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1. Introduction

In recent years, archaeological scholarship has been much more receptive to the notion that personhood and subjectivity can be extended to nonhuman beings.¹ It is also true, however, that the kind of person may frequently be vague or in doubt. The ancient Andes provides an extraordinary record for examining the presence and engagement of nonhuman persons in the ancient past, given the great commitment taken by indigenous peoples to vitalize the landscape and its features and objects (e.g., Dean 2010; Dransart 2006; Jennings and Swenson 2018; Kosiba et al. 2020; Lau 2013, 2016; Townsend 1992).

This essay examines a long-lived tradition of cult objects and effigies in later pre-hispanic central Peru. I focus on their status as ancestral persons, hypothesized as the following. It is known that stone uprights and carved monoliths were produced and treated as important embodiments of esteemed forebears (Duviols 1977, 1979; Lau 2006, 2008). If, as is commonly held, ancestralization comprises the set of practices and beliefs that transitioned (“make”) an honored deceased into a transcendent being, the process should be based on kinship relations. As ancestor images, their production and veneration should have, notionally, been the purview of family or lineage groups who considered themselves progeny. To more fully scrutinize this framework, we need to consider the evidence to associate ancestor effigies and ritual places with the practices of kin groups.

This study discusses documentary and archaeological evidence to help approximate several relations of personhood: naming practices, forms of address, and the physical production and context of effigies. The evidence available to us indicates that ancient Andean ancestors were seen as and treated as extraordinary and esteemed kinspersons.

2. Framing Andean Ancestral Persons: Anthropological Perspectives and Historical Accounts

Two key themes broadly underpin my argumentation. The first concerns the animacy of nonhuman beings. By now, a well-established ethnographic literature reveals

how indigenous traditions of the Americas commonly attribute an interior animacy and personhood to beings, many of whom take the forms of plants and trees (e.g., Allen 1988; López Austin 1988), animals (e.g., Hallowell 1960; Kohn 2013; Walens 1981), spirits and numina (e.g., Descola 1986; Fausto 2012; Viveiros de Castro 1992), and/or objects or landscape features (e.g., Salomon 2018; Santos-Granero 2009). This “motley crowd of others” (Viveiros de Castro 2001, p. 23) may be crucial because they help constitute identity by way of their otherness: They are fundamentally linked as key beings in various cultural practices crucial for ongoing group livelihood, such as hunting, farming, herding, warfare, or collective ritual. Put another way, nonhumans are important in how humans understand and maintain their humanity because they are essential in social relations (broadly defined) and systems of framing selfhood and social organization. This essay follows an earlier thread that the dead hold status as a kind of special nonhuman being and other (Lau 2013, chp. 5), invested with a capacity to affect the livelihood of their descendants.

The capacity for the dead to intervene in the lives of the living, of course, is the basis of the other key theme: death practices. Bloch and Parry theorized (1982) that mortuary rituals, broadly, help legitimate political arrangements (such as rights to rule and elder power structures) and facilitate the smooth inheritance of roles and resources of the deceased. They are also pegged to local understandings about the fate of souls and the afterlife; mortuary practices and the symbolism of many Amerindian traditions seek to manage finite lifeforces or vitality (see also Santos-Granero 2019).

Death practices in the prehistoric Andes were variable across time and space (Dillehay 1995; Eeckhout and Owens 2015; Shimada and Fitzsimmons 2015), but one enduring mode consisted of ancestor cults. These formed the predominant mortuary practice in the Andes reported by the early colonial accounts, and considerable evidence points to a much deeper history (DeLeonardis and Lau 2004; Isbell 1997; Kaulicke 2001; Salomon 1995). Unlike other parts of the Americas, where the deceased may be destroyed, left to disintegrate, or forgotten, in Andean ancestor cults, the bodies and images of special named forebears were often curated for periodic renewal ceremonies and particularly as wrapped mummified bundles. Descendant groups regularly made and venerated other kinds of ancestor images, such as figurines, statues, or sculpted stones, of varying sizes, materials, and scales of demographic and regional potency (Lau 2015a). Creese’s (2017) discussion about art as “kinning” is instructive here, not only because of the semiotic affordances made possible through the replication of physical forms, but also, in the Andean case to be detailed, making ancestor images essentially propagates the symbolic system (kinship) by articulating material expressions (effigies of prototypes) and social relations of the cult group; similar to kinship itself, it distributes ancestral relations and prescribes their articulation.

This essay considers several periods of the Andean past and aims to draw comparisons to their respective evidential records. One important source of evidence comes from colonial era texts, especially of the 16th and 17th centuries. The other source of evidence comes from the archaeological record, and my objective with this contribution is to help furnish the logic for a comparison between the material/visual record and the written texts. To be sure, the relations between colonial accounts and the archaeological record are fraught (e.g., MacCormack 1991; Pillsbury 2008; Quilter 1996; Salomon 1999; Sillar and Ramón 2016), but I believe critical reading and select comparisons help illuminate the ancient record, particularly in regions with profound regional historical continuities. This commits to the view that, despite the sharp disjunctions in time and socio-religious context, the written texts have major relevance for assessing traditions of artifact forms and social practices, both colonial and prehispanic (e.g., Dean 2010; Duviols 1977, 1979; Isbell 1997; Murra 1980; Rowe 1946).

Two broad kinds of documentation are especially relevant. Colonial era eyewitness testimonies and accounts (the “chronicles”) often treated the places and histories of the Inca, especially of southern Peru and the Cuzco heartland (e.g., Cobo [1653] 1990; Guaman Poma de Ayala [1615] 1980). The “Idolatries”, meanwhile, emerged out of the colonial furor to

Christianize Andeans and campaigns to extirpate pagan practices, from ca. the late 16th to the mid-18th century, especially in the highland communities of central Peru. Descriptive accounts and court testimonies resulted from what MacCormack (1991, p. 390) called evangelization's "controlled ferocity" during the oppression of village-based and regional cults of the highland communities (e.g., Arriaga 1999; Duviols 2003; Mills 1997; Polia 2017; Salomon and Urioste 1991). Both kinds of records provide significant information about how stone images were characterized, used, and engaged with as objects of cult and animate features of communities and landscapes.

In particular, the colonial writings shed light on the widespread highland pattern of veneration of superhuman ancestral beings who took tangible physical forms (e.g., Dean 2010; Duviols 1979; Lau 2008, 2016). Usually these images were lithic forms: rounded pebbles, jagged rocks, boulders, uprights (Figure 1), and outcrops.² They could be portable or stationary, small and large. Mountains (Castro de Trelles 1992; Salomon and Urioste 1991) were the ultimate embodiments on the landscape (Gose 2006, 2016). Spanish priests called many such forms *huacas* (also *guacas*), a term they used synonymously with "idols".³ This pairing emerged out of the Christian gaze targeting their status both as tangible things and as false gods. The lithic material often had distinctive qualities, such as translucence, luster, mottling or striping, and smoothness. Unusual features could also be important: holes, protuberances, or natural features that approximated anthropomorphic or zoomorphic parts (e.g., eyes, mouths, limbs). The stones may have also been modified through shaping and carving (e.g., Lau 2016).



Figure 1. Standing stone uprights (*huancas*) at the foot of the Cordillera Blanca, above the city of Huaraz. Passersby have left stones to create an *apacheta* pile. Photograph by author.

Descendants venerated ancestors because they owed their existence to them (Cobo [1653] 1990)⁴ and for their continued vitalizing power (Salomon 1991; Taylor 2000). The effigies embodied progenitors of various kin collectives (*ayllu*). They owned the fields and herds and looked after their livelihoods. They also helped mediate the important rains that renewed the annual round. Ancestors were venerated as tutelaries who safeguarded the group and its lands and resources. In short, Andeans trusted in their ongoing impact for the group's wellbeing and prosperity (Arguedas and Duviols 1966; Arriaga 1999; Castro de Trelles 1992, pp. 26–27; Doyle 1988; Duviols 1977).

Each *ayllu* group had its own ancestors, ranked according to its own genealogical traditions (Isbell 1997; Zuidema 1990; Salomon 1999). These articulated group origins and tracked primordial actions of those forebears who settled the landscape and begat subsequent peoples. At the highest position was the founding progenitor, whose corpse in bundled form was called a *mallqui* or *illapa*. Standing stone uprights (*huancas*)⁵ were

also sometimes apical progenitors (Figure 1), those who manifested the capacity, or were deemed ancient enough to lithify (Zuidema 1973, p. 19). Other ancestral embodiments included pebbles, rocks, crags, and mountains, but also items such as carved monoliths and pottery jars; even tombs could be taken as instantiations. These were infused with the potency of the ancestor and activated and charged through ritual. Hence, there were many kinds of ancestral forms who fit into greater and lesser levels of ritual organization and who could be incorporated into the landscape (Lau 2015a). The local cult, with its articles and lands/herds, had its own caretakers and adherents; Christian priests demonized them as the “ministers” and “dogmatizers”, those kinspeople who continued to actively conduct and advocate pagan practices.

The principal *huaca* idols tended to be the mummy bundles and large stones and monoliths (Figure 2). There were also numerous smaller and more portable cult objects, which the Spanish saw as “lesser idols” (Figure 3).⁶ They had many local names but were referred to as *chancas*, *conchuri* (*Con Churi*, *cunchur*), and occasionally, *huacicamayqs* (“heads of houses”)⁷ (Ávila, in Arguedas and Duviols 1966, pp. 255–56; Arriaga 1999, p. 35; Mills 1997, pp. 76–77, 84).⁸ These were deemed family gods⁹ and generally the charge of the living head member. They were passed down typically along hereditary or affinity lines.¹⁰ As kinds of persons, they were considered vital, suprahuman members of the family, to whom offerings were made, and who were addressed in the same breath as parental and elder figures (Salomon and Urioste 1991, n366 and p. 86).



Figure 2. Stone monolith carved in the form of a seated, cross-legged mummy. Note the flat mask-like face, ear spool, and flexed and tucked position. Such effigies may have replaced disintegrated bundles or sought to show the lithification and enduring materiality of ancestors. Museo Arqueológico de Ancash, Huaraz. Photograph by author.



Figure 3. Small-sized ancestor figure excavated at Chinchawas. Note the flat mask-like face and seated position; height 6.4 cm, width 3.6 cm. Photograph by author.

Reports of an extirpation visit sometimes concluded with a tally of its deeds and items that were collected for public destruction and confiscation (Table 1). Arriaga’s how-to extirpation manual (e.g., Arriaga 1999, p. 138) made this accounting official operating procedure for increasingly standardized monitoring. Those portable and flammable items were burned in public. Shrines were razed, and stone monuments were destroyed or buried on the spot. The reports provide a general sense of the relative numbers of cult objects involved. For example, over an eighteen-month period in 1617–1618, Arriaga (1999, p. 23) observed the removal and destruction of over 603 principal *huacas*, 189 *huancas*, 617 *mallquis*, and 3418 *conopas* from the Cajatambo region alone.¹¹ This is roughly in the same order observed by the Augustinians during early evangelizing efforts in Huamachuco, which reported, in 1560, the destruction of over 3000 idols (Castro de Trelles 1992, p. 39).

Table 1. Numbers of idols tabulated in church visits to highland regions and parishes therein.

Priest-Writer	Year of Visit	Region/Number of Towns-Confessors	Huacas Principales/Públicas	Mallquis	Huancas	Lesser Idols
Juan de San Pedro (Castro de Trelles 1992)	c.1560	Huamachuco	-	-	300+ Guachecoal(es)	-
Arriaga and Avendaño (Arriaga 1999)	1617–1618	Cajatambo and Chancay	603	617	-	3418
Francisco de Ávila (Arguedas and Duviols 1966, p. 255)	1611	Huarochirí	Mentions that over 5000 idols were observed in five parishes comprised of over 7000 confessors			
Hernández Príncipe (1923)	1622	Recuay (Huaylas) (ca. 10 communities)	46	“100 y más”	-	“no hay número” (includes <i>huancas</i>)
Diego Álvarez de Paz (in Duviols 2003; Polia 1999)	1618	Ocos and Lampas provinces (2427 confessors)	345	230	-	1225
None identified (Polia 1999, p. 434)	1619	Conchucos (5 doctrines, 5 villages and 3104 persons)	297	-	-	-

Table 1 shows details from other extirpation visits, especially of parishes in the central Peruvian regions of Cajatambo and Ancash. The numbers relate to the prevailing protocols of painstaking investigations and remedial actions of confession and iconoclasm. There are inconsistencies in reporting, especially the conflation of categories (e.g., *huacas/mallquis*), missing categories (e.g., *huancas*), and vagaries of change through time and space. Notwithstanding, what even a conservative reading of the counts connotes is that extirpation had reported the elimination of many thousands of principal *huacas* and probably tens of thousands of lesser idols by the early 17th century. It can be estimated, again quite crudely, to be around four or five principal idols per village or basic *ayllu* collective or by another measure one “principal *huaca*” for every 7–10 individuals during the early 17th century (highland Cajatambo/Ancash area). These approximate figures basically agree with the descriptions noting the close connection between the *huacas* and the small extended families, the *ayllu* collectives responsible for them (see esp. [Hernández Príncipe 1923](#)).

The accounts of the ethnic Inca by key chroniclers (e.g., Cobo, Guaman Poma, Sarmiento) are also illuminating. Similar to other regions of Peru, deceased Inca rulers were also preserved into mummy bundles. However, they were also described as having made additional images, which were called *huauque* or *wawki* (Quechua for brother); these were simulacra made out of different materials and of varying degrees of likeness ([Van de Guchte 1996](#); [Hamilton 2018](#); [Meddens 2020](#)). They were carefully kept and attended to as physical extensions of the rulers, even after their death, as part of the *panaca*, the ruler’s descent group estate. Offerings and sacrifices were made to them. They were brought out in public display during celebrations and were deployed in battles to stir the morale of the Inca armies, having “the same powers as the bodies of their owners when they were still alive” ([Cobo \[1653\] 1990](#), pp. 37–38).

In sum, the historical accounts observed different material forms of esteemed ancestors in local funerary cults. Having ancestors in a tangible form was essential because the cults required regular interactions with them. By the same token, their upkeep and stewardship by kinspeople signaled the vitality of the cult and its descendant collective.

3. Honorifics and Naming Practice

Early historical descriptions about native Andean idols were an exercise in translation. The intensive monitoring and classification of idols helped colonial authorities to both identify them and expedite their eradication. Passages that relate how indigenous Andeans addressed their cult images are revealing, because the naming approximates an indigenous sense of the object’s subjectivity and personhood.

In particular, native prayers and supplications in the Idolatries documents, some in the original Quechua (Table 2), essentially address the ancestor effigies in honorifics as special cherished kin, especially elders, parents, and brothers ([Duviols 2003](#); [Itier 2003](#); [Polia 1999](#); [Salomon and Urioste 1991](#)). In other words, the devotion accorded kin-based subjectivity to the range of effigies: small-sized *chancas* or *conopas*, monoliths (*huancas*, *huacas*), and mummy bundles. Recognizing cult objects as valued and long-lived kinspersons was precisely the emic basis to their personhood (and paradoxically, the logic for Christians to cast it as false worship). Ultimately, what connected ancestors to their adherents turned on special contingent deictic relations having to do with kinship, filial reverence, and deference.

Table 2 reveals some additional points. The passages often used the term *yaya* (father, lord) to address the various ancestral embodiments.¹² This indicates the subordinate position of the worshipping descendants, who see themselves as their progeny. One priest in the extirpation campaigns of the Ancash highland observed, “they also venerate movable stones of particular workmanship with which they tell various myths . . . and they say they are the children of the stones” (Diego Álvarez de Paz, in [Polia 1999](#), p. 418, my translation).

Table 2. Examples of addresses to ancestral instantiations (the original Quechua in italics).

<p>Example 1. <i>Prayer to shrine (of two stone effigies) to bring forth maize beer (Itier 2003, p. 785).</i> <i>A qapaq yaya,</i> <i>a apu yaya,</i> <i>ka,</i> <i>kayta mikuy,</i> <i>kayta upyay,</i> <i>aswa mirananpaq</i></p>	<p>Oh, powerful father oh lord father Take eat this drink this so that there's abundance of chicha</p>
<p>Example 2. <i>Prayer (to conopa (small charmstone)) for camay, vitalizing force (Itier 2003, p. 790).</i> <i>Yaya qunupa,</i> <i>runakta kamay,</i> <i>waynakta kamay,</i> <i>alli kanapaq kamay,</i> <i>mikuuya qumay,</i> <i>aykatapis qumaytaq</i></p>	<p>Father conopa, give vitality to the people, give vitality to the young ones, Give them vitality so that they are well, give us food, and give us all that is necessary.</p>
<p>Example 3. <i>Prayer/offering to Huari mummy bundles (Itier 2003, p. 805–6).</i> <i>Yaya warikuna,</i> <i>mikuy kamaq,</i> <i>puča kamaq,</i> <i>tiqši kamaq,</i> <i>parquyuq,</i> <i>čakrayuq,</i> <i>kayta mikuy,</i> <i>kayta upyay,</i> <i>čuriykikuna arpašunki,</i> <i>allin čakra kačun</i> <i>allin mikuy kačun.</i></p>	<p>Huari fathers, who vitalize the food, who vitalize the nourishment, who vitalize the soil, Owners of the canals, Owners of the fields, eat this, take this, Your children make you an offering, to have good fields, to have good harvests.</p>
<p>Example 4. <i>On the intercessional role of Con Churi (Salomon and Urioste 1991, p. 86).</i> <i>cay chica llactam cay chaupi ñamca llacsa huatu</i> <i>mira huatu lluncu huachac hurpay huachac ñis cap</i> <i>cascanta yachanchic chaymantas cay</i> <i>ñiscanchiccuna ñau pachaca chayman ric</i> <i>runacunacta con churiquip yayaiquip ma chuyquip</i> <i>simincamachu hamunqui ñispas ñic carcan chaysi</i> <i>manam ñictaca ri cuti con choriiquictarac</i> <i>huyarichimuy ñiptin cotimuc carcan</i></p>	<p>This is all we know about Chaupi Ñamca, Llacsa Huato, Mira Huato, Llungo Huachac, and Urpay Huachac. In the old days, they say, these huacas would ask those who went to them, “Have you come on the advice of your own Con Churi, your father, or your elders?”</p>

The Huarochirí document discusses a related kind of cult image: sacred masks (*huayos*) from the face and other body parts of heroes and captive enemies (Salomon and Urioste 1991, pp. 120–21). These masks were ritual objects and also foci of veneration. They were danced to, offerings were made to them, and they were also carried on litters as agentive objects, similar to other objects in *huaca* and ancestor veneration. Notably, the captive enemy, before he was to be dispatched and his flayed face made into a mask, would beseech the captor, “Brother [*wawki*], soon you’ll kill me. I was a really powerful man, and now you’re about to make a *huayo* out of me. So before I go out onto the plaza, you should feed me well and serve me drinks first.”

This passage describes the transformed relationship between the captor and the captive: from one of enmity to one of kinship. Similar to the *huauques* and ancestor images more generally, the making of *huayos* appears to have been a form of making kin and kinning (Creese 2017). The process incorporates the image-person into the social collective and norms of social practice based on reciprocity.

4. Ritual Spaces for Ancestor Cult

I now turn to the ancient record and specifically to contexts of ancestor effigies and their architectural spaces. Other works have detailed a rich record of mortuary practices in highland Peru, specifically in the Ancash highlands (Figure 4) (Ibarra 2009; Lau 2000, 2015b, 2016; Ponte 2015). This study underscores the strong pattern of association between stone effigies and their relatively modestly sized ritual spaces.

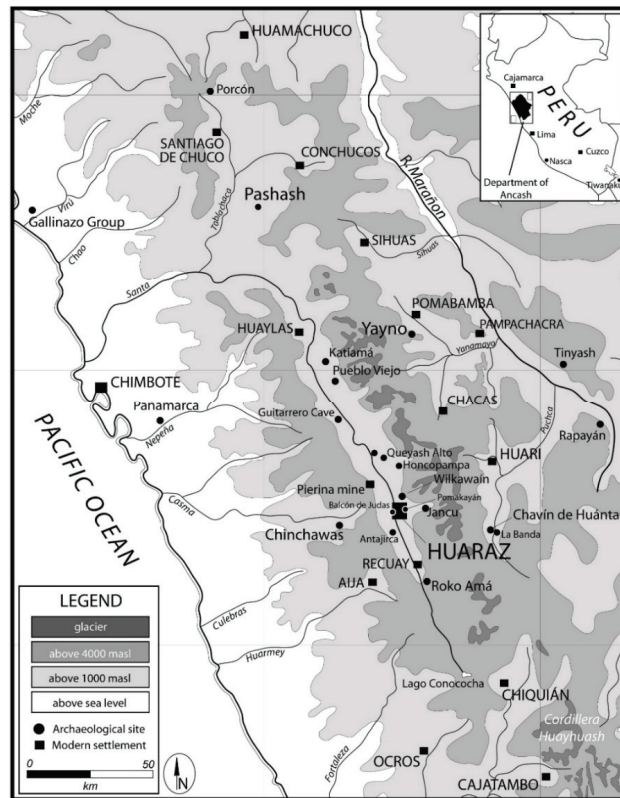


Figure 4. Map of north central Peru and places indicated in the text. Map by author.

By the first centuries AD, ancient Ancashinos began to entrust the human remains of esteemed forebears to burial spaces. Most were essentially modest covered spaces or small-sized buildings to store and curate physical human remains; these follow many of the general behavioral patterns detailed in the Idolatries (Isbell 1997; Salomon 1995). Early Recuay tradition tombs (AD 200–400) were mainly subterranean, utilizing cists, hollows, small chambers, and galleries. Later in the Recuay tradition and by the onset of the Middle Horizon (AD 700), aboveground tombs (or *chullpas*) (Figure 5), with a rectangular plan and often with multiple chambers, became predominant; *chullpas* continued to be the predominant burial architecture until the conquest.

As in the Idolatries testimonies, the dead were not buried directly in the soil but, rather, were left open inside the covered space—flexed, desiccated, and wrapped in textiles. Recovering intact bundles has been rare, but field reports indicate human remains and preservation consistent with flexed corpses that deteriorated in the open (Bria 2017; Gamboa 2009; Grieder 1978; Ponte 2015). Many cult effigies made in stone and ceramics are depicted as seated, flexed and bundled individuals (Lau 2000, 2006) (Figures 2 and 3).



Figure 5. Typical aboveground mausoleum (*chullpa*), near Pampa Chacra, Peru; approximately 3 m wide. Large, flat roofing slabs protected a low, single-chambered interior. Small highly visible doorways allowed periodic access for small descendant collectives. Photograph by author.

The mausolea were repositories to keep and retrieve the human remains and cult articles (Figure 6) for various post-mortem treatments and handling (Isbell 1997). Earlier constructions were usually single chambered, but later, the mausolea grew larger and more complex. Some tombs were large enough to accommodate the bundled interments of extended families or small kin groups over many generations, very similar to the pattern detailed in the Idolatries. Further, these buildings were not permanently sealed or buried. Small, highly visible doorways (Figure 5) allowed relatively easy access to the chambers' contents, including the burials and offerings.



Figure 6. Interior of a *chullpa* structure, near Roko Amá, showing built-in compartments for the storage of special cult objects and paraphernalia. Today, they contain offerings made to the building's spirits, in the form of coca leaves, sweets, and sacrifices of guinea pigs. Photograph by author.

Funerary locations varied greatly. They could be found near residential areas, as well as in more remote locations, often in elevated and highly visible areas. They were often situated in areas that marked important places in oral traditions, such as places of emergence/dawning (*pacarina*) or milestone acts by their forebears (Lau 2000). Special land-forms (e.g., mountains, outcrops, springs, lakes) marked these origin places. Caves,

in particular, were emphasized for their role in *ayllu* beginnings and key associations to water, fertility, and the underworld. Tombs and stone monuments were built at, or oriented towards, these places. The mausolea, with their dark interlinked chambers and often awkward passageways, often simulated the qualities of cave interiors.

The Idolatries accounts also mentioned walled open areas, just outside or near the tombs, that were places where effigies and cult idols would be brought out and feted. These were called *cayan*, located on terraces or platforms (Figure 7). Such spaces have been found near funerary structures, often with evidence of offerings, intensive feasting, and stone sculpture. The spaces are irregular, with walls of variable height, and measure roughly 10–15 m on a side; this is consistent with use by relatively small ritual collectives, likely in the order of dozens of people, rather than hundreds or more (Bria 2017; Gero 1991; Ibarra 2009; Lau 2002; Paredes 2012). Sampling excavations have found offering caches directly outside of *chullpas*, often of miniature vessels.



Figure 7. Photograph of Chinchawas, showing the main settlement mound and locations of a ceremonial enclosure (perhaps a ‘*cayan*’) and a standing upright (*huanca*). Over 40 carved stone monoliths were identified across the site. Photograph by author.

Early colonial religiosity of the rural Andean highlands centered on entreating ancestors for group wellbeing and renewal (Doyle 1988; Duviols 1971; Salomon 1995). The various tombs and ancestor images (see below) were instrumental because they comprised the physical milieu to ensure engagement with the ancestors (Lau 2000, 2008). The repositories were revisited over the agricultural round (Doyle 1988) and added onto over generations because of a long-term devotion to the construction and its contents; this, of course, is precisely the behavioral pattern typical of ancestor cults in the Andes and elsewhere globally. The mortuary places marked the very grounds, both the physical repository and rationale, of ancestorhood. Based on the documentary record, Gose (2006, p. 35) proposed the term “cosmological plumbing system” to refer to how cult activities, especially offerings and libations, essentially sought to feed into and tap into potent ancestral flows crucial to both physical and cosmological domains (rains, water, alimentary, bloodline); burial shrines and *pacarinas* were particularly important as access points of the system for this ritual work.

For more ancient groups of the Ancash highlands, studies have referred to “descent-scapes” to characterize this phenomenon more broadly and also to help frame diachronic consideration of the material record of long-lived cult contexts (Lau 2015b, p. 184). By this I mean the ongoing or perpetual materialization of the esteemed dead and the past as the mode to renew and understand their lived world; this was a long-term, cumulative ritual

commitment of local and regional kin collectives dedicated to a sacred landscape that was animated and made intelligible by genealogical traditions, mytho-historical doings, and landmarks of its ancestors. Thus, we find that tomb constructions were often renovated, adding/connecting new extensions, chambers, and entire new buildings, when necessary (Gamboa 2009; Ponte 2015). Cemeteries grew with the addition of entire new repositories, while others were disused and fell into disrepair or saw post-interment offering caches (Grieder 1978; Lau and Luján Dávila 2020; Paredes 2012). These physical additions and alterations are remnant clues to an ongoing development of a kin group's mortuary and the local symbolism of a uniquely changing landscape.

5. Cult Effigies and the Archaeological Record

The use of stone monuments was another crucial component of long-lived, local ancestor cults. These were integrated in buildings, burial grounds, and other significant spaces. Funerary buildings also incorporated many other kinds of worked stones, including tenon heads (carved heads cantilevered into walls), rosettes, cornices, and roofslabs (Lau 2006, 2016). Such features formed part of a larger social program of ritual, building, and renovations at existing funerary places. Given the ravages of extirpation, looting, and theft, however, only a handful of stone monuments are known in their intended architectural settings or within the confines of their original ancient settlements.

To make their associations to their funerary place more explicit, standing stone uprights (*huancas*) were placed on, in, or near the tomb repositories (Figure 7). For example, such stones marked interment places at Jancu and Chinchawas (Lau 2002; Wegner 2007). This was probably a much more common practice in the ancient past, but uncarved uprights that have toppled over or been moved are very difficult to distinguish.

The best-known monoliths with carved ancestor imagery are of the Recuay tradition, ca. AD 1–700 (Brito 2018; Lau 2000, 2006, 2011; Moretti 2019; Schaedel 1952; Wegner 2007). The monoliths adorned thresholds to important buildings and also stood nearby as freestanding statues. Many figures are depicted upright in a seated, tucked position, similar to a mummy bundle. There are also views of frontal figures (Figure 8) standing/splayed and occasionally flanked by other beings. All are either set into (or found near) burial architecture and found nearby platform-shrines and ceremonial *cayan* enclosures.

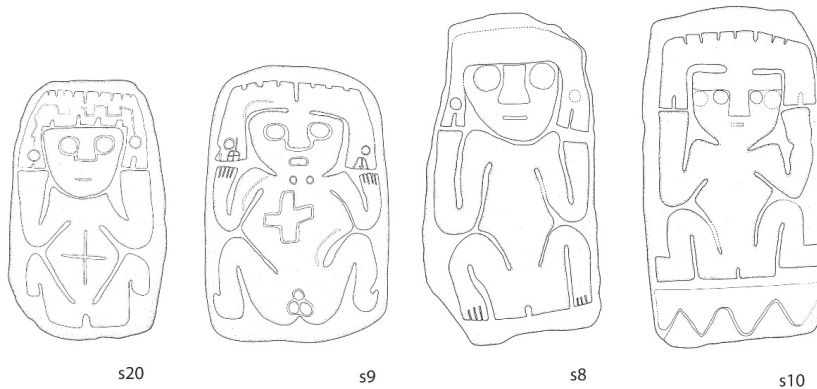


Figure 8. Drawing showing four (of nineteen) vertical slab sculptures documented at Chinchawas. The variability in frontal figure depiction and lack of standardization in size and quality indicate slow periodic production and accumulation of ancestor figures for the community's local 'descent-scape.' Sculpture s10 is 127 cm tall. Drawings by author.

Two sculptures remain on an ancient high-status house complex at Chinchawas; many others were documented scattered in the public and funerary sectors of the site (Lau 2006; Mejía Xesspe 1941). Tenon-head sculptures adorned *chullpa* mausolea at Katiamá (Zaki 1978) and Tinyash (Falcón and Diaz 1998; Thompson and Ravines 1973). Other stone

sculptures are known for having been found in excavation or reported as surficial finds from specific sites. These include Recuay tradition sculptures in large centers, such as Pashash (Grieder 1978; Lau and Luján Dávila 2020) and Yayno (Lau 2016), as well as in smaller communities around Huaraz (Bazán del Campo 2008; Wegner 2007). Other examples are known with varying degrees of certainty and detail of information about provenance (Brito 2018; Moretti 2019; Schaedel 1952; Soriano Infante 1950).

Julio C. Tello (1929) contended that the sculptures and spaces comprised components of an integrated religious program dedicated to local ancestor cults. Each group maintained its own funerary chamber(s), the shrine repository above, and a nearby walled ceremonial enclosure. These were all spaces where effigies of important male and female progenitors could be incorporated into the overall complex. It stands to reason that they served as commemorative monuments of persons who built, became interred in, or were otherwise associated with the nearby mausolea. Functionally, the monuments underscore the enduring, cynosural roles of ancestors in the ritual spaces, being the honored grandees and witnesses of the group's ritual activities.

The production of effigies should be important in this regard. One Spanish inquisitor noted that the making of stone and metal idols was accomplished by specialists; they were "sold" in exchange for promises of herds and good crops (Avendaño [1617] 2003, pp. 715–18). A later passage suggests that the painting and fashioning of cult objects were the purview of the specific ritual group. Avendaño's observation thus hints that the making of ancestor images was a cyclical, reciprocal relationship between progeny and progenitor. Just as the descendants are the work of their makers, the ancestors (effigies) are the work of the descendants. Both engender and energize the other: Each is the result and beneficiary of the other's vitalizing intervention (see Salomon 1991, p. 16). It seems reasonable to believe that descendants were charged with the right to create simulacra of their ancestors, i.e., bringing entities of the same group into being.

Notwithstanding, native commentary about the production of monoliths (carved or not) is generally scarce in the early Spanish descriptions, something that Hamilton (2018, p. 68) has also observed for the camelid *conopa* miniatures. He suggests that this intentional silence may "feign the illusion that conopas were not individually carved by human actors", but rather were divinely instantiated objects, extraordinary and thus capable of their own transformation.¹³

The general silence on the making of *conopas* can be contrasted with the relatively detailed commentary on the making of *huauque* images (Table 1), the "brother" images of the Inca rulers (Acosta 1954; Cobo [1653] 1990; Sarmiento de Gamboa 2007).¹⁴ These were portable images that contained the king's spirit or essence, his *camaquen*. They could serve as companions or stand-ins, with oracular functions. *Huauques* were also portraits and heirlooms and had their own staff and attendants. These images were created during their lifetime, so the rulers had some say over their form and material (Cobo [1653] 1990, p. 37). Their last form, upkeep, and veneration, however, were up to the descendants.

The *huauques* of the earliest dynasts were of stone¹⁵, and later effigies were of gold. The practice of making them was an innovation attributed to the reign of Manco Capac, according to Sarmiento de Gamboa (2007, p. 77). However, (Cobo [1653] 1990, p. 37) speculated on older beginnings: "This custom is so ancient [that] . . . it must date from the time of their earliest recollections. Although initially it was only the practice of the kings and great lords, as time passed the custom was extended so much that any important man might have a *guauque*." Mention of "*gualqui*" (brother) images for provincial lords occurs also in the Idolatries of Cajatambo (e.g., Noboa [1656] in Duviols 2003, p. 299).

Table 3 shows that the brother images are characterized by a lack of patterning—in materials, form, and degree of likeness. Perhaps the only inflexible criterion is that all rulers should have at least one and that they were referred to as "brothers" and had their own names. As a kinsperson, they were the ruler's alter-image, and because they were portable and circulated, they extended the ruler's personhood and charismatic reach.

Table 3. *Huauques* (brother-images) of the Inca kings.

Sapa Inca Name	Huauque Name	Material	Form
Sinchi Roca	Guanachiri Amaro	stone	fish
Manco Capac	Indi		bird (~falcon)
	(another) Huanacauri	(stone)	mountain
Lloqui Yupanqui	Apo Mayta		
Capac Yupanqui	Apu-Mayta		
Inca Roca	(Vica-Quirao?)	stone	
Inca Viracocha	Inga Amaro		
Pachacuti Inca	Indi illapa	golden	(bulto)—made in his image
Yamque Yupanqui		golden	(bulto)—made in his image
Topa Inca Yupanqui	Cuxi churi		
Huayna Capac	Guaraqui inga	gold	(large)
Atahualpa	Ynga Guauqui, and Ticci Capac		bulto

After the ruler's death, his *huauque* was placed in or near the resting places of the dead king or his collective's estate. They were paired with the mummy effigy made of the desiccated body remains. *Huauques* might be seen to be similar to ancestral monoliths erected near tombs. Van de Guchte (1990, p. 293) makes a crucial point, however: Unlike *huancas*, which are persons transformed into stone at that location (manifesting their internal capacity for lithification), *huauques* are explicitly made (by others).

6. Making Kin out of Stone: Provisional Observations

How far back in time can we push back the patterning between kin groups and their cult images? Firm comparisons must await better datasets and more systematic testing. However, we can make some provisional observations about Recuay tradition stone sculpture (ca. AD 200–700) to help orient future work; these include the current record of formal variability, decentralized production, and local contexts of use.

An indicator of variability concerns the choice of raw materials. There is very little standardization in the kinds of stone used for Recuay stone sculpture; production generally emphasized locally available rock and local quarries. Recuay stone carving, especially from the region around Huaraz, frequently employed common local igneous rocks, especially andesites, rhyolites, granites, and trachytes (Brito 2018; Lau 2006; Moretti 2019; Schaedel 1948; Soriano Infante 1950). The preferred stones around the Huaraz area seem to have consisted of light gray to greenish gray andesites. Some pieces appear to use finer-grain porphyritic andesites from the Cordillera Negra. Rock debris and possible monolith preforms may be evidence of production on the eastern side of the Cordillera Negra, near Huaraz (Brito 2018; Mejía Xesspe 1941). The procurement of raw material overall seems very different from other major Andean stone working traditions (e.g., Inca, Tiwanaku, Chavin), which sometimes acquired stone from distant areas, which required greater transport and labor organization, and which resulted in more standardized forms and production.

Another indicator of variability was the coexistence of formal substyles. Schaedel (1948, 1952) observed a series of "central" and "peripheral" style areas in the Recuay sculptural tradition. These were based largely on distinctions in form (block shape, depth of carving, saliency of the figural plane) and imagery (type, naturalism, abstraction). The coexistence of various substyles resonates with the hypothesis of multiple ritual communities who rendered similar ancestor images differently.

The heterogeneity and lack of standardization in imagery, in particular, are consistent with the model of local decentralized production. Each sculpture is unique and contains

special elements executed in distinctive configurations and varying quality. In addition to position (splayed or seated, flexed), the human (ancestor) figures show distinguishing features, such as head and body ornaments, and special attire and accoutrements, such as weapons, bags, and musical instruments. These are probably related to the unique properties, special keepsakes, or achievements of specific individuals—the personhood of the depicted—as deemed important by the sculptor and descendant group.

The best published evidence for patterning of intrasite production derives from Chinchawas, a small village (ca. AD 500–900) where 43 carved monoliths have been documented, three in situ. The corpus shows notable differences in slab size, but with most adhering to shape tendencies and general proportions (for details, see Lau 2006, pp. 229–31). The degree of craftsmanship also varies considerably, where the finer sculptures feature higher relief, greater detail, and more even surfaces. There are also instances of mistakes, errant gouges, unfinished parts, and re-use of older carved slabs; one carving was left unfinished and then re-carved on the other side. Some were defaced, and some were removed from their original spots. Overall, the corpus at Chinchawas shows great heterogeneity, with expedient and pragmatic solutions. Rather than a single artisan or workshop or a single program of installation, the sculptures likely resulted from sporadic efforts of part-time artisans affiliated with local social groups, and the local tradition developed over some four centuries.

The current evidence indicates that most ancestor stone carvings of the Recuay tradition were produced at different times, one by one, following the irregular needs occasioned by death and local initiatives of small kin groups to ancestralize known persons. This was a special kind of cultural production characterized by highly inconstant and contingent localized contexts of making, but nevertheless tethered to conservative dispositions toward ancestral forms and the ritual practices devoted to them.

7. Conclusions

To conclude, this essay considered ethnohistorical and archaeological evidence of ancestor cult practices in Peru's central highlands. It discussed the textual record of devotional practices and honorific forms of address from early colonial accounts in order to inform how cult spaces and ancestral images were the purview of local kin groups. In spite of important disjunctions in time and social context, not to mention the critical problems of colonial writing, the written accounts shed light on ritual forms and patterning of the ancient past. The overall comparison is consistent with the hypothesis that, by the early centuries AD, funerary repositories were made and used by small collectives, probably kin groups, to keep and periodically handle their esteemed deceased. Ancestral personhood took many physical forms, most routinely as bundled and stone idols and features of the landscape. Broadly, the study adds to more general consideration of death practices and animism in the Americas by showing how these ancestor forms were addressed as and treated as cherished family members (forebears, elders, parents, siblings).

Animating idolatry might therefore best be seen as a process of making special kinds of kin and has unique implications for the ritual practices of the venerating group. Firstly, for each collective, the effigy extended human associations to the object forms and thus externalized person-specific deeds and qualities, as deemed worthy by the descendant group, into their ritual setting. As their *raison d'être*, the effigies appear to have been the cynosures of the cult's devotion, and their physical presence enabled crucial physical engagements between the idols and descendants. In addition to doing superhuman work for the ritual collective (resulting in rains, abundance, and overall prosperity), they were engines for descendant identity and social reproduction. Finally, the procedures of making the effigies trusted in a logic based on reciprocal obligations and therefore was an ongoing, future-looking proposition. Just as a progenitor was responsible for or "made" the descendants, the descendants made, and continued making, the progenitor's image.

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Conflicts of Interest: No conflicts of interest are declared.

Notes

- 1 This describes many forms and disciplinary spaces of archaeology (e.g., Alberti 2016; Pauketat 2013). For the Andes, see (Bray 2009; Lau 2008; Sillar 2009) and for ethnographic and historical basis, see (Allen 2015; Duviols 1979; Salomon 1998).
- 2 For the region in question, see Lau (2006, 2015a).
- 3 For example, very early in the *Relación de los Agustinos*, 1560, by Fr. Juan de San Pedro (Castro de Trelles 1992, p. 22) or by the time of Francisco de Ávila’s *Tratado*, in 1608 (in Arguedas and Duviols 1966, p. 200).
- 4 The close cultic relationship between ancestral images, especially mummies, and their worshipping descendants was widely acknowledged at least since the early detective work of Polo de Ondegardo on Inca mummies (MacCormack 1991, pp. 390–91).
- 5 Similar *huanca*-like lithified tutelaries were called *Guachecoal* in the Huamachuco area (Juan de San Pedro, in Castro de Trelles 1992, p. 27). There were other terms for them, such as *marca apárac* and *marcachárac* (Arriaga 1999, p. 31). At other times, they were referred to as *marcayoc*, *llactayoc*, or *chacrayoc*, referring to their vigilance over villages and fields.
- 6 See also the different names of similar objects of Huamachuco province (Castro de Trelles 1992, p. 56).
- 7 “*Camayoc*” signifies master or owner, and “*wasi*” means house.
- 8 *Conopas* and *illas* were another category of small talismanic objects, occasionally conflated with the other “lesser idols”. *Conopas* were typically in the form of animals and plants and were worshipped to give abundance to the form depicted, e.g., camelids, guinea pigs, maize. These could communicate with their bearers, were efficacious in household-level ritual activities, and were also valuable heirlooms, but did not feature heavily in the wider cults of founding ancestors (Arriaga 1999, pp. 35–36). Many of these included “*mama*” in their names, connoting the maternal quality and also the parental/authority associations of the “lesser idols”.
- 9 They were frequently compared to ancient Roman family gods, the *lares* and *penates*.
- 10 Ávila notes the distinction that *cunchur* (of Huarochiri) act as intermediaries for the principal *huacas*/gods (Ávila, in Arguedas and Duviols 1966, pp. 255–56), while the *chanca* helps in divining and communicating the will of the *cunchur*.
- 11 Overseen by Hernando de Avendaño in the highland Chancay and Cajatambo areas.
- 12 There are also certainly Christian connotations, in the use of “lord” and “father”. The term “*yaya*” (or father) is also used as an honorific for celestial bodies (e.g., sun, stars) and large landforms, such as mountains and boulders (Itier 2003, p. 783; Taylor 2000, p. 33).
- 13 Hamilton (2018, p. 82) also notes, following Sillar (2012), that *conopa* manufacturing may have been related to Inca standardized production and materialized ideology.
- 14 There is also mention of Manco Capac ordering a gold effigy made of his mother Mama Oello; his afterbirth was placed in the stomach area of the figure.
- 15 This resonates with Zuidema’s observation that the oldest figures in long-lasting genealogies are so old and “so far removed” that they have been turned into stone (Zuidema 1973, p. 19).

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Article

Embodiment of Ancestral Spirits, the Social Interface, and Ritual Ceremonies: Construction of the Shamanic Landscape among the Daur in North China

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Abstract: The case study in this paper is on the Daur (as well as the Evenki, Buriat, and Bargu Mongols) in Hulun Buir, Northeast China. The aim of this research is to examine how shamanic rituals function as a conduit to actualize communications between the clan members and their shaman ancestors. Through examinations and observations of Daur and other Indigenous shamanic rituals in Northeast China, this paper argues that the human construction of the shamanic landscape brings humans, other-than-humans, and things together into social relations in shamanic ontologies. Inter-human metamorphosis is crucial to Indigenous self-conceptualization and identity. Through rituals, ancestor spirits are active actors involved in almost every aspect of modern human social life among these Indigenous peoples.

Keywords: Daur shamanism; social interface; ritual ceremony; embodiment of ancestral spirits; inter-human metamorphosis; shamanic landscape

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1. Introduction

Ontological approaches in anthropology have revealed that the realm of sociality in many Indigenous societies in the world is not confined to the human domain but is extended beyond humanity to encompass animals, plants, spirits, and other entities. In the past several decades, great efforts have been made on studies of relational interactions between humans and animals in the Arctic, Amazonia, and North Asian regions (see [White and Candea 2018](#)). However, the relation between living humans and deceased ancestors has largely been neglected. Both [Humphrey and Onon \(1996\)](#) and [Pedersen \(2001\)](#) have noted that human engagement with ancestral spirits plays a central role in shamanic practices and cosmologies among Indigenous peoples in Southern North Asia (SNA).

My case study in this paper is the Daur (as well as the Evenki, Buriat, and Bargu Mongols) in Hulun Buir, Northeast China, a region called “Northwestern Manchuria” by [Lindgren \(1930\)](#) and, of course, an important constituent of SNA in [Pedersen \(2001\)](#) text. In Daur traditional knowledge, life is a relational process embracing both concepts of life and death, filled with incarnation, regeneration, and transformations. Invoking spirits of shamanic ancestors to enter the shaman’s body is considered crucial in Daur shamanic rituals. The evidence suggests that dead shamans actively participate in human social life, and these interactional relations between living humans and ancestral spirits play a key role in maintaining cosmic harmony, protecting tribal members from illness and misfortune, and ensuring success in every aspect of community activities ([Ding and Saiyintana 2011](#); [Humphrey and Onon 1996](#); [Kara et al. 2009](#); [Sa 2019a, 2019b](#)).

Field data used in this paper are from my observations of three rituals in Hulun Buir in the summer of 2019 and the summer of 2020¹. The aim of this research is to examine how shamanic rituals, including the use of material/art objects, function as a conduit to actualize communications between the clan members and their shaman ancestors. If humans and

noncorporeal beings inhabit different worlds, is there a social border between them and where is this border? My ethnographic analysis of contemporary Daur shamanism in this paper suggests that, whether ancestral beings, nonhuman beings such as animals and land spirits, or living human persons, they all are equal members in the same realm of the social. The ritual and the shaman-constructed landscape of the ritual locales intra-act upon the social border in which all social members are able to celebrate, communicate, share food and drink, listen to each other's stories, and receive blessings or praise.

2. A Brief History of Daur Shamanism

The Daur immigrated from the Upper and Middle Amur River region to the Naun River (Nenjiang) valley in the 17th century. Today, most of the Daur people live in the Evenki Autonomous Banner (Hailar region) and the Morin Dawa Daur Autonomous Banner in Inner Mongolia, Qiqihar City in Heilongjiang Province, and Tacheng City in Xinjiang (Zhurongga and Manduertu 1985, pp. 3–4). According to the Chinese census in 2010, there were around 130,000 Daur people in China at that time (Sa 2019a, 2019b). The Daur patrilineal clan system is thought to have been organized at least several centuries ago. A clan organization is called a “hala” and branches of halas are called “mokons”². According to ancient Chinese literature, scholars have discovered that there were around 30 halas and 60 mokons when they were settling in the Upper and Middle Amur River valley (Ding and Saiyintana 2011, pp. 22–23; Zhurongga and Manduertu 1985, pp. 187–89). The hala/mokon system can still be recognized today. When a Daur person introduces himself/herself to me, s/he often starts to let me know which hala and mokon s/he (or her/his father) belongs to.

The Daur are best known for their excellent farming skills. Agriculture as their major subsistence began at least 1000 years ago. Traditional Daur subsistence combined farming, hunting, fishing, gathering, and logging (Batubaoyin 1991, pp. 22–64). Today, agriculture still plays a major role in Daur economics in Morin Dawa. Fruit growing has been developed in the last two decades and has become the local secondary subsistence style (Dai 2021). However, my research focus in this paper is the Daur of Hailar. The Daur culture in this region encompasses many nomadic elements, since Bargu and Buriat Mongols and Evenki (Solon Evenki and Kahmnigan) pastoralists are also inhabitants on the same Hailar steppe. Many of them are usually bi- or trilingual (Kara et al. 2009, p. 142).

Shamanism may have been practiced by the Daur as well as other Indigenous groups in North Asia since ancient times. Archaeological research suggests that shamanic practices might be traced back to the Bronze Age in Central and North Asia (Devlet 2001; Rozwadowski 2017). The first appearance of the word “shaman” is from a Medieval Chinese documentary book *Sanchao beimeng huibian* 三朝北盟会编 (Collection of documents on the treaties with the North during three reigns) compiled by Xu Mengxin of the Song Dynasty (1126–1207). The word shaman appears when the book describes a Jurchen Imperial advisor: “As for the word *shanman*, it is the Nuzhen equivalent of (the Chinese) ‘shamaness’ (*wuyu*)” (Kósa 2007, pp. 117–18). The Daur shaman was first documented by Manchu Qing’s book *Heilongjiang waiji* (A Local Record of Heilongjiang) written in the early 19th century. He writes, “If a Daur person is sick, (this person) must call a *sama* to dance for healing” (Xiqing 1984, p. 68; Menghedalai and Amin 2013, p. 205).

Daur shamanism continued to be practiced in the first half of the 20th century but was regarded by the state government as a “primitive” and backward religion, forbidden after 1949 (Menghedalai and Amin 2013, pp. 244–66). Daur shamans in the Nantun town of Hailar in the 1930–1940s were documented by the Japanese scholar Omachi in his article published in 1944 (Omachi 1995). The report included the male shaman La (or Lama) who was the great grandfather of a contemporary Daur shaman Siqingua—a key interlocutor in this paper—and the female shaman Huangge³. Both La shaman and Huangge were renowned for their shamanic skills and were held in high respect beyond the Hailar region⁴ (Ding and Saiyintana 2011; Humphrey and Onon 1996; Menghedalai and Amin 2013). In the 1950s and early 1960s, the Chinese state government organized a project to conduct a state-wide field survey of minorities’ social history and cultures. The projects documented

surveys of living Daur shamans, although they had abandoned shamanic practices for some years. La shaman even agreed to dress in his shamanic costume and performed his final ritual dance in his lifetime for scholars of the survey project ⁵ (Meng 2019, p. 155).

Daur shamanism began to be revived at the end of the 20th century. Siqingua, as the great granddaughter of La shaman, was initiated by a Bargu shaman Hudechulu in 1998 and soon became famous (Menghedalai and Amin 2013, pp. 475–76). According to my field survey, up to August 2020, Siqingua has held about 15 initiation rituals for her shaman students. These neophytes are all from local ethnic groups, including the Bargu, the Daur, the Buriat, and the Evenki. Two of Siqingua’s students are even from Russia and Mongolia (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Shaman Siqingua. Photograph by Feng Qu on 30 September 2020.

3. Spirits and Images

Pedersen (2001) has identified two main types of shamanism in North Asia. While the shamanism in Northern North Asia (NNA) focuses on social interactions between humans and animals, SNA shamanism is characterized by inter-human transformations. Kara et al. (2009, pp. 147–48) correctly write that a Daur shaman usually “inherited his or her special ability from a shamanic ancestor of the clan who passed on the ability after his or her death. Shamanic abilities were not inherited by each generation—sometimes these would reappear after one or two generations⁶”.

In the Daur language, both male and female shamans are called “*yadgan*.” However, the Daur of Hailar often use the term “shaman” to describe the *yadgan* due to the cultural influence from the local Evenkis (Sa 2019a, p. 3). There are also other specialists alongside the shaman such as the *bagchi* as an assistant to the shaman in rituals or a priest in the public cult, the *otoshi* as a healer of children, the *bariechin* as a midwife, and the *barshii* as a bone-setter. As these specialists are not able to embody spirits, they are not considered to be shamans (Batubaoyin 1991, pp. 120–22; Ding and Saiyintana 2011, pp. 43–45; Humphrey and Onon 1996, p. 30; Sa 2019a, pp. 3–4; Zhurongga and Manduertu 1985, pp. 266–67).

Daur *yadgans* can be categorized into two types: *hojoor yadgans* and *bodi yadgans*. *Hojoor* is a Daur word meaning male clan ancestral spirits. This is crucial in the study of Daur shamanism because most Daur shamans are *hojoor yadgans* who inherit ancestral spirits from their father’s clan (Ding and Saiyintana 2011, p. 43; Humphrey and Onon 1996, pp. 188–89; Sa 2019a, p. 3; Zhurongga and Manduertu 1985, p. 268). According to Sa (2019a, pp. 5–6), the shamanic ability of a *hojoor yadgan* is inherited along the patrilineal line but usually not by each generation. An ancestral shaman may pass the ability onto his (her) son or grandson (granddaughter). The word *bodi* means external. This indicates that a *bodi yadgan*’s ability is from spirits outside of his or her father’s family, sometimes from the maternal lineage. A *hojoor yadgan* has one or two ancestor shamans as master spirits and a pool of other spirits (including animal spirits) who follow the ancestral spirits to be tutelary of the shaman’s *hala-mokon* (Sa 2019b).

As in other ethnic groups in SNA, the Daur pantheon includes the great spirit *tengger* (God of Heaven); the spirit of land; dragon as the spirit of river; lightning god; fire god; *Bayin Achaa* as the spirit of mountain; animals such as the bear, tiger, snake, fox, and bird; and ancestral spirits (Batubaoyin 1991, p. 123; Ding and Saiyintana 2011, pp. 78–115; Humphrey and Onon 1996, pp. 76–118; Sa 2019a, pp. 4–5). Two words are used to describe spirits in the Daur language: *barkan* and *onggor*. According to Sa (2019a, p. 5), an Indigenous scholar who has an Evenki father and a Daur mother, *barkan* denotes “static, imaged spirits, such as portraits and idols,” but *onggor* “indicates changing and dynamic spirits.” *Barkan* mainly refers to spirits turned from people after their death, and some of them have legendary origins. However, *onggor* includes not only ancestral spirits but also animals and spirits of the land and river. As Kara et al. (2009, p. 149) have described, *barkan* spirits “are only called *onggors* by the shaman when they become helping spirits and enter the shaman’s body”. Namely, “spirits of ancestors or spirits of nature can be invoked and incorporated to the shaman’s body in the form of an *onggor*”.

Barkan spirits are usually presented by paintings, portraits on wood, or wood carvings as idols. These idols represent legendary ancestors who died in accidents, the clan *hojoor*, and animal spirits. Daur people believe that those who died from accidental causes would haunt living humans. Making images for them and giving sacrifices and offerings to them in rituals would avoid misfortunes in human life. Interestingly, a legendary *barkan* usually includes an assemblage of idols not only representing the dead ancestor but also animals associated with him (or her) and objects used by this person. The *holieri barkan*, for example, are the most popular group of spirit idols invited by all Daur shamans. It is made of 17 categories of spirits with 58 items including anthropomorphic images, zoomorphic images, and objects (such as a gun used to shoot birds). These idols memorize a legend about an Oronqen man who was killed by lightning. After his death, animals around him and objects used by him all transformed into powerful spirits. Most of these idols are made of wood by carving, but two types of them (11 images, all mythological beings) are portraits on cloth. Another spirit assemblage, called *bogol barkan*, consists of a group of idols including anthropomorphic spirits such as an officer, a blacksmith, Lama monk, fisherman, hunter, businessman, and *nianniang* wives; animals such as a fox, raven, cuckoo, reindeer, lizard, earthworm, dog, and snake; and objects such as a coffin, rock roller, and trees. Additionally, every *hala* has a *hojoor barkan* who was the earliest ancestor of the clan. During rituals, these images are placed on the altar in the ritual house to accept offering, sacrifices, prayers, and chanting praises (Ding and Saiyintana 2011, pp. 96–113; Zhurongga and Manduertu 1985, pp. 244–59). From my observations, spirit images are either made from foil shaped by cutting and attached to cloth, framed paper paintings, or wood carvings which are usually placed in a red wood box (Figure 2).

A copper mask embellished with hair used by the Daur shaman is called *Abagaldai*. According to Humphrey, the *Abagaldai* is “the main *barkan* of the ritual”, and people put most of the offerings before him (Humphrey and Onon 1996, p. 242). The *Abagaldai* mask represents the spirit of the black bear. It is said that it is the head of all tutelary spirits. Traditionally, its hair, eyebrows, and mustache were made of hair from a bear (Figure 3) (Lü and Qiu 2009, pp. 62–64; Zhurongga and Manduertu 1985, p. 256⁷).

Daur ritual idols reveal an animist ontology in which humans, nonhuman animals, spirits, and objects are intersubjective. Animals and objects have the same divine status as ancestral spirits to share living human sacrifices and respect. It is true that inter-human transformation plays a central role in SNA shamanism as stated by Pedersen (2001) and Humphrey and Onon (1996). However, nonhumans, things, and other entities as subjects are equally important elements in SNA shamanic ontologies.



Figure 2. Spirit images and offerings on a Daur shaman's altar. Photograph by Feng Qu on 26 June 2019.



Figure 3. Siqingua's mask. Photograph by Feng Qu on 17 July 2021.

Animal and plant images are present on the Daur shaman's costume. The shamanic dress of the Daur and Tungus in Manchuria was documented by Lindgren 90 years ago, featured with antler headdress, streamers, fringes, bronze mirrors, brass bells, iron pendants, cowries, decorated bands, and animal/plant images (Lindgren 1935). The general style of the shamanic dress has been inherited by shamans among Daur and Tungus today and exhibits the universe inhabited by various species including both animals and plants. The Daur shaman headdress is adorned with a pair of reindeer antlers with prongs made of iron (prong numbers represent the shaman's rank). A metal eagle which symbolizes the shaman's *onggor* perches between the two antlers (Figure 4) (Ding and Saiyintana 2011,

p. 66). Each epaulet of the costume is surmounted by a stuffed cloth bird representing the shaman's messenger between the spirits and the shaman (the left bird is male and the right is female) (Ding and Saiyintana 2011, pp. 70–71). Lü and Qiu have documented the specific qualities of Siqingua's costume. The collar of the costume is decorated with a dragon and phoenix, showing elements from Han Chinese culture. The waistband is depicted with a natural landscape structured with the sun, moon, trees, mountains, a river, and reindeer. Twelve lower streamers are each embroidered with animals from the Chinese calendar, while twelve upper streamers are each embroidered with life-trees called *duwalan* by the Daur (Lü and Qiu 2009, pp. 45–53). According to Odongowa's (a Daur ethnologist) interpretation, *duwalan* connect spirits and human beings and include the species poplar, prickly pear, white birch, willow, pine, and camphor, among others (Humphrey and Onon 1996, pp. 176–77)⁸.



Figure 4. Daur shamans' headdresses. Photograph by Feng Qu on 2 August 2020.

Based on the ontological perspectives of Indigenous cosmologies (Descola 2013; Ingold 1998, 2006; Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2004; Willerslev 2004), I contend that these carvings, portraits, and embroidery on the Daur shaman's costume are more than just representations or symbols, materializing relationships between shaman and spirits and, as living beings and social actors, enabling adjusted styles of communication (Harvey 2018) at the social interface between worlds. We will see in the next section how these images and associated artefacts participate in the construction of the shamanic landscape and function as constituent things to produce relations engaged with living humans, deceased ancestors, and other nonhuman beings.

4. Social Interface and Construction of the Shamanic Landscape

Ontological approaches have encouraged scholars to “take different worlds seriously” (Pickering 2017) and for anthropologists, “shamanism is a key lens through which to view the other worlds they wish to explore” (Erazo and Jarrett 2017, p. 147). Although the human domain and the domain of others have an objective discontinuity, whether in Amazonia (Fausto 2007; Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2004), the Arctic (Ingold 1998) or North Asia (Pedersen 2001, 2007; Willerslev 2004), shamanic practices create a social interface which articulates different worlds and enacts social continuities between worlds.

The term “social interface” in this paper indicates the social space where all potential entities from different worlds are gathered to communicate, exchange ideas, and confer on human clan/family problems. Among the Daur together with other ethnic groups in today’s Hulun Buir, shamanic rituals are frequently held throughout the year, especially in the summer season. Participants, from one family to the next, including the elderly and young children, dress up for the ritual occasion. Attending a shamanic ritual in this sense is little different from attending a secular festival. The primary difference is that a secular ceremony only has human participants from the human world, but the shamanic ritual attracts attendees from different worlds, including not only human persons but also nonhuman persons and ancestral persons. To differentiate from secular ceremonies, I call shamanic rituals “ritual ceremonies” in this paper.

Open public sacrificial cults are common among Indigenous peoples in Hulun Buir historically and today, including the *oboo* cairn sacrifice⁹, *tengger* sacrifice, mountain spirit (*Bayin Achaa*) sacrifice, and river spirit sacrifice. The sacrificial cow or pig was slaughtered and cooked, and food and drinks as offerings were provided for spirits in rituals. Historically, these cult ceremonies were usually presided over by a clan elder or the *bagchi*, both being specialists to pronounce prayers (Humphrey 1995; Humphrey and Onon 1996; Lü and Qiu 2009, pp. 72–82; Zhurongga and Manduertu 1985, pp. 256–58). In China, shamanism is not recognized as one of the five official religions by the central government, but as a form of folk belief culture. Since the 1980s, the large-scale *oboo* sacrifices have been frequently organized by the local authorities to strengthen the political discourse, and shamans’ ritual performances have been regarded as intangible cultural heritage in the Hulun Buir region. They are usually open to all regional residents in spite of ethnic differences. In this way, shamans are seen as important symbols and often invited by local authorities to preside over these *oboo* worships. *Oboo* cairns have emerged “as powerful symbols and crucial spots for both Indigenous people and political leaders” (Dumont 2021, pp. 59–60). Worship is accompanied by feasting, sports, games, and other entertainment activities which are used to delight both humans and spirits. Participants expect to acquire “the blessing of the mountain spirit to make use of the land for the reproduction of life” (Humphrey and Onon 1996, p. 151).

While shamans and other specialists are invited to perform in the authority-organized public sacrifice activities, they never discontinue clan-based rituals in a half-open way. I use the word “half-open” here because these rituals are not open to everyone but only to their *hala-mokon* members. The most conventional rituals include the *ominan*, the *eelden*, the purification, and the initiation. The *ominan* is the greatest shamanic ritual in Daur shamanic practices¹⁰. It takes place every three years and lasts three days. Clan members participate in the ritual communally, and all spirits are invited to descend. Aside from the host shaman, a high-level great shaman (*da yadgan*) will be invited to be the leader of the ritual. Other shaman students of the great shaman are also present to perform communally (Figure 5) (Batubaoyin 1991, pp. 113–17; Ding and Saiyintana 2011, pp. 61–66; Humphrey and Onon 1996, pp. 237–50; Meng 2019, pp. 102–8; Zhurongga and Manduertu 1985, pp. 262–64). Humphrey rightly says that not only is the *ominan* “a shamanic equivalent of the communal sky/mountain cult”, but it is also “a ‘meta-ritual’ containing an overarching summation of *yadgan* shamanism as a whole” (Humphrey and Onon 1996, p. 237). The *eelden* takes place every year or every other year. It usually lasts one day, the same as the initiation ritual. Except for the purification held at home on the day marking the beginning of the lunar calendar year, the *ominan*, *eelden*, and initiation rituals were in the past held either in the shaman’s courtyard or in the wild (Zhurongga and Manduertu 1985, pp. 262–64). Today, according to my fieldwork data, most ritual locales are chosen to be in the wild, usually on meadowland by a river (Figure 6).



Figure 5. Siqingua (fifth from the left) and her students on Shaman Lina's *ominan* ritual. Photograph by Feng Qu on 1 August 2020.



Figure 6. Overview of the Shaman Lina's *ominan* ritual. Photograph by Actachin Zorigt on 1 August 2020.

The ritual space needs to be created carefully under the instruction of the shaman's *hojoor* spirits. As mentioned above, Siqingua inherited her shamanic ability from her father's grandfather, La shaman. She was initiated in 1998 and has held numerous rituals for herself and her students up to now. She reported in an interview at her home in the town of Nantun during the summer of 2019 that before the ritual day, her ancestors (mostly her great grandfather) would appear in her dreams repeatedly to tell her the ritual location she should choose, as well as details of how to build the ritual space and what sacrificial animals and offerings she should prepare.

The creation of the ritual space constitutes a vital part of the Indigenous shamanic knowledge system since it is one of the key elements to ensure the descending of spirits and the success of the ritual. The shaman's family, relatives, students, and other *hala/mokon* members volunteer to work on preparations of the ritual space. On the evening before the ritual day (or days), volunteers would transport all materials including the sacrificial animals and offering items to the site. A Mongolian-style felt house would be raised and fresh birch trees dug from the mountain forest would be prepared. At dawn before the

sunrise of the ritual day (or the first ritual day of *ominan*), people would erect two birch trees as *tooroo* (meaning sacrificial trees) inside the felt house and some *tooroo* trees outside, 20 m from the house door. The inner *tooroo* at the top of the felt house are connected with the outer *tooroo* by a hide rope accompanied by a string woven with seven (or three, five) colored threads. The number of outer *tooroo* trees depends on the host shaman's generation. For example, Siqingua's daughter Lina, who is also a shaman and has inherited shamanic abilities from her father's shaman ancestors, hosted her first *ominan* in the summer of 2020. As she is the fourteenth-generation shaman in her father's family, the number of outer *tooroo* trees was precisely fourteen (Figure 7) (See also Batubaoyin 1991, pp. 113–14; Ding and Saiyintana 2011, pp. 61–66; Humphrey and Onon 1996, pp. 237–50; Kara et al. 2009, pp. 151–52; Lü and Qiu 2009, pp. 82–101).



Figure 7. Ritual house, inner *tooroo* and outer *tooroo* trees in Shaman Lina's *ominan* ritual. Photograph by Feng Qu on 1 August 2020.

Between the two inner trees, three cross bars made of plum wood were tied to represent a spirit ladder in order to enable the spirits to descend. A pair of stuffed cloth snakes (one black, one white) would be tied to the bottom of the trees. Idols and pictures of the shaman's *barkens* would be placed on the inner altar behind the trees. Beside the trees, the shaman's costume and *Abagaldai* mask would be hung. Pictures of the Sun and the Moon as the symbols of *tengger* would be hung on the outer trees. Beside the trees, the outer altar would be set up. Volunteers and participants would tie colored ribbons on both the inner *tooroo* and outer *tooroo* to show their respects to the spirits (also, see Batubaoyin 1991, pp. 113–14; Ding and Saiyintana 2011, pp. 61–66; Humphrey and Onon 1996, pp. 237–250; Kara et al. 2009, pp. 151–52; Lü and Qiu 2009, pp. 82–101). These actions, as described by Humphrey and Onon (1996, p. 239), “were recognized by Daur to be ancient and therefore generally a good thing, even if their urgent aim was not to preserve them so much as to ‘refresh’ the spirits, which were retained mainly in oral forms of memory”.

The creation of the ritual space conducted by the Daur and other ethnic groups as described above is arguably “linked to what we define as sacred landscape both in the human and physical as well as in the other-than-human world” (Foutiou et al. 2017, p. 7). Human persons, the felt house, artifacts, *tooroo* trees, *barken* idols, and *onggor* spirits constitute a complex relational network encompassing both human and other-than-human levels. All these actors in this network play a role as a subject, filled with agential and affective properties of personhood. Interactions between them are thus intersubjective and interpersonal. In other words, whether humans, artifacts, or noncorporeal beings, they become themselves through interactions with each other. Here, we may recall what Ingold

has proposed as a “domain of entanglement” (Ingold 2006, p. 14), within which “beings of all kinds, more or less person-like or thing-like, continually and reciprocally bring one another into existence” (Ingold 2006, p. 10).

The shamanic landscape constructed on Hulun Buir grassland brings humans, other-than-humans (including ancestral spirits), and things together into social relations in animist ontologies. Images, artefacts, and other objects such as *tooroo* trees and the felt house play vital roles as things in pulling together “flows and relations into various configurations” (Hodder 2012, p. 8). In his case study of Khanty shamanism, Jordan (2001, p. 102) argues that “the ideological premise to shamanism—upheld, reproduced and transformed through socially sanctioned practices” is grounded in materiality. The human creation of the ritual site, in Hodder (2012, p. 10) terms, actually transforms objects into agentive things, environment into living landscape, space into place, and time into temporality. The Daur Shamanic landscapes thus constitute what Hodder (2012, p. 8) has called “heterogeneous mixes,” in which things bring humans, ancestors, and other bodiless beings together. The hide rope between the outer and inner *tooroo* on the Daur ritual site, for example, is said to be “the road of the spirits” (Humphrey and Onon 1996, p. 240; Sa 2019b, p. 364). According to Daur knowledge, to be effective, the trees’ leaves must be green and alive, enabling *onggor*s to descend the trees and the rope, and shamans could also connect with *onggor* through the trees (see Kara et al. 2009, p. 152; Humphrey and Onon 1996, p. 240). In the Daur or Evenki initiation ritual, a hide stirrup would be tied with the rope, and the new shaman must hold the stirrup and run between the house and the outer trees for three rounds in order to connect with *onggor* and so renew his or her body. I observed the Evenki shaman Narengerile’s initiation ritual on a riverbank outside Nantun town in September 2020. When the new shaman was running the last round on the way from the outer *tooroo* to the house, she suddenly shouted and jumped wildly. With other people’s help, she was able to sit down and so begin drumming and singing. From her chanted words, people knew the ancestor shaman who was occupying her body (Figure 8). Here, the rope, the stirrup, and the trees are things to bring *onggor* and humans together in actualizing direct communications between them. The shamanic landscape as social interface, together with objects as things, produces “a new assemblage of bodily affects” (Conneller 2004, p. 50), in which live humans, deceased ancestors, nonhumans, and other noncorporeal beings “continually and reciprocally” bring “one another into existence” (Ingold 2006, p. 10).



Figure 8. Shaman Narengerile was possessed by her ancestor shaman on her initiation ritual. Photograph by Feng Qu on 30 September 2020.

In this way, whether barken idols or other artifacts and ritual objects, they all possess features of a person. In other words, they are actual persons and community members “in their own right sharing the same social and technological world” (Fowler 2004, p. 4). Therefore, each shaman, each ritual participant, and each ancestral spirit are actually a multi-authored product of social relations engaged with constituent things. Here, we may recall Strathern (1988) concept “dividual”, because images and associated objects are social beings as dividual and partible, linking humans and other-than-human beings (including ancestors) intimately (see Fowler 2004, pp. 14–17).

5. Ritual Ceremonies and Embodiment of Ancestral Spirits

The greatest clan ritual, the *Ominan*, is conducted every three years by Daur shamans for obtaining higher rank and renewing power. It is the best case for us to understand SNA Indigenous shamanism because it is a “meta-ritual” which contains “an overarching summation of yadgan shamanship as a whole” (Humphrey and Onon 1996, p. 237). The shaman is qualified to wear headwear with three prongs of reindeer antlers on the first *ominan* held three years after the initiation ritual. After that, every *ominan* will add another three prongs of antlers to the shaman’s headwear. Twelve-pronged antlers mark the highest rank for a Daur shaman. Siqingua became the greatest contemporary Daur shaman with 12 prongs of antlers on her fourth *ominan* in 2015 (also see Ding and Saiyintana 2011; Kara et al. 2009; Lü and Qiu 2009).

The date and the locale of the ritual are carefully selected under the instructions of ancestral spirits. Not only do the shaman’s *hala/mokon* members participate in the ritual but so, too, do the people of “neighboring sub-clans having no shaman of their own, and any other non-clan clients of the shaman” (Humphrey and Onon 1996, p. 239). Additionally, not only the host shaman and the senior shaman but also other shaman students of the senior shaman will attend. In Siqingua’s *ominan* ritual, all her students, including the Daur, Tungusic Evenki, and other Mongolic Bargu and Buriat, would be present to perform and invoke their own *hojoor* spirits. Every shaman’s clan members from different ethnic groups will follow their own shaman to attend the ritual. Therefore, a contemporary Daur ritual is an important inter-ethnic event. On 1–3 August 2020, Siqingua’s daughter, Lina shaman, performed her first *ominan* with her mother as the senior shaman. Ten other students of Siqingua were included in the three-day event. Hundreds of participants from different clans and tribes belonging to different ethnic groups gathered and expected to communicate with ancestors to receive their blessings and guidance for problem solving.

The Daur shaman plays the key role as the body-conduit linking different worlds. However, the meeting between living humans and ancestral spirits together with other noncorporeal beings is the ultimate destination for a successful ritual. Humphrey and Onon (1996, p. 184) have listed a Daur *yadgan*’s tasks for his or her people in the ritual: to divine the causes of illness and misfortune; to divine the whereabouts of lost animals; to explain dreams; to enliven the spirit-placings people kept at home; to invoke and bargain with spirits; to consecrate sacrificial animals to spirits; to expel or calm spirits attacking people; to exorcize spirits through substitute objects; to retrieve human souls stolen by spirits; to place children under the protection of *tengger* or a female spirit called *Ome Niang-Niang*; to invoke and propitiate the souls of dead shamans; to cure mental illness and depression; and to restore balance in social life. These diverse tasks exemplify how the shaman functions as a gifted prophet and an extraordinary healer for his or her community. However, it is important to add that all participants, whether shamans, community members, or deceased ancestors, are equally important ritual actors in creating a social relational network. Community members are not just passive elements in the ritual to be healed and helped with problem solving; they bring personal or communal needs and requests to the ritual which make the ritual meaningfully constructed and relationally emergent. During the entering of ancestral spirits into the shaman’s body, the shaman replies to questions from the spirits and asks questions of the spirits and through consultations with the spirits, pursues a social connection with ancestors which continues

in their daily life. All these actions confirm that community members and other participants are indispensable constituents to ensure the success of the shamanic ritual. As Jokić (2008, p. 36) argues in his analysis of the Buriat initiation ritual, the new shaman's "relatives present at the ritual are not merely spectators; they are active participants involved in worship, food preparation, and support for the candidate". Humphrey and Onon (1996, p. 261) also emphasize that traditionally, the Daur shaman "was a relational being, who needed other people to give him or her energy and support". Similarly, ancestral spirits are active elements engaging with the shaman's invocations and prayers. They are the main characters to divine, judge, and give clear instructions to the shamans and their people. The incarnation of *onggor* is thus "an entirely desired, positive, and voluntary act" (Jokić 2008, p. 40). When the *onggor* of La shaman entered Siqingua's body at the onset of her *ominan* held in September 2009, the ancestor shaman told his great-granddaughter exactly "what to do during the ritual" and "what kind of sheep" she should sacrifice to *hojoor barkan* and *tengger*. Later, when shamans entered the felt house, La shaman entered Siqingua's body again and told her "about the order of the *ominaan*" (Kara et al. 2009, p. 153). Every time the *onggor* entered the shaman's body, the spirit would call several *mokon* members one by one to approach and take advice (Sa 2019b, p. 363). Ancestral spirits arguably play a leading role in a Daur ritual. Thus, shamans and spirits, shamans and community members, and spirits and community members "depend on each other, rely on each other, produce each other" (Hodder 2018, p. 91), and all these actors work together to weave a relational network.

Ding and Saiyintana (2011, pp. 130–31) documented Siqingua's first *ominan* held in the summer of 2004, during which Siqingua was possessed by different spirits seven times over three days. The first possession occurred on the morning of the first day of the ritual, when La shaman told people how to organize the event, including sacrificial details, timings, sacrificial equipment, and offerings. On the third occasion of spirit possession, the spirit was not Siqingua's ancestor but an ancestor shaman of the other *hala-mokon*. The spirit called his tribe's people to him (or Siqingua shaman), divined for them, and gave instructions on how to avoid future misfortune. According to my observations of Siqingua's daughter Lina shaman's *ominan*, held in August 2020, after the main sacrifice, all shamans were possessed by their own *onggor* spirits and every participant called by his or her ancestor shaman to confer on personal or family issues.

The dialogue between clan members and ancestral spirits goes on through the whole ritual process. The spirit speaks through the shaman while he or she is singing, accompanied by drumming, and the people gathered respond to the spirit in various ways. The spirit may tell stories about himself (or herself), and in return, people may tell of their suffering and ask for help from the spirit (Humphrey and Onon 1996, p. 240). At the closing ritual of Wo Jufen shaman's (a student of Siqingua's) first *ominan* held in June 2009, the shaman's ancestor descended, summarized the whole ritual procedure, gave thanks to all participants, and expressed his appreciation. Finally, the ancestor asked the people if they agreed that the shaman should be upgraded to a higher rank, and all the people shouted "yes" to the spirit (Ding and Saiyintana 2011, p. 291).

The reciprocal principle is clearly shown between humans and spirits during Daur shamanic rituals. While live humans provide offerings, sacrificial animals, and praise to their ancestors and other spirits, the spirits give people blessings and guide them to avoid illness and misfortune. Usually, on the afternoon of the third day of the *ominan*, nine girls and nine boys perform a traditional Daur dance around the outer altar, accompanied by traditional music, to amuse the spirits and the people themselves. A *kuree* ritual is performed by shamans and all of the people at the end of the *ominan*. Each *yadgan* holds one end of a leather thong, and, one by one, people hold the other end of the rope in order to duck under it and escape. It is said that such actions can facilitate spirits' blessings in order to avoid illness (Ding and Saiyintana 2011, p. 63; Humphrey and Onon 1996, pp. 240–41; Lü and Qiu 2009, p. 100). On the last night of the *ominan*, there is a "blood drinking" ritual held in the felt house in darkness, in which people feed spirit idols with

calf blood. After this, all of the people gather around the bonfire outside the house to dance and sing in order to amuse both humans and spirits (Lü and Qiu 2009, pp. 100–1).

To summarize, the Daur shamanic landscape creates a social interface at which various entities gather from different worlds in a sharing space. Various metamorphoses immediately collapse the boundaries between the domains of live humans and deceased ancestors as well as nonhuman spirits. It seems to me that the ritual is in many ways similar to a festival ceremony in which beings of all kinds enjoy food, drink, and music, exchange information, and merge into one social community; however, in the shamanic ritual, the ancestral spirits join the celebration.

6. Ancestors as Active Participants in Daur Social Life

Although the death of a Daur shaman ends his or her biological life, the “inter-human metamorphosis” in the ritual enables his or her social life to continue. Ancestor shamans still actively participate in organizing the social life of their *hala-mokon* through their communications with their descendants in the ritual. For the Daur and other Indigenous peoples in Hailar, ancestral spirits are still “live” persons living with humans in the same social realm. Although they normally reside in mountains and forests, they are always invited to visit their descendants by the shaman’s invocations and prayers. It is crucial to point out that such inter-human connections between the living and the deceased are always experienced by people in a social rather than ‘religious’ context. Their communications with ancestors through possessed shamans constitute a vital part of Indigenous social acts. As Duna, the Evenki shaman Narengerile’s daughter, who has many years of experience as a servant in shamanic rituals, told me:

I never feel our ancestors are gods we need to worship. They are *onggor*, but the word *onggor* is not like the word god in the Chinese language. They are my family members. They do not live with us. They have their own places to live. However, they visit us in the ritual, just like a relative of mine visits my family sometimes. (28 September 2020)

Here, I recall Shirokogoroff’s “safety valve” theory, in which he argues that a Tungus (or Manchu) shaman “acts as a *safety valve* and as a special clan officer in charge of the regulation of the psychic equilibrium among the clan members” (Shirokogoroff 1935, p. 376). A shaman “cannot refuse to assist his clansmen” because he or she bears “a great responsibility” (Shirokogoroff 1935, p. 380). Regardless of his functionalist bias, Shirokogoroff successfully determines the central role played by the shaman to maintain the cosmological harmony and social balance among North Asian groups. However, taking an ontological approach, I contend that it is the ancestor shamans and the live shamans together rather than only the live shamans who play a role as a safety valve. From the active participation of ancestral spirits through the shaman’s performance, people learn cosmological knowledge, survival strategies, crisis management, conflict resolution skills, ecological intelligence, and traditional wisdom in order to establish community well-being.

One more question is whether the Daur human-ancestor relation can be usefully considered as totemist or animist. Based on Lévi-Strauss (1964) conceptions of Australian ethnographic data and Descola (1996, 2013) ontological classification, Pedersen (2001, pp. 423–24) sees the human-nonhuman transformation as a reflection of the animist principle in NNA and the “inter-human metamorphosis” as a production of the totemist principle in SNA societies. Such an attempt to distinguish NNA and SNA as two heterogeneous cultural geographic areas has been made in previous scholarship (e.g., Hamayon 1994). In my view, it is problematic to elaborate a dualistic model for cultures across an interconnected region, because cultural interactions and relations between NNA and SNA are much more prominent than their distinctions. Shamanism and shamanic cosmologies in North Asia overall have been established on the all-groups-recognized singular principle to deal with human relations with the other social realm, encompassing nonhuman animals, plants, ancestors, and other noncorporeal beings. This singular ontological principle is theorized as animism in Descola’s (1996, 2013) approach or perspectivism in Viveiros de Castro’s (1998, 2004). Both human-nonhuman and inter-human transformations fit the

animist ontology which recognizes interior continuity and exterior discontinuity, because both animal spirits and ancestors are noncorporeal beings, showing dissimilar physicalities between humans and animal/ancestral spirits. To my mind, inter-human perspectivism in SNA is not opposed to extra-human perspectivism. Rather, it should be perceived as the regional version of perspectivism or animism. There is no necessity to borrow the concept of totemism from Australian Aboriginal societies to arbitrarily label the SNA ontologies and pursue a dualistic model between NNA and SNA.

Inter-human metamorphosis is also crucial to Daur self-conceptualization and identity. Through the embodiment of ancestral spirits, shamans today reconstruct clan history and rediscover patrilineal genealogy eroded by the presiding state government following the 1949 legislation. During the Daur shamanic trance, ancestral spirits always lament their personal experience. They often cry out to tell how they took generations to come down to meet people by finding a “seed” shaman (new shaman). For many contemporary Buriats in Russia and Mongolia who lost their family genealogy, they are eager to know who their ancestors are. They often receive answers from the shaman possessed by ancestral spirits (Jokic 2008; Shimamura 2004). In the Evenki shaman Narengerile’s initiation ritual, when the last shaman in her father’s line entered her body, her family members learned this ancestor’s life story and that he was buried on a small island in Lake Baikal. After the ritual, shaman Narengerile told me that she is starting to plan a trip to Russia in the near future to look for her ancestor’s grave.

Shamanic landscapes and inter-human metamorphosis among ethnic groups in the Hailar region enable the traditional local, clan-based system to creatively persist in the modern world (Figure 9). On the one hand, many Indigenous peoples have successfully adapted to the modern social system. On the other, they rely on the underlying clan-based structure to shape their ethnic identities. Although contemporary shamanic rituals are often organized in a supra-ethnic way¹¹, participants are still centered on their own clan shamans for cross-boundary interactions. Clan solidarity and community cohesion are thus intensified through repeated shamanic rituals.



Figure 9. At the last day of Shaman Lina’s *ominan* ritual. Photograph by Feng Qu on 3 August 2020.

7. Conclusions

My case study of Daur shamanism in this article suggests that, as stated by Pedersen (2001, p. 415), “the realm of the social does not end with human beings.” For the Daur

as well as other Indigenous peoples in Hailar, the social realm is constituted by not only human beings but also noncorporeal beings such as nonhuman animal and ancestral spirits, as well as material ‘things’ such as ritual objects. Drawing on the theory of animist ontologies (Descola 2013; Ingold 1998, 2006; Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2004; Willerslev 2004), I developed a relational model, in which I have examined how shamanic constructions of the landscape create a ‘social interface’ which brings together entities from different worlds for the ongoing negotiation of social relations.

For over a century, studies of shamanism have been centered on the religious paradigm in which beings in other worlds are envisioned as gods or sacred entities whom humans revere and worship (Eliade 1964). However, my examinations and observations of Daur and other Indigenous shamanic rituals in Northeast China suggest that these other entities are persons, equivalent to human beings. In Viveiros de Castro (1998, p. 472) words, humanity is the “original common condition” for both humans and other beings. Although ancestors and other spirits are bodiless, they both virtually possess personhood and intentionality. Relations between the living and the deceased and between humans and nonhumans are intersubjective and interpersonal. Humphrey and Onon (1996, p. 191) have documented their Daur colleague Urgunge’s opinion: “Spirits were not ‘higher’ than human beings, just different.” Such a perspective corresponds to Descola (1996, 2013) modality of physical discontinuity.

Inter-human perspectivism represents the regional phenomenon of SNA (Pedersen 2001). The embodiment of ancestral spirits plays a leading role for communication between beings throughout the whole process of the ritual. On the one hand, ancestral spirits are different from zoomorphic spirits because they are tied to living humans by kin relationships. On the other, the humanity of humans is also shared by ancestral spirits and zoomorphic spirits, indicating that both inter-human and human-nonhuman transformations rest on the same animist principle. According to Sa (2019b), the embodiment of both ancestral spirits and animal spirits always takes place in the same ritual. A Daur shaman usually has one or two ancestor *hojoors* as master spirits but with the aid of animal spirits, indicating that nonhuman animal spirits also play an indispensable part in SNA shamanism.

The construction of the Daur shamanic landscape creates the social interface which enables direct communications between living humans and their ancestors. The entanglement of social relations and the social dynamics within the ritual space are deeply grounded in materiality. My analyses of Daur rituals have suggested that these ritual artifacts and objects are recognized in terms of body metamorphosis, a multiple, extra body of a human person or other-than-human person (Removed for peer review). Both living humans and deceased ancestors are dividual, partible, and multiply authored persons because they rely on materials to become themselves. They are thus linked together by things in producing and reproducing the social interface (Fowler 2004). Artifacts and objects themselves are also social agents, active participants in the construction of the shamanic landscape together with humans and noncorporeal beings.

Animist ontologies as a re-theorization of shamanism draw our attention away from the Eliadian narrow definition of the shaman (Wallis 2013). From my explorations of Daur shamanic ontologies, I have argued that shamanic rituals and sacred landscapes are always linked on both human and other-than-human levels. As stated by Foutiou et al. (2017, p. 7), “The physical and non-physical landscapes in shamanisms are deeply interrelated and interconnected and constitute an inseparable unity”. The ancestral spirits are crucial in SNA societies. Through rituals, they are actively involved in almost every aspect of human social life. In this way, both live shamans and ancestor shamans are not only ritual actors but also political actors in ANA Indigenous societies. Since political pressure, resource depletion, the destruction of ecosystems, environmental degradation, and climate change have increasingly weakened sustainable development (Dumont 2021), the construction of the shamanic landscapes and the embodiment of ancestral spirits are particularly valued in SNA societies.

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Notes

- ¹ Since these shamanic rituals were not open to the public, outsiders usually have no access to participating in the ritual. I was able to observe the rituals with Saiyintana's introduction to the shaman. Saiyintana is a Daur ethnographer and a retired professor at Inner Mongolia Academy of Social Science. She is a friend of the Daur shaman Siqingua and other shamans.
- ² According to an academic survey conducted in 1957, the term *hala* has at least 300 years of history (Zhurongga and Manduertu 1985, p. 188).
- ³ Huangge (1888–1972) is reported as Huangge 黄格 in most of the literature (Ding and Saiyintana 2011, pp. 56–58; Humphrey and Onon 1996; Zhurongga and Manduertu 1985, p. 259), but as Fangu in Omachi (1995, p. 51) text and as Panggu 庞古 in Menghedalai's monograph (Menghedalai and Amin 2013, p. 298). She was initiated to become a shaman in 1921. Unlike most shamans from poor families, Huangge came from an aristocratic family. She was sister to the famous communist revolutionary Merse (also known by his Chinese name Guo Daofu, 1894–1934). Humphrey and Onon (1996, p. 167) discovered that the Cambridge scholar Ethel John Lindgren had met and photographed Huangge in the early 1930s.
- ⁴ A story to confirm La shaman's power was told by an old Daur woman to La shaman's great-granddaughter Siqingua, a contemporary shaman. It says that when the Japanese occupied the Hulun Buir region in the period 1931–1945, about thirty shamans were arrested to be caged in a large house. The Japanese burned seventy bonfires surrounding the house. Finally, only La and the other Bargu woman survived and all the other shamans were dead. When the fire was extinguished, La shaman was still drumming and singing (Lü and Qiu 2009, pp. 17–18; also see Kara et al. 2009, pp. 146–47). Huangge's *hojoo* was a red bird, inherited from her mother's father's clan. She was "in demand not only in her (father's) clan but to protect women in every other clan too" (Humphrey and Onon 1996, p. 268).
- ⁵ La shaman was born in 1878 (Ding and Saiyintana 2011, p. 207) and passed away in 1958 (Lü and Qiu 2009, p. 18).
- ⁶ The Daur shaman could also inherit spirit ancestors from the mother's clan (Kara et al. 2009, p. 148).
- ⁷ Not every Daur shaman has an *abagaldai* mask. Siqingua and Huangge are shamans who have such masks as powerful equipment.
- ⁸ Humphrey and Onon (1996, p. 176) also writes, "According to the words of the Holieri ancestor spirit, there were twelve Duwalang trees, which were divided into six trees growing on the river bank and six trees on the mountain top."
- ⁹ The word *oboo* means "heap" or "cairn" in Mongolian. *Oboo* cairns "are one of the most ubiquitous human constructions scattered across the grasslands of Northern Asia. They appear in different shapes and sizes, depending on the local surroundings. In Mongolian cultural areas, *oboo* generally consist of a round heap of stones topped with a central pole and branches. They are built on high grounds, such as the tops of sacred mountains, hills or passes" (Dumont 2021, pp. 51–52).
- ¹⁰ The Daur word *Ominan* is from the Evenki word *ominaran*, meaning "to invoke the spirits." Kara et al. (2009, p. 144) argue that the Daur *ominan* ritual is "most likely of Evenki origin".
- ¹¹ This phenomenon is called a "meta-ritual" in (Humphrey and Onon 1996, p. 237) text. Sa (2019b) proposes a conceptual mokon circle, denoting an enlarged group including not only the basic mokon members but also other mokon members, relatives, and friends. For Siqingua, every time she has a new student, the neophyte will bring his or her family members to join Siqingua's mokon circle. Therefore, the more students that a shaman has, the larger the mokon circle of the senior shaman is.

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Article

The Gender of God's Gifts—Dividual Personhood, Spirits and the Statue of Mother Mary in a Sepik Society, Papua New Guinea

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Abstract: A Sepik myth tells of a time in which women were in charge of powerful spirits before jealous men reversed the gender roles by force. Today, the men of Timbunmeli (Nyaura, West Iatmul) have lost control over spirits who have started to act through female bodies. Christian charismatic rituals hint at mythical times, and remind villagers that women are the original custodians of spirits now understood as being spirits of God. While previously, male bodies represented spirits in shamanic rituals and through male ritual regalia, now women are the predominant recipients of God's gifts. This paper analyzes the current religious practices as onto-praxis in relation to the local concept of personhood and the relational ontology informing the Nyaura's lifeworld. Building on Strathern, Bird-David, and Gell's theories about the personhood of humans and things from an anthropology of ontology perspective and adding a gender perspective to the discussion, this paper argues that dividuality put into practice has not only informed the way the Nyaura have made charismatic Christianity their own, but is also central for understanding current events impacting gender relations in which material objects representing spirits play a crucial role.

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1. Introduction

When Timbunmeli village (Nyaura, West Iatmul)¹, situated at the southern end of Lake Chambri in the East Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea, celebrated the month of Mother Mary in 2010, women caught the community's statue of Mother Mary in a fishing net and with that, performed what [Sahlins \(1985, pp. 53–54\)](#) call mytho-praxis—historical action as the projection of mythical relations. A Nyaura myth tells the story of two ancestral sisters who—while fishing for shrimps—caught the heads of two powerful spirits, referred to as *wagen* (ancestral clan spirit) in the local vernacular.² Those two spirits started to jump and dance in their net, echoing a pleasant sounding rhythm. The sisters took the spirits home to their village. From then on, women guarded the spirits, met in ceremonial houses and took care of important business, while men looked after children and cooked food in family houses. Jealous of women's power, men gained access to the spirits by force and expelled their female custodians from the ceremonial house—an institution that from now on became a men's house, governed by the principles of male seniority

¹ Timbunmeli belongs to a group of villages whose inhabitants identify as Nyaura in reference to the name of the clan that founded their first village, Nyaurangei (the place of the Nyaura). Anthropologists and linguists refer to the Nyaura also as West Iatmul. Gregory [Bateson \(1932a, p. n2\)](#) borrowed the name Iatmul from a clan in the East Iatmul village Mindimbit and introduced it as an ethnonym for a group of villages that showed linguistic and cultural similarities. Iatmul is not a name used by my interlocutors, but they recognize that they share similarities of culture, language and descent with other societies referred to as Iatmul by outsiders.

² Local vernacular terms are marked by italics and underlining, while terms stemming from the Papua New Guinean neo-melanesian Pidgin English Tok Pisin are marked by italics.

and initiation. Gender relations were reversed: women became the household caretakers, while men took over the *wagen* and learned esoteric practices from them. One of the skills an initiated man could acquire was the ability to establish a personal relationship with a *wagen*. In shamanic rituals the *wagen* could possess his body to heal others and prophesy (Bateson 1932b; Falck 2016).

Today, the men of Timbunmeli have lost control over spirits who have started to act through female bodies. In Christian charismatic rituals, villagers are reminded that women were originally the guardians of spirits. During a Catholic charismatic movement that reached their village in the 1990s, villagers received gifts from God enabling them to heal, prophesy, and speak in and interpret tongues. While initially men were also filled by the Holy Spirit, today God's gifts are clearly gendered—predominantly women receive them. In Catholic charismatic rituals, the women of Timbunmeli remind male leaders of their female entitlement to leadership and power. This is especially obvious in celebrations during the month of October—the month that the Catholic Church dedicates to the Holy Rosary and the Queen of the Holy Rosary, Mother Mary. During the month of Mother Mary (*mun bilong mama*), women catch her statue with nets, carry it around in the village influenced by her spirit, or are possessed by spirits of God and Mother Mary herself.

In what follows, it is argued that current religious practices in Timbunmeli village cannot only be analyzed as mytho-praxis but also as onto-praxis (Scott 2007). Building on Sahlins (1985) theorization of the interaction of structure and agency and his concept of mytho-praxis, Scott has coined the term onto-praxis to “encompass the mutually transforming relationships, not only between myth and history, but also between the received and internalized dispositions, or practice-generative schemes, of a given socio-cultural context and people's everyday activities therein” (Scott 2007, p. 20). In Timbunmeli, basic ontological premises that characterize the Nyaura lifeworld and that are echoed in the Nyaura concept of the person can be identified in villagers' religious practices.

Elsewhere (Falck 2016, 2019c), I established that a Nyaura person is not only what Strathern (1988) has called a “social microcosm” but also a cosmo-ontological microcosm, reflecting basic principles of people's cosmos and existence. Not only social relations with others define personhood in Timbunmeli, but also visible and invisible entities such as totemic names, bodily matter and the spirit that connects humans with living and dead kin, the visible and invisible part of the world and its creator. It is precisely the dividual aspect of personhood and the ontological premises it contains that had implications for the way the Nyaura made Christianity their own. In this article, I will add another dimension to the analysis of religious change in Timbunmeli: gender, which, similar to personhood, is not a pre-given quality of the individual, but can be understood as an aspect of relations (Strathern 1988; also Eriksen 2008, 2012, 2016).

The way people in Timbunmeli have appropriated charismatic Christianity provokes difficulties for male leaders who find themselves confronted with dynamics that increasingly appear to be beyond their control. Timbunmeli's relational ontology put into action by female bodies in Christian charismatic worship has started to transform their lifeworld. I argue that charismatic Christianity has been engaged with Nyaura mytho- and onto-praxis in such a way that it affects the gendering of Timbunmeli's charismatic space—“the space in which the Spirit reveals itself for the believers” (Eriksen 2014, p. S263)—and the power relationships this space produces.

First, I give a brief overview on religious change in Timbunmeli village. Second, I describe the local concept of the person and how its conceptualization has been engaged with charismatic Christianity by focusing of the practice of spirit possession. Third, I show that dividuality has not only informed the way the Nyaura have appropriated Christianity but that it is also crucial for understanding the agency of objects in religious practices. I attempt to make some suggestions for how Strathern (1988), Gell (1998), and Bird-David's (1999) approaches to personhood and the agency of things can be expanded to analyze the religious change in Papua New Guinea. Fourth, I describe how women, by putting ontological principles into action and by legitimizing their practices with

Nyaura mythology, currently challenge gender and power relations. Finally, I will discuss my findings in relation to the Pentecostal Gender Paradox (Martin [2001] 2003) and its consequences for power relations. I conclude that it is not only the social dimension of objects or persons alone that we have to look at if we want to understand the current trajectories of religious change in the Sepik, but also their cosmo-ontological dimension put into practice in the historical moment.

2. Religious Change at Lake Chambri

Since the beginning of the 20th century, Christianity—predominantly in the form of Roman Catholicism—has influenced Sepik lives: in 1913, the first Catholic mission station was built at Marienberg; in 1957, the Chambri Lake area received a Catholic mission station on Chambri island, one of Timbunmeli's neighboring islands. During the 1980s and 1990s, Christian influence gained momentum in Timbunmeli and today its inhabitants understand themselves not only as Nyaura but also as Christians.³

I (Falck 2018, 2020) have argued that the Nyaura's conversion to Christianity is connected to local conceptions of power, which understand access to and good relationships with spirits as a source of power. Before contact with Europeans, Iatmul societies were considered—by themselves and by neighboring societies—powerful local players, not only because of their skills in warfare and their dominance in trade relations, but also because of their spiritual repertoire (e.g., Gewertz 1983; Harrison 1990; Mead 1978; Metraux 1975, 1978). Exposure to modern warfare during WWII, Western trade relations and Christianity set in processes that not only changed the Iatmul's relationship with other societies, but also impacted the relationships they had with themselves and their cultural items. Villagers turned to the Christian God, whom they had come to perceive as a more potent source of power than their own spirits, and embraced Christianity.

While changing inter-cultural dynamics in the Sepik region were one factor that motivated the Nyaura on Timbunmeli to convert to Christianity, intra-cultural dynamics set into motion by ambitious young men also contributed to the success of Christianity. The Catholic Church established leadership positions for Nyaura men that enabled young men to achieve influence and power in a society that heretofore had been structured by seniority and restricted access to the secrets of the men's house. Christianity offered young men the means to devalue the base of their elders' power through a critique of the spirits upon which it was predicated: the Christian God and his spirits—i.e., the Holy Spirit, angels, saints—were not only said to be more powerful than Nyaura spirits, but Nyaura spirits were also devalued as evil. Attracted by the possibility to escape the strict rules of their elders' *wagen* cult and bring their community on the pathway to change, young men lacked the interest to learn from their elders and turned their back on Nyaura spirits and practices. The last male initiation took place during the 1980s, and the last men's house fell apart during the 1990s. By the end of the 1990s, most elders had died without passing on their esoteric knowledge to today's generation of male leaders.

While their elders had been able to directly engage with spirits during shamanic rituals and through esoteric language, the new generation of spiritual leaders depended on the mediation of God's help by expatriate priests and his word by the Bible. While waiting to be fully initiated into the secrets that they assumed the Catholic Church held, villagers experienced the Christian God and his spirits as distant and removed from their immediate lifeworld. A Catholic charismatic movement changed this perception by permitting direct encounters with the godly. Charismatic prayer groups evolved, during which sessions the spirits of God started to possess villagers' bodies. Interestingly, those Catholic charismatic séances show similarities to shamanic séances, during which shamans could be possessed by *wagen*. With that, the local understanding of personhood and spirit possession is central for the issue at hand.

³ In 2013 the denomination of the adult population (292 people) of Timbunmeli Island was as follows: 220 Catholics, 56 AOG (Assemblies of God), 6 SDA (Seven Day Adventist), 6 SSEC (South Seas Evangelical Church), 2 Israel Ministries Church, 1 Four Square Gospel Church, 1 Revival Fellowship.

3. Personhood and Spirit Possession in a Context of Religious Change

A Nyaura person can be understood as a composite or dividual being, reflecting central principles of the Nyaura cosmology and ontology. For my discussion here, I will focus on the intimate bond between body (*bange*) and spirit (*kaik*) that is not only crucial for personhood and life in Timbunmeli, but also central for understanding the local notion of spirit possession.

The body of a Nyaura person is made up of maternal and paternal bodily matter that conceptually is related to ground. The Nyaura creation myth centers around a being—Kavakmeli—whose body split to become sky and ground. In the newly formed soil, a hole appeared from which the people's ancestors emerged. Today, the idea of bodily matter being related to ground is reinforced by the biblical story about Adam's creation from a lump of soil. Furthermore, *kavak*—the local vernacular term for primeval ground—is also used as a synonym for the Christian God. However, not only bodily matter but also spirit (*kaik*) connects people with the creator of their cosmos.

Kaik is the Nyaura term for an invisible entity that is vital for life. In the local vernacular, *kaik* is also called *bangewagen* (spirit of the body) or *wasman* (guardian)—it flows through the body and makes it lively, healthy, and aware of harmful situations. If the connection between the lifespirt and body is lost, a person will fall sick, and if the connection cannot be restored, the person will die. Therefore, healing rituals often focus on guiding a lost *kaik* back into its body (see Bateson 1932b; Falck 2016, 2019c). After birth, a Nyaura child is given a totemic name (*gwaak si*) that connects it with an ancestral namesake. Its *kaik* will recognize this name and if the connection between body and spirit is lost, the totemic name will be used to lead the lifespirt back to its body.

The *kaik* of a person is perceived as coming from an invisible part of the world called Undumbunge (place of the dead) that nowadays is equated with heaven. With death, it turns into a spirit of the dead (*undumbu*, *soul*) and returns to heaven. While the spirit of a recently deceased person is referred to as *undumbu*, the spirits of people that have died before are referred to as *gwaak* (kinterm for paternal grandfather) or *wagen* (ancestral clan spirit). Today, people say that God bestows a baby with its *kaik*, which is understood as a breath of wind like that which God blew into the nostrils of Adam to flow through the body. Thus, people can feel God's presence in their bodies—like *kaik*, his Holy Spirit is flowing through them.

Mosko (2010, p. 215) argues that “people's assimilation of Christianity [in different Melanesian societies] has been effected through elicitive exchanges involving parts of their persons and corresponding personal detachments of God, Jesus, Mary, Holy Spirit, the Devil, and so on.” Although Mosko has been criticized by the authors whose works he cites in support of his argumentation (see Falck 2019c), from the Nyaura perspective, all persons are dividuals whether they are human or divine. God, too, is a partible being. In reference to Christian theology, they call him God tri-wan (God three-one), meaning God as Trinity. He can transform himself into a human (Jesus) and appear like a spirit (Holy Spirit). God is one, but he is also many. His Holy Spirit is present in everyone—the *kaik* of each person is part of the divine and the divine is a part of each living person.

The Nyaura's perception that God is part of each person supports the egalitarian ethos of Christian ideology according to which everyone is equal in the eyes of God. Everyone, the Nyaura in Timbunmeli say, has a part to play in what they call “the work of God” (*wok bilong God*) and which contains the revelation of divine messages.

The idea that everyone can pursue God's work has been reinforced by the impact of the global Catholic charismatic movement that reached Timbunmeli in the 1990s. During charismatic gatherings, villagers were baptized in the Spirit and assigned with patron saints (*wassanktu*)⁴ who could float (*flotim*) their bodies and out messages from God. When floating their bodies, God's spirits controlled their actions and disclosed divine messages through

⁴ Within the Catholic Church, patron saints are holy persons and angels that can be assigned to a person, a group, an activity, a building, a country, and so on, to function as intercessors before God.

them. This development marked a significant change from former Christian practices and structures. Within the hierarchical organization of the Catholic Church, villagers depended on Church officials to learn about God's will. Now, practically everyone could become God's medium.

While the Catholic Church had embraced the Catholic charismatic movement as a new way to offer its followers a closer relationship with God, it withdrew its support after rivalries among charismatic leaders led to disputes. Nonetheless, in Timbunmeli, locally run charismatic prayer groups evolved. There, God's gifts not only floated the bodies of villagers; spirits of God also started to possess (*usim*) them. Villagers describe the experience of being filled by God's spirits as similar to being drunk. When God's spirits float their bodies, they feel pleasantly intoxicated and filled with a happiness that suffuses everything. They lose full control of their actions but stay conscious. When a spirit of God possesses a body, however, the consciousness of the possessed person disappears. The medium's lifespirt leaves the body to be temporarily displaced by a spirit of God. Because the connection between body and *kaik* is so crucial for life, spirit possessions are an exhausting undertaking. Once a spirit possession has ended, the bodies of mediums are tired and need rest (Figure 3b).

Spirit possession is not a religious innovation that charismatic Christianity introduced to the Sepik, but had already been part of Iatmul spiritual practices when Bateson (1932b) conducted fieldwork among the East Iatmul of Mindimbit in the late 1920s. He describes healing practices, in which *wagen* possessed the bodies of shamans to heal the sick. In 2013, I witnessed a shamanic ritual performed by an East Iatmul man that showed similarities to what Bateson had witnessed at the end of the 1920s. Interestingly, spirit possessions that take place during Catholic charismatic prayer group meetings show similarities to the shamanic séances Bateson described. For example, each shaman and Christian charismatic medium is only used by a specific *wagen* or spirit of God, respectively. In both cases, the spirit may take over the body of its medium in a way that overpowers the cognitive-sensual experiences of its medium. Similar to differentiating between being used or floated by a spirit of God, the Nyaura also differentiate between *wagen* possessions, during which the consciousness of the shaman (*wagenmangnyang*) disappears, and *wagen* séances, during which the *wagen* only stimulates certain body parts of the shaman (*yanonyang*) via a pulsation of blood, which can be interpreted according to a code. Both *wagen* and God's spirits have their own language. While *wagen* use a metaphorical language intelligible only to the initiated, spirits of God may use glossolalia comprehensible only to those blessed with the gift of interpreting tongues. Those and other similarities were not only noticed by myself when I compared my findings with what Bateson had described, but had initially been pointed out to me by my Nyaura interlocutors. For them, these similarities were proof for a perception of Christianity that had grown among them when charismatic Catholicism became part of their lives. During their charismatic practices, God's spirits revealed themselves to be local spirits and villagers started to doubt whether the Christian pantheon was really so different from the spirit pantheon their elders had relied on (see Falck 2018). Today, my interlocutors call spirits of the dead and ancestral spirits souls, angels, and saints, whereas spirits of the bush and water are referred to as nature that God created. God himself is known by many names as different clans refer to him with the names of their first primordial ancestor, such as Mangensaun, Nyaugunduma, or Sukundimi.

A major change between the non-Christian charismatic space and the Catholic charismatic space in Timbunmeli is the fact that previously, only certain initiated men had the ability and right to function as spirit mediums. During the Catholic charismatic movement, though, women, next to men, were baptized in the Spirit by Catholic charismatic prayer leaders and received access to spirits that started to lead charismatic prayer groups.

Although the Catholic Church had already included women in the work of the mission before the charismatic movement arrived, male leadership had never really been questioned within the paternalistic structure of the Catholic Church. Men obtained church offices, led church services, and directed Christian activities. Women became an organized part of

the church's structure as members of the Catholic Women's group, but they did not lead men. Today, women have started to lead Catholic charismatic prayer groups that men also attend. Although men can feel God's spirit moving in their bodies during charismatic prayers, spirits of God only possess female bodies.

Interestingly, spirits of God not only enter human bodies, but also slip into ceramic bodies similarly to *wagen* who had slipped into carvings and masks during rituals of the ceremonial house. Yet, while there are statues of Jesus or Archangel Michael found on altars and people call upon those Christian figures in their prayers, only the statue of Mother Mary features centrally in current religious practices. In the following, I will discuss local conceptions of personhood, gender, and possession in relation to the agency of these things.

4. The Personhood of Humans and Things as a Product of Relational Action

While the human body has to be filled with a lifespirit to be alive, things can also be filled with spirit and become persons. Things and bodies not filled with spirit, are conceptualized as empty shells called *saba* (empty hull of a thing) or *bange simbe* (outside skin), respectively. Bateson has documented that spirits could slip into human bodies and other material forms to which the East Iatmul referred as *tsimbi (simbe)* and *tsava (saba)*:

Tfimbi [simbe] and *tjava [saba]* are important words connected with the theory of possession and life. [. . .]. When a shamanic spirit [*wagen*] enters into a crocodile the body of the crocodile is described as the *tjava [saba]* of the spirit. But when a shamanic spirit possesses a shaman the latter is not the spirit's *tjava*, but its *tfimbi [simbe]*. The body is apparently referred to as the *tfimbi* or *tjava* of the *kait [kaik]*. (Bateson 1932b, p. 418n40, underlining added; see also Stanek 1983, pp. 256–57 on *saba*)

The establishment of relations between spirit and body or spirit and thing is transformative. A human body loses its former beingness when the relationship with its *kaik* is altered temporarily or lost for good. When the *kaik* leaves its body during spirit possessions and a different spirit takes its place, the human body acquires the identity of the spirit using it. When the lifespirit has left the body for good, the body turns into a corpse (*tsing*), while the *kaik* turns into a spirit of the dead. Things, too, change their beingness when enlivened with a spirit. When a spirit has entered a human body or that of a thing, those bodies become that respective spirit being. Interestingly, the *kaik* is an entity that is gendered—it is either male (*kaikdu*) or female (*kaiktaugwa*). Spirits, too, are gendered, including spirits of God. When a gift (*present*) of God refers to a male spirit, it is called *presentman*; when it refers to a female spirit, it is called *presentmeri*.

In a recent article, Hauser-Schäublin (2017) has shown how carvings in the East Iatmul village of Kararau can be grown into persons. Picking up on my suggestion that Nyaura persons are composite beings constituted of relationships with visible and invisible others and made up of visible and invisible substances and entities, she has shown that ancestral agency is central for a carving to achieve personhood. In Timbunmeli, things are not only grown into persons by human intention; it is true that spirits can be made to slip into things and bodies via esoteric language or charismatic prayers, but they can also slip into material bodies of their own accord. Furthermore, my interlocutors told me that a carving could also lose its status as a person once the spirit enlivening it had left or had been removed. This enabled men to sell carvings and masks that once had been important ritual paraphernalia of the ceremonial house and now fill the archives of museums and art galleries around the world.

Whereas in former times spirits would slip into men's cult regalia, today, God's spirits can also slip into Christian statues, such as the statue of Mother Mary. In 2010, Timbunmeli village received a statue of Mother Mary from a Catholic sister with whom the headmaster of Timbunmeli's primary school and his wife were close. To celebrate the arrival of the statue, the community organized a Marian procession for the month of Mother Mary. The community decorated houses and pathways with flowers to honor the mother of God.

I was told that Mother Mary was happy about the welcome her statue received. Her spirit entered the statue that jumped and danced in the arms of villagers who carried her ceramic body from house to house, accompanied by prayers. Mother Mary not only moved in people's arms, but she also started to perform in a net held by women and with that, re-enacted the mythical scene I described above. Like the *wagen* in mythical times had started to perform in the net of the ancestral sisters, Mother Mary jumped in the women's net.

Mother Mary's spirit not only entered the community's statue, but also used the body of one of the women who had held the net—Grace. One of my interlocutors, Anna, remembering the day, said: "They caught it [the statue of Mother Mary] in a net that they use to catch shrimps. Mother Mary danced inside of that net and when Grace held it, she jumped and jumped." Mother Mary was happy to be held by Grace, her medium.

I learned that Grace has a personal connection with Mother Mary via her totemic name. While Grace's Christian name carries its own meaning, her totemic name is of more interest for the dividual aspect of Grace's personhood and Timbunmeli's relational ontology that I discuss. As I have stated above, every Nyaura person is bestowed with a totemic name that connects her/him with an ancestral being. Grace's *gwaak si* is Mariuamangi—a totemic name belonging to Grace's patriline. Her clan brother, the headmaster of Timbunmeli's Primary School, had, qua customary work that he performed,⁵ started to lay a claim onto her name and given it to Mother Mary's statue. Doing so, he emphasized Mother Mary's connection to his clan. I have already mentioned that my interlocutors have re-interpreted Christian spirits as local spirits. Mother Mary, too, is understood to be an ancestral being belonging to the totemic repertoire of the clan that Grace had been born into. By bestowing Mother Mary's statue with the name Mariuamangi, an official relationship between the ancestral being, Mother Mary, Grace, and Grace's patriline was established.

When Mother Mary enters the statue or Grace's body, they become Mother Mary and the actions performed are perceived as being her actions. Thus, personhood is not an intrinsic quality of humans or things but has to be understood as being relational and contextual. Humans and things reveal their being when they are being engaged (e.g., Heidegger [1962] 2001, pp. 95–122, 153–63; Jackson 2012, pp. 171–72; Willerslev 2007, p. 97). Ingold, for example, says "[...] whether a stone is alive or not will depend upon the context in which it is placed and experienced" (Ingold [2000] 2011, p. 97). Similarly, Bird-David (1999, p. 78) understands personhood of non-human entities as being made in social relations "as, when and because we socialize with them". This idea of a relational epistemology resonates well with Gell's theory of the agency of art objects. What matters for a thing to have "social agency", Gell (1998, p. 123) says, "is where it stands in a network of social relations".

While in Bird-David's relational epistemology, non-human persons are understood as the objectifications of social relations, also in Gell's (1998, p. 21) theory, objects, specifically art objects, function as objectifications of social agency, namely that of "'primary' intentional agents in their 'secondary' artefactual form". Objects only contain secondary agency. They are material "indexes" that permit a "particular cognitive operation" that Gell (1998, p. 13) calls "the abduction of agency", from which a "causal inference" about the intentions or capabilities of another person can be made. I, however, suggest that this perspective is too limited to understand the way objects become part of religious contexts at the Sepik. From an emic perspective, it is a spiritual substance that enters the object and bestows it with personhood via the connection created between spirit and material form. The issue at hand is not only that of a relational epistemology but also that of a relational ontology.

At this point, it is interesting and important to note that not only personhood may be established and changed via relational actions, but also gender. For example, a man has to get rid of his mother's blood during initiation to become fully male. He has to detach the gendered substance during a scarification process. Furthermore, relational actions

⁵ In Nyaura societies, a brother has to perform customary duties for his (classificatory) sister to acquire the right to use her name in the future.

between spirits, humans, and material bodies can affect gender. Some of the female bodies possessed by spirits of God during Catholic charismatic prayer sessions were not possessed by female but male spirits. For example, Sandra was regularly used by a spirit of the dead called David (also referred to as Saint David); Helen was used by a spirit of the dead called Thomas. The possession of a female body by a male spirit transformed the body's gender—it became male. This was not only evidenced by changes in villager's approach towards those bodies, e.g., using a male form of address or behavioral rules related to men, such as men sitting on the ground whereas the (female) body used by a male spirit was sitting on a stool (Figure 1).⁶ It was also evidenced by behavioral changes of the bodies the spirit used, e.g., assertive demeanor, sitting with one's legs apart on a stool, or preaching like a Catholic priest.



Figure 1. Using the body of his female medium, a spirit called Thomas counsels a man (photo: Falck 2013).

The Nyaura in Timbunmeli have appropriated charismatic gifts from God in a way that corresponds with ontological principles of their lifeworld. However, putting the relational ontology of their lifeworld into practice in a context of religious change holds the potential for further far-reaching change as I will discuss in the next section. Today, God's gifts are clearly gendered—mainly women receive them. This development not only challenges men's self-perception as leaders and leads to conflicts between men and women but can also be understood as a form of onto-praxis during which women put both ontological premises as well as the mythology of their lifeworld into practice. The consequences of this for gender and power relationships, is a topic I turn to next.

5. The Gender of God's Gifts—Gender, Power, and Religious Change

When in 2010 the statue of Mother Mary danced in women's arms and a net (Figure 2), powerful messages were revealed to Timbunmeli village. The Mother of God reminded villagers that women had encountered the power of spirits first. Women—visible for everyone to see—laid claim on their custodianship by carrying the statue in their arms and net where Mother Mary approvingly danced.

During the procession, conflicts about who was allowed to carry the statue arose. In the aftermath, disputes between male leaders and women escalated. While the Catholic Women wished to organize further Marian processions and celebrations of the Month of Mother Mary in the following years, Timbunmeli's church leaders—who, in the paternalistic structure of the Catholic Church, hold higher ranks—did not allow it. Only in 2013, after

⁶ Customarily, Nyaura men sit elevated on a stool, whereas women sit on the floor. Ranks between men may also be expressed by higher and lower seating order.

the female leader of the Catholic Women had apologized to male leaders for any wrongs the group had caused, a reconciliation looked feasible. Still, the men did not give permission for the month of Mother Mary to be celebrated. Despite lacking approval from church leaders, the Catholic Women organized daily prayer meetings on the Primary School ground for October. They argued that everyone had the right to praise God and perform his work—men could not prohibit it.



Figure 2. (a) Timbunmeli’s statue of Mother Mary (photo: Falck 2013); (b) A Nyaura woman during a celebration with a contemporary version of the net that two ancestral sisters had caught wagen with while fishing for shrimps (photo: Falck 2013).

During the month of Mother Mary in 2013 (Figure 3), several spirit possessions took place and women’s bodies, guided by spirits, performed what were referred to as miracles. Mother Mary danced in the arms of women who carried her statue during a procession on Timbunmeli’s Primary School ground and Mary’s spirit also entered Grace’s body on several occasions to deliver divine messages.



Figure 3. (a) The statue of Mother Mary dancing in the arms of a woman during a Marian procession in October 2013 (photo: Falck 2013); (b) two women recuperating from spirit possessions towards the end of a charismatic prayer meeting during October 2013 (photo: Falck 2013).

This was criticized by Timbunmeli’s Catholic church officials who felt that their authority had been thwarted. One of the pastoral workers, Ivan, felt especially alienated by the women’s actions and attacked the Catholic Women in his sermons. Ivan especially criticized how women had performed cleaning rituals on the Primary School ground where sorcery items were said to be hidden to impair the operation of the school and harm its teachers and other villagers (see Falck 2016, 2019b). Pointing to the violation of the Catholic

Church's structure and due procedure for organizing religious activities in the community, Ivan complained publicly about the women's actions. In his sermons he even called the spirits that were using female bodies "home made spirits", which caused utter resentment among the Catholic Women and other villagers.

During a meeting of the Catholic Women, Briska—their leader and the wife of the Primary School's headmaster—said: "I arranged that we could meet for our prayers on the school ground and I do not feel good about what Ivan said. Ivan is jealous, because the women followed me." Grace complained: "Every time we women want to organize something, Ivan complains. He wants to be in charge of everything." Briska added, "The men have already corrupted the life on this ground [meaning: men have exploited leadership positions for personal gain, fallen prey to corruption, and mismanaged community affairs], it is the time of the mothers now!" The Catholic Women agreed—the men were jealous and tried to hamper their work of God. They wanted to stick together, otherwise no change would come to their community. It was the month of the Mother (*mun bilong mama*)—the Catholic mothers (*katolik mama*) had every right to take the lead.

During a prayer meeting on the Primary School ground, Mother Mary possessed Grace's body to talk to the women about the men's lack of support:

Mother Mary: "I, I forgive them [the men], the father [God] forgives, the child [Jesus] forgives. It is something that belongs to God. You are doing my work, you are doing God's and Jesus' work. That's it. You aren't happy, are you? You are hiding your feelings, why? Are you afraid?"

Rita: "Saint Mary, I am not afraid. Maybe the others are, you should ask your children."

Mother Mary: "Some of you have already voiced their anger. [. . .]. You were given more strength and power on this ground Timbun[meli]."

Nancy: "Amen!"

Mother Mary: "You shall not abandon this ground [the school ground]. I will be here. One day, that man who made that talk will come. I think some of you have heard it already, he is afraid, ah?"

Rita: "That's right."

Mother Mary: "[. . .]. Don't be afraid of him. Return to him. [. . .]. Papa God will bless this ground from where you have removed much harmful things already. You are carrying my pain. A man of this ground cannot degrade [*daunim*] you. [. . .]. Whatever they do to you, they do to me. [. . .]. You're not pursuing the work of the ground, it is the work of Heaven that you are pursuing. [. . .]." They said, 'It's not the true thing that they are making', did you hear that, too? [Answer: 'Yes!'] 'They said the school will not run well.' But God has spoken and he has said, it will work."

It did not take long before Ivan came to the school ground during one of the prayer meetings to address the Catholic Women with an apology. Ivan, like other male leaders, did not want to attract the anger of God and his spirits: "I want to apologize for what I have said. [. . .]. I apologize to you. [. . .]. We leaders, we don't want to feel pain. [. . .]." Briska—speaking for the women—answered:

It is true, I was very angry, but now you came and you asked me to accept your apology, and I accept it. [. . .]. I am marking the voice of the women and I tell you, you should not attack [*bagarapim*] the women. The women carry God's talk. [. . .]. You have seen that your church service remained empty [because of what you said]. Many people did not turn up. [. . .]. Ok, speaking for the women, I want to come and shake your hand and let you know that I am *wanbel* [reconciled with you] and I ask all my sisters, you forgive him.

At the end, not only Ivan but other leaders who had raised critique, too, had to publicly apologize to the Catholic Women and the spirits that guided them as their work

had proven successful: the spirit of a dead villager—called Saint David—together with the spirit of Mother Mary had identified sorcery bundles that were publicly removed from the village ground.

In March 2017, I had a long conversation with Ivan—a man who has spent his adult life in service to the Catholic Church. I asked him about his assessment of the current situation in the village where God used women to perform his work. We started to talk about mythical times when it was women, not men, who were in charge of spirits and important affairs. I asked Ivan what he thought about the similarity between ancestral times and the present (see also e.g., [Hauser-Schäublin 2019](#), pp. 174, 225–33; [Wassmann 1991](#), p. 180), as women are again the custodians of powerful spirits, he replied:

Mary delivered Jesus. And that is why the women receive everything. We men, no. Joseph did not do anything. He was only there. [. . .]. The women got the Holy Spirit first, the women looked after the *kastom* [customary law with ancestral agency] first. And I, the man, I just came in and by force chased her away. And I, wrongfully became the caretaker [of spirits]. It was not mine [to take]. Ok, and that's why we see that the women are receiving the big, big presents [gifts from God]. This spirit is using the women. [. . .] Before in our *kastom*, the women were its guardian and that is why everything goes to the women now and they are the owner. [. . .]. Ya, it is something that they own. They want it back now. And you see, the spirits, too, they use the women. It wants to use the women. And we see that the women are owning it now. [. . .]. It strongly wants to use the women. And so, we see that the women are owning it now. I, the man, I only watched over it. I can say: take care only. [. . .]. The good things came from the side of the women and so the women lead. I, the man, I have no part in it, I only support and steer them. Now, everywhere the women work now. And what can we men say? It is not something that belonged to us. It belonged to the women and they already pulled it back. I was not its rightful owner.

Motherhood and female creative powers, as discussed by [Silverman \(2001\)](#), are important motives in Iatmul culture. Everyone knows that without a mother, one would not exist. The importance of female reproductive powers is also reflected in the local creation myth. The primeval sea that stood at the beginning of the cosmos and the hole in the primeval ground from which humankind ascended represent the reproductive fluids and organs of the first female ancestral being. In male rituals, Iatmul men appropriated women's reproductive power and transformed it into a masculine form that, via initiation rituals, could give birth to men or re-create the structures of the cosmos via the enactment of esoteric knowledge ([Silverman 1996, 2001](#); [Wassmann 1987](#)). However, male entitlement to this power rested on theft and the concealment of the fact that “the primordial sea and the terrestrial birth of the universe symbolize the primacy of female fertility and the maternal as opposed to the paternal body” ([Silverman 1996](#), p. 37).

Interestingly, the importance of female fertility for everything that exists has been transferred by my interlocutors—both women and men—onto Mary's importance for Christianity. Without Mary, they say, Jesus—and by extension the Catholic Church or Christianity in general—would not exist. Thus, everyone should honor mothers and venerate the Mother of God.

Marian devotion is a global Christian phenomenon, but it receives a distinctively local face when it encounters local cultural concepts and practices (e.g., [Kingsbury and Chesnut 2019](#); [Smith 1994](#)). The importance of Mother Mary in Melanesian religious practices has most prominently been described by Hermkens (e.g., [Hermkens 2007, 2008, 2020](#)), who suggests that “Mary's submissive image falls in line with pre-existing gender relations and gender hierarchies, in which women are constituted as submissive to their husbands, their primary role being that of caretakers of the families, as mothers” ([Hermkens 2007](#), p. 7). As elsewhere (e.g., [Chesnut 2003](#); [Hermkens 2020](#); [Vuola 2019](#)), in Timbunmeli, too, women identify with the Mother of God. However, Iatmul mothers—and Iatmul women in general—cannot be described as being submissive to men, per se. There are contexts and spaces in which

women express assertive behavior usually identified with the male ethos (Bateson [1936] 1958; Falck 2019a; Silverman 2001). Although customarily, Iatmul men are “very much in control of the ritual power of each village, and, as a consequence, of representing its physical strength” (Kaufmann 2010, p. 174), there also exists the underlying notion “that there is nevertheless a maternal source to this power, and in fact rituals play at rendering this relationship between men and mothers visible” (ibid.). One of the rituals commenting on gender relations in Iatmul societies is the famous *naven* rite—referred to as *sorak* by the Nyaura—in which a reversal of gendered behavior is publicly performed by male and female bodies. As my interlocutors explained, the ritual is a public celebration and appreciation of motherhood (Falck 2019a). Today, Marian devotion reflects the general appreciation of motherhood in a Christian context. Moreover, the identification of women with Mother Mary empowers them. As charismatic prayer leaders and during spirit possessions, women act in an assertive and authoritative manner, building their strength on the support granted to them by Mother Mary, but also by other spirits of God and God himself.⁷

According to Silverman (2001, p. 36) the fear that women might regain their former powerful position taken from them by devious men is prevalent among the East Iatmul in Tambunum. Considering the happenings in Timbunmeli and the disputes that arose as a result, one could say that a male nightmare has come true: the male cult has lost its significance and women have acquired a direct access to the most powerful spirits there are today—spirits of God. The different spheres from which men and women acquired their self-worth (e.g., Hauser-Schäublin 2019) have started to change with women pushing into a space that, since the mythical theft, had been gendered male.

Because both women and men know who the original custodians of spirits were and because God clearly favored women with his gifts, there is not much room to maneuver for men to influence the changes taking place. One strategy has been to insist that the paternalistic structure promoted by the Catholic Church provides men with the authority to steer religious affairs. Yet even within this structure women can acquire leadership positions, as the example of the Catholic Women demonstrates. The Catholic charismatic movement, however, has introduced a new powerful basis for female entitlement: Nyaura spirits that are now equated with God and his spirits have found a way back to their original guardians. There was nothing men could do about it. God has given his gifts to women and he wants to use them to pursue his work.

Ivan’s remark that “everywhere the women work now” corresponds with the observation that globally, Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity are numerically dominated by women who outnumber men in religious activities. Martin ([2001] 2003) has described this phenomenon in relation to another observation, namely that despite the predominantly female face of the world-wide movement, it paradoxically reproduces male leadership and thus paternalistic power. Martin ([2001] 2003, p. 54) notes, “[t]he implicit deal seems to be that a substantive shift towards greater gender equality will be tolerated so long as women are not seen to be publicly exercising formal authority over men.” Other scholars, too, contend that women’s religious emancipation through their participation in Christian contexts may not challenge gendered structures that perpetuate power relationships but reproduce paternalistic structures. Yet, women may find ways to assert influence on gendered relationships with recourse to spiritual support in a Christian context (e.g., Brusco 1986; Chong 2006; Griffith 1997; Soothill 2007). In Timbunmeli, as I have shown, women have started to publicly undermine men’s authority when demonstrating their entitlement

⁷ In Timbunmeli, women not only outnumber men during the month of Mother Mary, but also during weekly charismatic prayer groups when female bodies are possessed by God’s spirits to pursue his work. Usually male attendance increases once it becomes clear that something important was put on the agenda of the prayer group. Then, male leaders take part to ‘steer’ (*stirim*) religious activities, but in fact they have little influence on the direction activities take, because the instructions are delivered by spirits of God and thus are endowed with divine authority.

to ritual power by drawing on both the importance of Mother Mary in Catholic theology as well as on a powerful truth of Nyaura cosmology in their spiritual practices.⁸

Recently, [Eriksen \(2016\)](#) criticized Martin's presentation of the Pentecostal Gender Paradox, arguing that it is based on certain assumptions about gender and power that do not necessarily fit the Melanesian context. While in Pentecostalism, gender was seen as an individual quality, this is not necessarily the case in Melanesia. There—as my findings evidence, too—gender may not so much be a stable quality of individual persons, but a dynamic quality. Among the Nyaura, the gender of God's gifts as well as the gender of human bodies can be revealed and changed in relational actions. By establishing relationships with God's spirits and predominantly performing God's work, female bodies have disclosed the gender of God's gifts and the charismatic space as female. Furthermore, through being possessed by a male spirit, female bodies can become male.

Another criticism that [Eriksen \(2016\)](#) raises is the presentation of gender relations as power relations in Martin's work. Yet, even if gender relations in Melanesia should not be understood as power relations per se, Christianity may change this. [Eriksen \(2008, 2012, 2014\)](#) has shown that Christianity is based on gendered values and perceptions of what is proper for a man or woman to do. [Eriksen \(2014\)](#) has also demonstrated that women's agency may be restricted by forms of Christianity that reproduce paternalistic values and dominance. Christianity may impact local notions of gender and power.

Instead of asking whether Christianity changes what gender is ([Eriksen 2016](#), p. 46), I have looked at how current Christian practices that can be understood as mytho- and onto-praxis affect the gender of the charismatic space in Timbunmeli. While the charismatic space of shamanic séances had been male, Christian egalitarianism merged with Catholic charismatic practices and Nyaura onto-praxis have led to a transformation of this space from male to female. The Christian charismatic space opened up possibilities for a (re-)empowerment process and a (re-)gendering of that space. Practices performed within it via female bodies not only impact male self-perception but also power relationships in Timbunmeli village. This is the case because the Nyaura trace the source of power ultimately back to the access to and good relationships with spirits. Thus, the question of who has access to spirits has consequences for power relationships—and this question has a gender dimension within the Timbunmeli's charismatic space because of the onto-praxis of agentive relationality and dividual personhood.

6. Concluding Remarks

While Strathern has stressed social relations that constitute Melanesian persons as dividual beings, I argue that whilst social relations are a central aspect of people's being in Timbunmeli, it is the cosmo-ontological dimension of personhood as well as the gendering of the charismatic space that we have to look at if we want to understand the way people in Timbunmeli have appropriated Christianity and engaged with objects as persons. Following [Scott \(2007, p. 20\)](#), I suggest looking at ontologies as practice generative schemes that inform the way people engage with Christianity and religious objects. Persons in Timbunmeli are made up of visible and invisible substances and entities that connect them not only with living kin, but also with ancestral beings, their world and its creator. Depending on relations established between those entities, personhood is established or lost.

In Timbunmeli, villagers put ontological premises encoded in their dividual being into action when they appropriated charismatic Christianity. Likewise, it is the ontological assumptions characterizing Timbunmeli's lifeworld that we have to look at when we take the meaning of objects in religious practices into focus. To understand the agency of objects in religious encounters, we not only have to ask how things and people reveal their being to others; we also have to ask how the beings of entities are transformed by

⁸ [Soothill \(2010, p. 96\)](#) warns to conflate social and spiritual empowerment. Women who may exercise spiritual agency “exist always in relation to a complex set of structures and constraints which shape and sometimes limit their actions and experiences.” Elsewhere ([Falck 2019a](#)), I have discussed religious change and its gender dimension in relation to changes in political and economic realities in the Sepik region, arguing that women have benefitted from changes set into motion when outside influences met principles of the Nyaura lifeworld.

the relations they enter with other entities. What are the “root assumptions operative here concerning the essential nature of things and their relationships within [...] cosmological schemes” (Scott 2007, p. 3) that ascribe personhood to humans and objects? How do these assumptions act on people and how do people act on them in changing contexts? It is not the social dimension of objects or persons alone that we have to look at if we want to understand the current trajectories of religious change in the Sepik, but also the cosmological dimension of personhood put into practice in the historical moment.

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Article

Ontology in Neolithic Britain and Ireland: Beyond Animism

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Abstract: A combination of new animism and new materialism has influenced recent interpretations of the Neolithic archaeology of Britain and Ireland, including decorative and figurative productions often referred to as ‘art’. This article queries the appeal to animism in some of this work and considers four alternative ways to react to the use of the term. First it considers contextualizing animism by discussing Descola’s identification of four kinds of ontologies—animism, totemism, analogism and naturalism—outlining examples of practices and material culture involved in each. After examining the effect of applying these to the Neolithic archaeology of Britain and Ireland, it then considers identifying Neolithic practices which seem at odds with animism without boxing these as indicative of other categories of ontology. After noting the wide range of Indigenous ontologies such models attempt to characterize, the article advocates an emphasis on ontological difference and attends to ontological diversity within the Neolithic.

Keywords: animism; totemism; analogism; art and architecture; mortuary practices; Neolithic Britain and Ireland; ethnographic analogy

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1. Introduction

A combination of ‘new materialism’ and ‘new animism’ has led to some inspiring and influential interpretations of British prehistory over the last twenty years. In some cases the implications of these approaches have been explored without identifying a specific form of prehistoric ontology (e.g., Conneller 2004)¹; in other cases a generalised sense of an animate world or animism is referred to (e.g., Johnston 2020, p. 20; Jones 2006; Jones et al. 2011; Pollard 2013; Richards 2013, pp. 27–29; Wallis 2009); and in rare cases specific versions of animism have been proposed (e.g., Wallis 2014). I am challenged by the theme of this Special Issue to consider the place of animism in understanding Neolithic Britain and Ireland (c. 4000–2500 BC), particularly in interpreting art, monumental architecture and mortuary practice. I will relate some concerns about the use of anthropological categories in this pursuit, and argue that we need to either set any interpretation of animism and animacy in the Neolithic in a broader ontological context or—far better—move beyond such categorization in favour of an appreciation of ontological difference which also attends to ontological diversity within the period.

2. From Cosmology to Ontology in Studying Neolithic Britain and Ireland

An interest in the new animism developing in anthropology—attending to the relationality of living worlds and the embeddedness of humans with other-than-human

¹ Conneller’s analysis does not draw an analogy with Viveiros de Castro’s ethnographic context but rather combines her reading of his analytical appreciation of that context with her own reading of Deleuze and Guatarri. Her account emphasises the specific archaeological evidence from Star Carr and does not compare that with material culture from an Amazonian community—rather, she draws on the philosophical basis of Viveiros de Castro’s (1998) description of perspectivism, which is animist in character, to inform her own work. Yet there is an implication that the animal body parts at Star Carr were active in a perspectivist form of efficacy: ‘[T]he connection of the antler effects to the human body, which necessitated the taking on of the animal’s bodily perspective, produced a new kind of body and way of acting in the world.’ (Conneller 2004, 53 my emphasis). Conneller warns against using analogy to infer social organization or identity, and does not conclude that Mesolithic communities at Star Carr were animistic, but perspectivism is discussed in her article whereas totemic practices and understandings are not. This raises the question of which cultural contexts provide our theoretical inspirations, and what effect that has on the final interpretation.

beings in those worlds (e.g., [Bird-David 1999](#))—followed a period in which shamanism and cosmology had been posited as core to interpreting Neolithic art² and monuments. The Neolithic megalithic art of Ireland (i.e., carved, pecked and incised motifs at passage tombs) was interpreted via Lewis-Williams and Dowson’s neuropsychological model which identified altered states of consciousness as a means by which certain abstract motifs could be generated by the human nervous system (e.g., [Bradley 1989](#); [Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1993](#); [Dronfield 1995](#); [Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2005](#)). These interpretations argued that that some common motifs in Neolithic passage tomb art were diagnostic of entoptic phenomena that would be seen during altered states of consciousness. Some accounts associated these with the presence of Neolithic ritual specialists undergoing trance experiences to transcend the layers of a vertically ordered tripartite cosmos (e.g., [Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2005](#)). Interpretations of trance and shamanism had limited impact in Neolithic studies, however, since there are questions about the ethnographic basis of the model ([Solomon 2014](#)), geometric motifs such as lattices, lozenges, chevrons and spirals need not derive from entoptic phenomena, altered states of consciousness need not involve shamans entering trances, identifying the broad category of ‘shamanism’ does not help much with understanding this period ([Jones 2017](#)), and shamanism is seldom identified in sedentary agricultural communities of the kind that was inferred at the time for later Neolithic Ireland.

Other studies of cosmology in the British Neolithic have been more influential, such as Colin Richards’ analyses of Late Neolithic houses, passage tombs and the Stone of Stenness henge on Orkney ([Richards 1990, 1993, 1996a](#)). These studies combined contextual post-structuralist and experiential approaches, the former being largely influenced by studies such as Henrietta Moore’s ethnography of Marakwet communities in East Africa which exhibit a highly structured organization of space, substance and gendered activities ([Moore 1986](#)) and Bourdieu’s studies of Berber communities which exhibit similar degrees of structuring ([Bourdieu 1970](#); cf. [Richards 1996b](#)). Richards and others argued that routines of practice guided by forms of architecture could inform us about the organization of time, space and experience—the organization of the cosmos and society.

Studies from the 1990s and early 2000s were not so much directed towards studying ontology as religious or spiritual practice and cosmology. Since the mid-2000s the emphasis has shifted away from detecting such highly structured spatial patterns in several related directions which share an emphasis on relationality and draw on what have become known as new materialist approaches. One is a focus on the *process* of building monuments, especially the way that monuments emerged from events in which people worked with materials and places that had distinctive properties to produce specific ontological effects (e.g., [Gillings and Pollard 2016](#); [Harris and Crellin 2018](#); [Jones 2020](#)). For instance, Lesley McFadyen’s work on ‘quick architecture’ ([McFadyen 2006](#)) situates people’s bodies in the messy process of rapidly constructing an early Neolithic chambered long cairn, while Colin Richards’ recent work on stone circles stresses diversity in the way such monuments were built and in the effects their construction achieved (e.g., [Richards 2013](#); [Richards and Wright 2013](#)). Some studies of Late Neolithic passage tomb art have focused on the process of its creation and the experiential effects this produced rather than its symbolic meaning (e.g., [Jones 2004](#); [Jones 2012](#); [Cochrane and Jones 2012](#); [Jones and Diaz-Guardamino 2019](#)). We will return to process-oriented approaches concerned with ontologically distinctive affect towards the end of the article.

Some interpretations also describe a generalised animistic ontology. Joshua Pollard’s reflection on the charged animacy of chalk banks and ditches at Late Neolithic Avebury is a good example. [Pollard \(2012, 2013\)](#) argues that the Wessex chalkland landscape and its materials resonated with special meanings and effects, suggesting

² There is no room to discuss the use of the term art and its definition (for an excellent recent discussion see [Robb 2017](#)). The making of Neolithic motifs, images, sculptures was to my mind a form of effective and potent action equivalent to, for instance, the decorating of pottery or the polishing of axeheads. ‘Art’ production has profound and varied ontological effects (cf. [Jones 2017](#)).

‘...recognition of an ontological status different to that of modern geological definitions; perhaps even, on occasions, stones being perceived as invested with a certain animism...’ (Pollard 2012, p. 98)

Pollard (2013) also draws a direct analogy with Polynesian concepts of *mana* and *tapu*, accentuating the volatility and danger of potency without presuming effective control of this potency through hierarchical political power (which has often been previously inferred as lying behind the construction of large henge monuments such as Avebury). Pollard explains that an animistic ontology could sit with a variety of forms of social organization.

Pollard’s interpretations are subtle, insightful and productive, and exemplify much of what is presented below as the way forward. At the same time mentions of animism in prehistory, even in passing, make me wonder whether we ought to give some shape and boundary to the concept, and set it alongside other ontological possibilities for the period. I can think of four ways to approach this. Firstly, we can define what we mean by animacy and animism by comparison with other ontological frameworks. Comparison with ontologies categorized as totemism and analogism by Phillippe Descola (2013, 2014a, 2014b) would be one possible way to contextualize animism under this perspective. Secondly, we could highlight aspects of Neolithic activity that do *not* seem to be animistic, without yoking those to some other ontological category, in order to distinguish different ontological modes. Thirdly, we could take from new animism (and new materialism) a critique of the ontological basis of archaeology (and other disciplines with western and colonial origins) and use that to deconstruct our preconceptions about ontology (Alberti 2016; Todd 2016). This leaves the door open for things and places to be animate or socially and spiritually affective entities without evoking animism as an ontology. Fourthly, and also in keeping with the third move, we could reject the usefulness of ontological categories such as animism for appreciating ontological difference. Instead of seeking categorical terms for past ontologies we can instead focus on the relational affects of prehistoric bodies and other media, for instance (e.g., McFadyen 2006; Harris and Crellin 2018). I will explore the first and fourth approaches in most detail, and, given the focus of this Special Issue, I will discuss the role of ‘art’ wherever possible.

3. First Approach: Comparing Categories of Ontologies by Deploying a Model

In order to do justice to the first approach I have considered the material aspects of animistic, totemic and related ontologies as cast by Philippe Descola in order to think about what these materialities *do* and how they might be used as heuristics in refining our interpretation of prehistoric ontologies. Descola has formulated a comparative perspective on ontologies over the last two decades and crystalized these into a heuristic schema (most comprehensively set out in English in Descola 2013). He defines ontology as ‘basic assumptions as to what the world contains and how the elements of this furniture are connected’ (Descola 2014a, p. 273), and ‘framing devices’ that shape ‘interactivity’ (ibid., p. 274). He argues that cosmologies and what he calls ‘social collectives’ distribute the components of ontologies in a patterned way in time and space (Descola 2014a, p. 278; Descola 2014b, p. 437). In his view ontologies are part of the fundamental conditions for what is possible—they are how the character of the world, entities and relations (including forms of power) are perceived. Descola identifies four ontological categories: naturalism, animism, analogism and totemism. Descola uses the term naturalism to refer to western ontologies that emerged from the Enlightenment period and dominated the nineteenth and twentieth centuries AD in particular. In this ontology nature is classified endlessly and divided by species, forms and materials. The human species is treated as exceptional: we visit a zoo, but our role there is unique compared with the other animals. The social world is organized by and revolves around humans. Within our own species differences exist by culture or society. Personhood is largely individual, indivisible and the province of human beings alone (but see Fowler 2004, pp. 16–22; 2016, pp. 404–5).

In animistic ontologies, Descola argues, ‘nature’ is modelled on ‘society’, so there is one society of beings with many natures—human, jaguar, tapir,, etc. Relationships

take place between equals, specific individuals who may be human or jaguar or tapir. Non-human beings are negotiated with dialogically: some of those beings may reveal themselves to be persons. Shamans intercede in the dialogue if needed—essentially to put right any grievances and heal any injuries arising from difficult interactions. Such interactions are not all equal nor necessarily peaceful, and Descola emphasizes predation and giving as two different modes of relations common in animistic communities. Descola (2013, p. 332) argues that animists do not venerate their dead ancestors, but the dead may be animate and have to be treated and transformed with care. The transmission of skills and knowledge is more important than genealogical transmission or the tracing of lineages. Social action continually activates and renews the world, and therefore Descola classifies animism as *anthropogenic*. If totemism and analogism are seen as forms of animism (as Sahlins 2014, suggests), Descola's animism is arguably best described as perspectivism, as defined by Viveiros de Castro (1998), although the latter would dispute such categorization (Latour 2009, p. 2).

When Descola selected examples of art for each of his ontological categories for an exhibition in Paris in 2012 he chose a transformation mask from the north-west coast of North America to exemplify the duality of the interior–exterior relationship he sees as central to animism (Simay and Descola 2012). Such masks are designed to display transformation: in its closed position, for instance, Kwakwaka'wakw Eagle masks, show the head of an eagle, but if the wearer pulls strings threaded through the eagle's head, its face opens up to reveal a carved human face beneath. For Descola this reveals the fact that human and animal are equivalent (cf. Ingold 2000)—although these masks also depict the totemic animal of the eagle clan. Descola does not say much about the material foundations of animism beyond this depiction of a shared interiority. Ingold (2000) stresses the naturalism of animistic depictions of animals, shown in motion, while Bird-David (2006) has discussed the scarcity of decoration and figurative depictions in immediate return foraging communities, among whom, she says, performers act differently as they engage with the beings seen in visions (Bird-David 2006, p. 39). She concludes that unlike circumpolar animists, Nayaka animists in South India do not categorize the perspective of non-human persons differently to their own: such beings 'cannot be looked at; rather one has to look *with* them sharing a perspective' (ibid., p. 48, original emphases). While performers shift stances in engaging with other beings, they do not change their bodily form or affordances so do not therefore adorn their bodies with animal body parts or imagery or masks. Different art, different engagement, different ontology; at the very least, this suggests different animisms.

Descola's definition of totemic ontologies draws heavily on ethnographies of Aboriginal Australian communities. Power, vitality, comes from the action of beings that created the landscape (i.e., from the past), and is invested in places as life energies which pass *directly* into people who are conceived at those places (i.e., it lies within the landscape and flows from there into bodies). These places frequently include bodies of water. According to Descola (2013, p. 263), human lineage may be less important than this connection with an ancestral being. Totemic communities are internally differentiated according to which ancestral being each member derives from, and communities are conglomerations of those different beings. The community is segmented, with each segment consisting of human and non-human beings which share some ancestral connection (ibid., p. 258). There may be overlapping means of segmentation, including by kinship, sex, generation, place of birth or conception and cult (ibid., p. 259). Non-human beings such as animals can be *like* persons, and are also derived from ancestral beings, but lack a creative element specific to human beings (ibid., p. 298): humans and non-humans are analogues for one another but not the same kinds of entities (ibid., p. 294: 'animals and plants are not persons', he argues). Totemic places are curated and creation events ritually re-enacted there; rites of renewal are crucial in practising these *cosmogenic* ontologies. Ritual knowledge is passed down from a senior to a junior practitioner throughout life. According to Descola, and Ingold (2000), shamanism is not a feature of totemic ontologies, and while animistic ceremonies negotiate

with other-than-human beings, totemic ceremonies renew the world by re-enacting creation events. Totemic communities change in ways that are situated within, and renew and reaffirm, tradition (cf. [Morphy 2007](#), pp. 72–82).

Totemic images depict a prototype of originary power which Descola says ‘unites a variety of species... descended from this model’. Art also illustrates the traces of those beings in the landscape. Howard [Morphy \(2007, p. 42\)](#) describes how Yolngu motifs depict designs worn on the bodies of the creation time beings—making art is a special practice which reveals ‘the reality of the unseen... underlying forces in the landscape’ (ibid., p. 88); motifs are scaled to fit on the human body where they were painted during mortuary rites ([Morphy 2007, p. 75](#)) and rites of passage (ibid., p. 94). Yolngu painting actively reveals ancestral presence through the ‘shimmering’ effects of colours, contrasts between delineated areas of light and dark, and cross-hatching (ibid., p. 92). Designs belong to clans, but variation in motifs among neighbouring clans may be extremely subtle (ibid., p. 100). The meaning of geometric motifs is polyvalent (ibid., p. 103), so the seemingly abstract motifs support curated knowledge which is needed to interpret them. [Ingold \(2000\)](#) stresses the depiction of humans and other beings in ways that show the combination of ancestral essences within their bodies. As with animistic ontologies, figurines of humans or animals are made in *ephemeral* media. Funerary structures, like log mortuary containers, were left to decay after use ([Oxenham et al. 2008, p. 50](#)); in some regions mounds were raised over burials or burial structures ([Oxenham et al. 2008, pp. 43–44](#)). The dead can mediate between spirit beings and the living, particularly during their mortuary transformation. Some funerary architecture, such as sand sculptures which temporarily house the bodies of the dead or mourners surrounding the time of the funeral, are very ephemeral while others last for a few years but are left to decay naturally. By contrast, stones or hard wood plaques or panels, *tjurunga*, may be curated for generations at sites associated with totemic beings. These are decorated with circular and linear motifs. In some cases, trees next to burial sites were also carved with designs—sometimes daubed red, especially during rites of world renewal (ibid., pp. 44–45).

Descola’s final category is analogism. Power derives from the alignment of society with the cosmos—it is *cosmocentric*. Properties are carefully divided into complementary categories which are distributed among the elements, celestial bodies, colours, body matter, times of day, the year, or life-course, and the directions of the compass. The concept of humours is a good example of how the same differentiated elements are present in the body and wider world: phlegm (water), black bile (earth), yellow bile (fire), and blood (air). The same patterns are evident at different scales through a process of homology (or shared form) and shared orientation: bodies, houses, tombs and landscapes are presented as analogous in form and composition. Beings are understood as different in kind and composition. Lineages, classes or castes may be formed out of the fixed properties invested in things, materials, places, substances and bodies. Human genealogy may be a concern, including the veneration of human ancestors, and potentially traced back to divine ancestors. Sacrifice is common. There are often multiple deities each with discrete fields of responsibility. Heterarchical relations where people are divided into distinct groups which may be ranked in some but not all domains of activity are prevalent, but may give way to hierarchical relations where one form of ranking is authoritative in all realms of activity. In the latter case certain groups become predominant in the community, such as deceased ancestors or a priestly class. Descola’s examples include city states and indigenous communities in north America (e.g., the American Southwest), upland South America, the Tallensi of west Africa, Hawaii, and pastoralists from Siberia and West Africa. Analogism thus groups together diverse societies with different subsistence bases, population densities, social institutions, etc. Art and architecture can include cosmograms, while beings are often depicted with set attributes (e.g., carrying certain objects), and some are as hybrids combining the physical attributes of different species.

Art is an integral part of ontology, and I have considered the art forms associated with each of Descola’s categories. Animistic ontologies might have no or little figurative

art because human actors are so embedded in relations they do not depict them from the outside, or might depict the natural poses and motions of animals (Ingold 2000), and sometimes reveal their interior personhood. Here, art is a media for dialogue between beings. Totemic ontologies illustrate the pervasiveness of relationships that conjoin different ancestral essences within bodies and/or trace ancestral events that produced that result; art is a means of affirming and renewing these ancestral connections. Analogic art demonstrates the graded order of the cosmos with power figured at a central point; art serves to represent or bring about the order. David Wengrow (2014) has argued on the basis of hybrids in art that analogism is first properly evident in European prehistory with the emergence of Bronze Age states in the near East—however, it is not clear that all analogic ontologies produce such artworks given the breadth of Descola’s category³.

This approach seems appealing in offering some material anchorage for drawing inferences about ontology. However, inferring such categories of ontologies from prehistoric art or other archaeological evidence—and even in ethnographic studies—is far from straight forward. For instance, there is a blurred boundary between Descola’s view of animism and totemism whereby aspects of the two are combined: Descola (2014b, pp. 485–86) outlines how the Amazonian Tukano relate the journey of ancestral anacondas, one of whom donated part of its body to form their human ancestors, and whose community maintains distinct descent segments—which sounds rather totemic. He also identifies Exirit-Bulagat Mongolian pastoralists as animistic in their relations with wild animals and otherwise analogic. Descola’s categories have several modes of interaction in common, making diagnosis difficult⁴, yet the differences between them are important: Descola argues that protection—such as pastoralists looking after animals—and transmission—such as handing things, places and substances down across generations—erode the efficacy of animism, shifting from open dialogue towards more hierarchical relations. The personhood of animals, plants and places is diluted by taking them under continual control, increasing the possibilities for incipient analogic features. A further complication is that ontologies overlap, intersect and compete. Caroline Humphreys (1995) describes the contested use of Mongolian *oboo* (cairns) by shamans and Buddhist priests. The shamans operate an animistic ontology in a heavily differentiated upland landscape with caves, streams, peaks, while a more analogic ontology prevails in the organisation of nomadic domestic space as animals are herded around a flat, broad landscape. These overlapping ontologies compete where landscape zones meet. People may also shift ontological modes as they engage with such different places and practitioners (cf. Harris and Robb 2012). Perhaps we can imagine similar situations in Neolithic landscapes, with locally overlapping cosmologies and ontologies. However, not all ontological categories deal with ontological diversity in the same way. For instance, analogism rigidly polices society with respect to cosmos, invoking chimeras where needed, and each event belongs in a single cosmic order which can be visualised graphically (e.g., as a cycle).

There are other problems with this approach. Graham Harvey (2006, pp. 166–68) argues that totemism and animism are ‘more related than opposed’, proposing that totemism is a *form* of animism, and animism pervades pretty much all communities in one way or another. Sahlins (2014) persuasively argues that totemism is ‘the animism of segmentary collectives’ while analogism is ‘hierarchical animism’, compared with the ‘communal animism’ identified by Descola as simply animism. In other words, we are left with the equation that ‘non-Western ontology = animism + social organization’. Jones et al. (2011) rightly argue that it is difficult for prehistorians to distinguish between totemism and animism, and Jones has warned convincingly against slotting our evidence ‘into preexisting,

³ Descola (2013, p. 279) also argues that hybrids appear in totemic fusions of human and animal collectives (though he is not referring to art here) and refers to analogic segmentation as ‘not hybrid but mixed’.

⁴ Descola (2013, pp. 309–35) argues that all categories of ontology exhibit predation and giving as modes of interaction but these are dominant in animistic ontologies; all practice exchange but it is dominant in totemic ontologies, while protection, transmission and production are modes of action that are dominant in analogic ontologies and weak or absent in animistic and totemic ontologies (noting that totemic identity is transmitted directly from mythic beings rather than through human lineage).

and overarching, anthropological categories' (Jones 2017, p. 176; cf. Insoll 2011). Attempts to differentiate between totemism and animism in Neolithic Britain and Ireland are, indeed, rare (e.g., Hensey 2012; Reynolds 2012; Wallis 2014). Reynolds (2012) suggests that totemism explains why deer were rarely consumed in the period, though does not present any evidence for a diagnostic association between food taboo and totemism or explain why a taboo on eating specifically deer would be widespread. While this pushes beyond a generalized sense of animacy and animism it does little beyond offering a different category of ontologies. A version of analogic ontology has arguably seeped in through contextual archaeology and post-processual work on cosmology (such as Richards 1990, 1993, 1996a, 1996b), but has not been defined as a specific ontological frame. While we might think productively about what combinations of animistic, totemic and analogic relations might have been active in different *events* rather than entire regions and periods, this still defers interpretation to Descola's categories⁵.

4. Second Approach: What Is Not Animistic in Neolithic Britain and Ireland?

What can be gained by reflecting on this comparative approach, even if we do not adopt it as a model? In considering this I move into the second approach: noting things which do not seem to be animistic without identifying them as specifically totemic, analogic or naturalistic. The tracing of descent and organization of the community are two examples.

Neolithic communities in Britain and Ireland built chambered tombs in which the dead were placed, sometimes along with the remains of animals, pots and tools and probably organic materials long since lost. Diversity in the results of ancient DNA analyses suggests that some of these tombs were used to bury close kin, while others were not. The subdivision of tombs into different chambers may indicate the segmentation of a community producing descent and lineal transmission—connectivity over time played out in the repeated deposition of remains within connected chambers (Fowler forthcoming). This implies the veneration of the ancestral dead, or at least human ancestry, was important in the construction of at least some of these tombs (whether reckoned in terms of biological lineages or otherwise). Descola notes that among Amazonian animistic communities 'the very idea of an ancestor seems incongruous . . . the dead are excluded from human collectives and have no power over them' (Descola 2014a, p. 466). Perhaps the Neolithic dead whose tombs did not revolve around biological lineages were lodged near to their spiritual point of origin, but many Neolithic mortuary practices do not seem to chime with the kinds of animism that Descola focusses on (although other Neolithic practices may do). The variety in Neolithic mortuary practices suggest some ontological diversity in either how kinship was reckoned or what role it played in the transformation of the dead or both.

The organization of time, space and social relations became formalized in some times and places in Neolithic Britain and Ireland. By c. 3000 BC a cluster of passage tombs in the Boyne valley included some extremely large examples, two of which have passages aligned on solstice events (midwinter sunrise at Newgrange, midwinter sunset at Dowth). These have been interpreted as indicating hierarchical relations since many people would have been involved in building them, and could gather outside them, but only a few could enter the chambers at any one time (including during solstice sunrises or sunsets). The megalithic stones of these tombs are carved with arcs, latitudes, spirals, concentric circles and other 'abstract' motifs⁶ which may have been part of carefully curated knowledge systems: Hensey (2012) has suggested these may have had figurative significance in the way that motifs in Australian Aboriginal art do. This is a plausible inference, though it need not necessarily imply a totemic ontology. Hensey (2012, p. 172) further notes that the production of Aboriginal art forms a connection with the ancestral past; this need not necessarily be so for the Neolithic passage grave art, but if this was the case it might have been a very different kind of ancestral connection to those that could be produced by

⁵ I am grateful to Ollie Harris for several discussions on this latter issue.

⁶ It is also important to note that at least some of this art was openly figurative, depicting trees, snakes and rainbows, for instance (Robin 2012).

successive deposits of human remains. Other connections with place are evident: the tombs combined materials originating in different mountain ranges, including quartz from the Wicklow Mountains c. 30 km to the south, and some megalithic stones forming the passages at Knowth and Newgrange seem to derive from *older* tombs and bear incised motifs hidden on their ‘backs’ which are turned into the body of the mound (e.g. Cleary and Eogan 2017, pp. 72–74). The act of assembling a monument from different originary sources could be cosmogenic. Many passage tombs in Ireland were also constructed to a common pattern. Mounds were often composed of a series of concentric layers, with large stones bounding each layer. The layers ‘wrap’ a central point and a linear passage to that point, marked by a series of thresholds with distinct decorative motifs: dazzling arrangements of zig-zags, lozenges or triangles. Pairs of chambers either side of this line partly mirror each other, but are also differentiated slightly by type of stone, contrasting carved or pecked motifs, size and/or contents (Robin 2010). This structure might suggest a slight hierarchy between two inseparable principles—perhaps gendered, perhaps associated with senior and junior lineages—as well as a linear journey or process of transformation (ibid.). The resulting monument could then be seen as aligning social order and cosmos in a *cosmocentric* way.

Similar designs are evident in the central cup-marks enclosed by concentric circles and radial lines in landscape rock art, and in the central platform enclosed by a circular ditch and bank with usually one or two linear entrances at henge monuments. This may suggest similar cosmological themes, or ontological components (potentially even cosmograms), across these later Neolithic sites which do not seem to fit best within Descola’s definition of animism compared with totemism or analogism. It is also likely that these media were not produced within a singular, static ontology. As Wallis (2014) argues, the passage tomb ‘art’ dates from several different periods and some of it embellishes, reworks or erases older markings so it may be inappropriate to try to allocate the production of this decoration to any singular ontological effect. Wallis therefore interprets a transformation in the forms of ontology present at passage tombs during the Neolithic (Wallis 2014, pp. 302–3), although these are described as a ‘complex variety of animisms through time’ explored by comparing the extent of hierarchy among animistic and totemic relations (*qua* Pedersen 2001). Despite the nuances in exploring change this again deploys a comparative anthropological model, albeit using a different framework to Descola’s: the gains and costs are therefore similar. However, the key point is that Descola’s description of animism does not fit all aspects of Neolithic art and monumentality.

5. Third Approach: Exploding Ontological Frames

Wilkinson (2017) argues that animism does not describe a set of ontologies ‘out there in the world’ so much as a western attempt to grasp a range of Indigenous practices and concepts which defy simple translation: ‘animism is an analytical operation that we do, not a type of religion that actual indigenous people hold to’ (ibid., p. 306). For Wilkinson, animism is an ‘equivocation’, a heuristic stand-in for something for which there is no equivalent (ibid.). Wilkinson concludes, ‘“Animism” does not help us understand indigenous practices; rather it illustrates how much we do not yet understand them’ (ibid., p. 307). Some theories of animism have also been presented as a ‘theory bomb’ to explode western ontological frames and terms, perspectivism in particular (Latour 2009), but as Harris and Crellin (2018, p. 58) point out the bomb leaves ‘some very specifically shaped pieces of shrapnel in its wake’. What *other* theory bombs might there be among other ontologies (including from communities Descola categorizes as totemic or analogic)?

Porr and Bell (2012), and Todd (2016), encourage academics to draw on the work of Indigenous theorists and recognise their descriptions of Indigenous ontologies in their own terms. This forces us to reflect on ontological diversity since many Indigenous concepts and theorists have been overlooked in discussions of ontology in Western academia (Porr and Bell 2012; Todd 2016). Todd (2016) cites Watts (2013), for instance, who presents an Indigenous theory of *place-thought*, developed from Anishnaabe and Haudenosaunee ontology, in which ‘we (humans) are made from the land; our flesh is literally an extension

of soil' (Watts 2013, p. 27), and in which humans engage in dialogue with the land. By contrast, relations with place, land and landscape are weakly attended to in Descola's scheme, except in his discussion of totemism.

Western academics (such as myself) have to take care not to co-opt Indigenous ontologies (Porr and Bell 2012, pp. 164–65), at the same time as acknowledging their influence (particularly via anthropology) on our recent understandings of past ontologies. Indigenous ontologies challenge the universalizing of western ontological frames (e.g., Watts 2013, p. 22), which is vitally important, but we need to be wary of using them as models for past ontologies from other parts of the world. At the same time, attending to the diversity in Indigenous theories and ontologies highlights the possibility of diversity in past ontologies. If we stick with a unitary category of animism we risk subsuming the distinctiveness of Neolithic European communities within a flattened and generic concept which does little justice to the ontologies of communities past or present. Arguably, a focus on diversity within Neolithic ontologies in Britain and Ireland is a crucial response.

6. Fourth Approach: Ontological Difference and Diversity

The move through the second and third approaches lead towards interpreting the specific ontological effects of Neolithic practices in processes of living, dying, and becoming. I will explore this for the Early Neolithic in southern Britain, where material worlds were arguably distinctive and different from those of any present-day communities around the world (and different from those of, say, Late Neolithic communities in the same landscapes). Inspired by Rosi Bradiotti's Deleuzian and feminist approach to identity (e.g., Braidotti 2011; cf. Deleuze [1994] 2009), Penny Bickle (2020) elegantly argues for placing *difference-in-itself* at the centre of analyses of past ways of becoming. She defines this as a process in which 'difference [is] a productive and energized space, out of which things, people, identity are created ... or 'become' ... ', and an approach in which we attend to 'the range of possibilities, not the average' (Bickle 2020, pp. 202–1) and to 'diversity within multiple ways of participating in identity in the past. (ibid., p. 204). Hers is a study of gendered differentiation in the Neolithic of central Europe. Without wishing to detract from the focus on sexual differentiation in Bickle's study, and acknowledging that I am not exploring bioarchaeological difference in the way she does, the focus on a process of becoming through multiple relationships can be applied to explore all kinds of identities. For earlier Neolithic southern Britain, for instance, we could consider *becoming-kin*, *becoming-child*, *becoming-herder*, *becoming-potter*, *becoming-adult*, *becoming-woman*, *becoming-man*, *becoming-parent*, *becoming-dead*, *becoming-ancestor*, *becoming-emplaced*, etc. Such becomings would overlap with one another, including within one person's experience, and are always becoming-with-others, some of which are human and some of which are not, as Banfield (2018, p. 55) explores. These processes are bound up with specific affective fields and ontological effects (cf. Harris 2017; Harris and Sørensen 2010). The aim is then to differentiate ontological modes of engagement, different ways of becoming-as and becoming-with, within and between communities. In the remainder of the piece I briefly consider some ways of becoming that might have emerged in Early Neolithic activities in southern Britain as a way of exploring this approach.

The Early Neolithic is noted for the 'altering' of certain places in ways sympathetic to their local characteristics—or their personalities, as Dave Robinson (2012) has suggested. Such practices included: cracking outcrops or digging out boulders and elevating the rocks to make megalithic monuments such as portal dolmens; clearing stones, trees and undergrowth from patches of ground, and; splitting the tree trunks of massive oaks lengthways and erecting the two halves as paired posts which became the focus of later mortuary deposits and mortuary structures. David Field (2007, pp. 129–30) has suggested that the façades of some mortuary structures form horns like those of cattle, and the spine-and-rib layout of withies during the construction of some long barrows and long cairns marked out a bovine body in plan. It is possible some wooden chambers, such as Fussell's Lodge, were wrapped in cattle skins, though there is no direct evidence for this (cf. Ray

and Thomas 2003 on Early Neolithic cattle as kin). Perhaps the placement of recently deceased humans within the ‘bodies’ of trees, rocks and cattle highlighted the equivalence between these bodies. Human and animal bodies were generally treated quite differently even if sometimes in equivalent ways: Banfield (2018, p. 196) notes an ‘interweaving and interdependence between human and cattle lives’ alongside ‘the maintenance of species distinction’. She also points out the ‘equity of treatment’ and ‘segregated togetherness’ of cattle and human remains at Fussell’s Lodge (Banfield 2018, p. 82). Perhaps the human dead, or aspects of the dead, became animals or entered the bodies of animals, rocks or trees through these mortuary practices⁷. Other treatments show no such equivalence, such as deposits of very young cattle, sheep or goat at some Cotswold-Severn chamber tombs which may have been sacrifices (Thomas and McFadyen 2010; Banfield 2018, p. 196). Perhaps lodging bodily matter (whether human, plant or animal) at shrines and tombs demonstrated the origins of such bodies in those locales: embedding the dead in place may be particularly significant given that most of the ancestors of humans and domesticated animals living in Britain and Ireland at this time came from Continental Europe during the first centuries of the fourth millennium BC (Brace et al. 2019).

In some tombs, such as those with a central passage with rooves high enough to allow crouching entry and pairs of side cells, the human dead were accessible and their decaying remains might be revealed, lit up, tended to or negotiated with when these tombs were visited. At some—but not all—tombs, projecting or tracing descent was arguably a key concern. The dead became different kinds of kin and ancestors depending on who their remains were interred with. Different architectural features and arrangements of chambers (which could be singular, or in a short single line, or paired either side of a mound, for instance) had different effects: there is no need to imagine a single ontology or way of becoming connecting the use of all chambered tombs given that these were built in such a variety of forms (cf. Fowler forthcoming). While the vast majority of stone-built tombs formed part of one tradition or another—or one tradition and *then* a second, given many were modified between their initial construction and abandonment—even those built within a similar timeframe in a given region are sufficiently diverse to suggest that creativity and specific histories were as important as the repeated replication of architectural forms. The modification of some tombs illustrates their ongoing roles in tracing *histories of becoming* and *histories that were becoming*—long, sporadic processes of *becoming-lineages* or other specific social collectives that built and tended them, for instance. As tombs sedimented people in place these tombs became place *and* history.

Causewayed enclosures were large, roughly circular ditched constructions with numerous causeways dividing up the ditches. They seem to have been built by co-operating gangs working on different ditch segments, a few centuries after the first chambered tombs in the region. They show little concern with cardinal points of the compass or regular patterns of internal division. Nor do they seem to be focused on places with earlier activity or distinctive landforms to the same extent as tombs were—Whittle et al. (2011, p. 891) refer to enclosures as ‘enchant[ing] by their freshness’. At the same time, like tombs, they articulated a very limited range of architectural elements—arced ditch segments throwing up banks and sometimes post arrangements or palisades—in quite varied ways and locations. Like timber-chambered tombs, they were arenas in which bodily remains decayed—the bodies of humans, trees, animals, pots—and the successive introduction of remains fed the growing monument: mounds covered decayed wooden tombs as midden material at enclosures was buried in ditches which were repeatedly recut. A cycle of commemorative deposition of the dead, physical transformation and forgetting, and commemoration of a transformed place and community could be inferred at some of these sites (Fowler 2003), though perhaps not all. Enclosures offered new ways of *becoming-dead* and *becoming-embedded-in-place* and *becoming-the-past* and these were pursued more extensively at some

⁷ To discuss a specific instance recorded by ethnographers, an aspect of a deceased person among the Orokaiva can become pigs and another aspect can become a wild animal living in the forest (Iteanu 1995). In this case becoming dead also means undoing kin relations and becoming wild.

enclosures than others. New, large gatherings perhaps involved cosmogenic acts drawing together widespread and perhaps diverse communities—differing co-residential lineages, households or clans, perhaps. At times, violence broke out in these landscapes—we see the impact on skeletal remains in tombs and enclosure ditches (Schulting 2012). People became enemies, became allies, became affines—potentially all with the same neighbouring communities—in different modes of engagement such as raiding or feuding, burying the dead, arranging marriages, digging ditches, herding cattle, holding feasts. These events involved more-than-human communities (Harris 2014), who might have shifted into new modes of engagement when gathering at such locales compared with times of the year when they lived in smaller groups (cf. Thomas 2002; Wengrow and Graeber 2015).

People also dug linear ditches and raised banks forming cursus monuments around archaeologically ‘clean’ routeways. These sometimes followed the courses of rivers. Such monumental transformations could be seen as part of a deferential dialogue with non-human beings, such as the rivers whose courses were respected. Cursus monuments directed the flows of humans and cattle just as the rivers beside many of them directed the flow of life-giving water. A concern with the origins of waterways was also reiterated in later centuries of the Neolithic (Leary and Field 2012).

The little that remains of earlier Neolithic art includes incised chalk pendants, carved chalk or wooden figurines, phalli and balls, sometimes found at causewayed enclosures. These are rare, ephemeral things with imagery related to human bodies but seldom producing ‘whole’ bodies. Carved chalk phalli are about comparable in size or rather larger than equivalent human body parts—up to 30 cm in length, reports Teather (2008, p. 192). Figurines are small, making the body of the viewer seem large by comparison and affording human beings the ability to easily manipulate the miniature. They seldom form complete inseparable bodies—though the decay of ephemeral parts is likely—and do not offer details such as hands, feet or facial features. If there were masks, these have not survived. Animal figures and depictions of objects are extremely rare, possibly confined to a few flint mines (e.g., Teather 2015), while incised lines in abstract patterns on chalk surfaces are more common. A few centuries later, chalk plaques and ‘drums’ or cylinders bearing incised geometric motifs were occasionally deposited in pits, ditches and a barrow on chalklands (Teather and Kenny 2016; Jones et al. 2015). While facial features are depicted on the Folkton drums, a lack of detail and ambiguity in the bodies and faces of this art as a whole seems deliberate (cf. Thomas 2005). The *process* of making and decorating objects may be key to understanding their ontological significance: as Jones et al. (2015) argue, carving in chalk, working with the material, may have been the main purpose of that activity. Human bodies became—with such objects through this work. If contemporaneous human bodies were also decorated in parallel ways then decoration might acknowledge the embodied character of these things and other things, such as pottery, suggesting a shared sense of becoming. Human bodies might have been decorated temporarily, highlighting their affinity with these decorated objects in certain events, or in more enduring ways. Yet even if human bodies were decorated like ceramic bodies, highlighting their similarity as vessels, perhaps, other differences were clear—there are no anthropomorphic vessels in this region and period, for instance. While they became together they did not become the same kinds of beings. Issues of preservation have to be considered, but it seems that entire bodies (human or otherwise) were not represented in enduring materials at the human scale either.

In common with the work of other authors cited in this article who are influenced by new materialist thinking, this approach has focused on some of a wide range of Neolithic ways of becoming without trying to categorize them in specific anthropological terms. To co-opt a phrase, this tries to take Neolithic material seriously. As such it prioritises ontological difference, diversity and specificity. We could suggest that in many cases non-human entities were what they were ‘on their own terms’ and had to be engaged with as such: they were present, *presented* at monumental locales—sometimes decorated, some composites, sometimes fragmented—and in most cases did not need *representing*. Of course, the exceptions might be significant, such as shaping some tombs like the bodies (or hides)

of gigantic cattle. Earlier Neolithic bodies—human, cattle, rock, tree and others—were therefore in a process of becoming alongside one another in equivalent ways to some extent, but with different effects on one another in any interaction. Monument construction could be understood as part of dialogue with the landscape and its constituent features and materials—a dialogue that said different things in different places and over time. Making small figurines or chalk phalli, building a large tomb that would endure across generations, encountering the decayed remains of past feasts; all these interactions created and drew attention to different ontological effects for the human and other beings involved.

7. Conclusions

Although the new animism has helped us to think productively about the Neolithic, we do not need to evoke animism to understand Neolithic ontologies. If we do so then we must be clear about how we are using the concept and how our definition of animism relates to other ontological terms such as totemism or fetishism. Yet, such categorization constrains as much as it enables our ability to appreciate Neolithic ontologies, and pushes our accounts in specific directions. There is seldom a firm archaeological basis for choosing between alternative categories in schemes such as Descola's, even if animistic and totemic art are defined in contrast with one another—and analogism is so broad a church that it risks swamping the analysis. Neither will other comparative schemes—other models—avoid this result, even if they provide finer gradings or combinations of categories. While trying to get a sense of 'something else' beyond the categories and terms we start with (*qua* Wilkinson 2017), we will never understand Neolithic ontologies in the terms of the people who lived them, and whatever approach we take (including new materialist ones) we fuse contemporary concepts with the remains of Neolithic practices in order to arrive at an accommodation of the two that is meaningful and effective in the present. This is not a pessimistic conclusion as I think this is a valuable endeavour. We do not need to refer to animism as an ontology (or any other 'type' of ontology) in order to talk about non-human persons, relational personhood, non-human beings, or the potency and efficacy of things, materials, animals or places in the Neolithic. Instead, we can focus on diverse Neolithic practices and their effects, recognising these as ontological in nature⁸, and situating that in a broader project to appreciate diversity within as well as across time periods and regions.

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⁸ One reviewer raised the excellent question of how we avoid generalizing ontology so it becomes all but meaningless. There are many ways to answer this, but rather than trying to present a method for doing so (beyond stressing the importance of differentiating ontological effects as I have tried to do above), I would suggest this is part of a problem with such general concepts in the first place. The eventual redundancy of such key concepts has, for instance, been considered for culture (e.g., Strathern 1995) and the social (e.g., Webmoor and Witmore 2008). Part of what I hope the case study in this article conveys is the redundancy of drawing divisions between such conceptual fields when considering Neolithic communities. I wonder if in coming decades we will need 'ontology' any more than we need 'society' or 'culture' as prefixes to understand spheres of Neolithic action. That does not detract from its value in transforming archaeological interpretation in recent years.

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Article

Reassessing Shamanism and Animism in the Art and Archaeology of Ancient Mesoamerica

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Abstract: Shamanism and animism have proven to be useful cross-cultural analytical tools for anthropology, particularly in religious studies. However, both concepts root in reductionist, social evolutionary theory and have been criticized for their vague and homogenizing rubric, an overly romanticized idealism, and the tendency to ‘other’ nonwestern peoples as ahistorical, apolitical, and irrational. The alternative has been a largely secular view of religion, favoring materialist processes of rationalization and “disenchantment.” Like any cross-cultural frame of reference, such terms are only informative when explicitly defined in local contexts using specific case studies. Here, we consider shamanism and animism in terms of ethnographic and archaeological evidence from Mesoamerica. We trace the intellectual history of these concepts and reassess shamanism and animism from a relational or ontological perspective, concluding that these terms are best understood as distinct ways of knowing the world and acquiring knowledge. We examine specific archaeological examples of masked spirit impersonations, as well as mirrors and other reflective materials used in divination. We consider not only the productive and affective energies of these enchanted materials, but also the potentially dangerous, negative, or contested aspects of vital matter wielded in divinatory practices.

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Keywords: Mesoamerica; art and archaeology; shamanism; animism; Indigenous ontology; relational theory; divination; spirit impersonation; material agency

1. Introduction

Placing greater emphasis on Indigenous ontologies and relational epistemologies opens up fresh perspectives on some age-old concepts in anthropology, which include shamanism and animism. These new perspectives are reshaping studies of shamanism and animism in art and archaeology, as the contributions in this Special Issue attest. Shamanic practice and animism have long been conceived as closely knit concepts in anthropology (Tylor [1871] 1958, pp. 241–42; see also Furst 1976). While they have proven to be useful cross-cultural analytical tools over the years, particularly in religious studies, both concepts root in reductionist (neo)evolutionary theory and have been criticized for their vague and homogenizing rubric, an overly romanticized idealism, and the tendency to ‘other’ Indigenous peoples as ahistorical, apolitical, and irrational (Klein et al. 2002; Van Dyke 2018). The alternative has been a largely secular view of religion, favoring materialist processes of rationalization and “disenchantment” (Fowles 2013). We trace the intellectual trends of shamanism, and its close relative animism, and how these concepts have been recently reclaimed by so-called relational or ontological archaeologists. This scholarship offers new and productive ways for using these comparative analytical terms in religious studies in anthropology and archaeology (for some examples see Abadia and Porr 2021; Alberti and Bray 2009; Alberti and Marshall 2009; Bird-David 1999; Brown and Walker 2008; Erazo and Jarrett 2017; Kosiba 2020; Gheorghiu et al. 2017; Harrison-Buck 2015; Harvey 2006; Porr and Bell 2012; Pharo 2011).

Current ontological studies of animism depart from Tylor’s ([1871] 1958) traditional definition as “the belief in spiritual beings” to include a world that “is found to be,

and treated as, a community of persons not all of whom are human” (Harvey 2006, p. 11). Brown and Walker (2008, p. 297) define *animacy* as “an ontology in which objects and other nonhuman beings possess souls, life-force and qualities of personhood.” Some scholars have incorporated this “new animism” in their discussions of shamanism (Wallis 2009, 2013a, 2013b). Yet, most scholarship still leans heavily on Mircea Eliade’s well-known Siberian model where he defines *shamanism* as “an individual who has received power to cure and divine direct from supernatural beings through dreams, visions, or spirit possessions” (Eliade 1964, p. 48). The distinguishing features most often cited is the shaman’s “use of altered states of consciousness and the emphasis on becoming a ‘non-human’ spirit agent” (VanPool 2009, p. 178). Most religious scholarship, however, remains dissatisfied with the “diverse, indistinct, and often contradictory ways” that shamanism is applied with some advocating the need to redefine or reconstruct the term (Pharo 2011, p. 9), while others think it should be abandoned altogether (Klein et al. 2002).

Astor-Aguilera (2010, p. 9) observes that “[m]any studies of Mesoamerican religion are partly based on the assumption that past and present Mesoamerican ritual practices are centered on the assumed archaic religion of shamanism.” We agree that trying to define a Mesoamerican “religion” based on the traditional pan-Asian definitions of shamanism and “its associated ideological rhetoric” is problematic and risks diminishing or obscuring Indigenous cosmological worldviews (Astor-Aguilera 2010, p. 15). We suggest that a relational ontological approach offers a more productive way forward. From this perspective, shamanism and animism are not viewed as static, prefigured religious structures or as a set of religious beliefs but are understood as an alternative means of acquiring knowledge and as a distinct way of knowing the world. Anthropologists often contrast a *relational ontology* with a modernist *substance ontology*, which relies on a Western objectivist, scientific paradigm and taxonomic classification for understanding the world (Alberti 2016, p. 166). A relational ontology is a distinct way of being in the world where one acquires knowledge through a two-way relationship with the environment, rather than being separate from it. From this perspective, culture and nature are conflated, often along with other so-called modernist Cartesian divides, such as human-animal, subject-object, animate-inanimate (Watts 2013, p. 1).

We argue that a relational ontological approach addresses many of the criticisms regarding the inconsistencies and contradictions in how we use the terms shamanism and animism cross-culturally and upends the ahistorical and apolitical rhetoric toward ‘Otherness’ rooted in colonialism, which plagued earlier anthropological approaches (Klein et al. 2002, p. 384). In this way, shamanism and animism can continue to serve as useful cross-cultural terms without being essentialized as a “primitive” religious structure or belief system and universalized in such a way that reinforces derogatory images of Indigenous peoples (see Bird-David 1999, p. 68). Like any cross-cultural frame of reference, such terms are only informative when explicitly defined in local contexts using specific case studies (Atkinson 1992). Here, we reassess shamanism and animism as an alternative means of acquiring knowledge and knowing the world, specifically within ancient Mesoamerica—an area that encompasses Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras and parts of El Salvador (Figure 1). In this study, we rely on ethnographic and archaeological data as well as ancient iconography and writing systems. Together, these sources greatly inform our understanding of Indigenous perspectives and practices. We focus specifically on imagery showing masked individuals temporarily impersonating spirits and examine archaeological examples of mirrors and other reflective materials used in divination, which are found at sites across Mesoamerica. Both epigraphic and ethnographic data from Mesoamerica are explicit in clarifying that these materials (mirrors and masks) did not serve as an intermediary but conferred temporary housing for the animate co-essence itself. In the case of masked shamans, they acquired knowledge through animistic impersonation that gave personhood to the more-than-human spirit agent where the shaman served as the object or receptacle that temporarily housed this communicating co-essence or life force (Stone 1991). Likewise, mirrors and other shiny materials also served as “communicating objects” for

animate spirits, as discussed further below (see also [Astor-Aguilera 2010](#), p. 238; [Blainey 2007, 2016](#); [Healy and Blainey 2011](#); [Love 2012](#), pp. 30–35; [Molesky-Poz 2006](#), pp. 65–66).

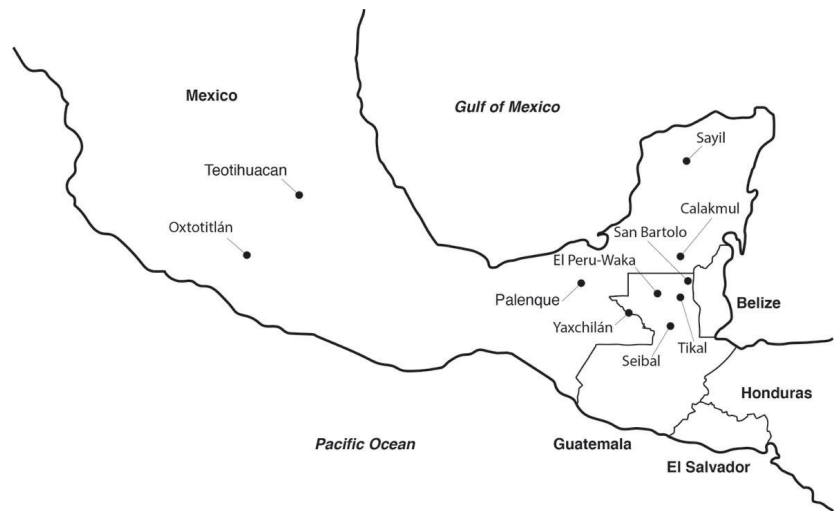


Figure 1. Map showing sites mentioned in text (drawn by K. Titus).

In this study of Mesoamerican art and archaeology, we aim to show how both the shaman and their objects were actively constituted as relational beings through divinatory practice. In this way, Mesoamerican peoples did not see the world in terms of a sharp distinction between active (human) subject and passive (nonhuman) object; both humans and materials had the potential for animate more-than-human behavior and could serve as temporary bodies for powerful spirits. Ethnographic data suggest that in a Mesoamerican relational ontology magical or enchanted spirits could assume productive and affective energies when engaged in reciprocal two-way relations, but that the one-sided control of nonhumans, such as wind spirits, constituted sorcery and could bring about illness and other potentially dangerous, negative, or contested aspects of vitality ([Astor-Aguilera 2010](#), p. 169). As such, our study of shamanism and animism in the context of Mesoamerica considers how impersonation and divinatory practice were not merely benign ways of knowing and acquiring knowledge but had the potential to leverage power in both positive and negative ways.

2. Tracing the Intellectual History

Shamanism and animism have a long history as analytical tools for cross-cultural comparison in anthropology, initially developed to describe the earliest of Indigenous religions ([Castrén 1853](#); [Durkheim \[1912\] 1961](#); [Tylor \[1871\] 1958](#)). Late nineteenth-century ethnographers, like [Mallery \(1893, pp. 191–92, emphasis ours\)](#), suggested that the shaman “pretends to control, by incantations and ceremonies, the evil spirits to whom death, sickness, and other misfortunes are ascribed.” Likewise, nineteenth-century anthropologists, like [Tylor \(\[1871\] 1958\)](#) defined the term *animism* as “the general belief in spiritual beings” (1958, p. 10), but concluded that it was based on falsehoods and “superstitious folly” (ibid. 5). In these earlier works, it was made clear that shamanism and animism were merely a projection of the “savage” imagination and were classified as “primitive” religious structures. As [Wilkinson \(2017, p. 289\)](#) observes, because such terms were primarily developed out of Victorian thought, they present largely derogatory views of Indigenous cultures that rest on social evolutionary paradigms, which were subsequently discredited.

It was not until the 1960s that these terms saw a resurgence in Americanist Anthropology and were increasingly embraced in Mesoamerican studies of art and archaeology

(e.g., Furst 1965, 1968, 1976, 1994). This shift coincided with growing popular interests in alternative spiritual philosophies and psychedelics. Yet, even before this time, as early as the beginning of the twentieth century, the terms “shamanism” and “animism” were being employed in ethnographic research in Mesoamerica (La Farge 1947; La Farge and Byers 1931; Madsen 1955; Oakes 1951; Redfield and Villa Rojas [1934] 1964; Vogt 1966, 1976). In reviewing these and other ethnographic studies, Tedlock (1982, p. 50) concluded that the majority of the Indigenous communities from across Mesoamerica shared the requisite traits of “shamanism” as traditionally defined by Eliade (1964), which include direct communication between the diviner and the spirit agent through dreams, visions, and spirit possession. Her study countered earlier work by Madsen (1955) who suggested that shamanism was restricted to areas of central Mexico.

Toward the end of the twentieth century, Mesoamerican archaeological studies began regularly employing “shamanism” as a term and relied heavily on the wealth of ethnographic comparisons, alongside studies of archaeological and epigraphic data, most especially for the Maya region (Boyd 1996; Freidel et al. 1993; Kappelman 2001; Markman and Markman 1989; Reilly 1989, 1995; Schele and Freidel 1990; Schele and Miller 1986; Tate 1999). Yet, by the turn of the twenty-first century, the term was once again drawing sharp criticism in studies of Mesoamerican art and archaeology. Klein et al. (2002) have been among the most vocal critics of shamanism, in particular. These scholars conclude that studies interpreted through a lens of shamanism show “an idealist aversion to materialist explanations of human behavior” (Klein et al. 2002, p. 383). From this materialist (Marxist) perspective, shamanism and animism are presented as expressions of a secular, false religious ideology and are thought to merely mask political and economic agendas in early societies (Klein et al. 2002, pp. 387, 405–6).

Over the years, scholars have found that to engage seriously with shamanism and animism has presented an “unsettling challenge” and there has been a clear reluctance in archaeology (even among phenomenologists) “to step beyond a rational materialist standpoint” (Wallis 2009, p. 51). Following the publication of Klein et al.’s (2002) article, there have been only a select few publications that have continued to explore shamanism as a comparative framework in ancient Mesoamerica (e.g., Blainey 2016; Healy and Blainey 2011; Stone 2014). Much of the recent scholarship has side-stepped the issue (in the ancient Maya case, see Martin 2020, p. 144) or has been a rebuke of shamanic interpretations (e.g., Beekman 2020; Stuart 2021; Zender 2004) or has been isolated to areas north or south of Mesoamerica (Stone 2011; VanPool 2003, 2009; VanPool and VanPool 2007). The concept of animism, on the other hand, has been more seriously problematized in recent studies of complex societies in ancient Mesoamerica. Current studies have advanced more sophisticated and sensitive theoretical treatment, attempting to take Indigenous theory seriously (e.g., Brown and Emery 2008; Halperin 2018; Harrison-Buck 2012a, 2012b, 2015, 2020; Harrison-Buck et al. 2018; Hendon 2010, 2012, 2018; Houston 2014; Jackson 2017, 2019; Joyce and Barber 2015; Kosiba et al. 2020; Kovacevich 2014, 2017; Looper 2018, among others).

Unlike animism, we suggest that serious consideration of shamanism in studies of complex societies have been stymied in part by the perpetuation of a false dichotomization that separates the shaman from the role of the priest and delineates these roles in terms of separate kinds of religious structures (e.g., Hayden 2003; Vadala 2014; Zender 2004). “As intuitive as it may seem . . . shamans and priests are not appropriate archetypes and do not reflect dichotomous or essentialist ‘types’ in the sense that they are immutable states wholly distinct from one another” (VanPool 2009, p. 178; see also Pharo 2011). The strength of VanPool’s (2009, Figure 1) argument is her conclusion that the shaman and the priest are anthropological constructs that do not reflect discrete roles in a given society. However, her explanatory model falls back on a social evolutionary paradigm, where “religious traits [of shamans and priests] tend to correspond with one another as the level of cultural complexity shifts” (VanPool 2009, p. 178). This trajectory is common in studies of prehistoric religion, where shamanism is presented as a “primordial religion” that is an apolitical formulation

that “[sits] upon a kind of moral pedestal” whereas the priesthood is an institutionalized religion that has “[become] increasingly political, destructive, ideological, and oppressive” (Fowles 2013, p. 33).

That a continuum from shaman to priest represents a shift from lesser to greater societal complexity is a remnant of Durkheimian evolutionary theory. This reductionist paradigm, rooting in Victorian thought, conceives of shamanism as a “primitive” religious structure most often associated with simple hunter-gatherer societies that was ultimately replaced by an institutionalized ‘priesthood’ once agriculture was adopted and more complex agrarian societies developed (e.g., Vadala 2014). Even today, shamanism is still presented as “performative and imagistic rites . . . whereas liturgical and doctrinal modes are characteristic of hierarchical polities and institutionalized religions” (Swenson 2015, p. 340; see also Fowles 2013, pp. 30–31). In this vein, scholars typically describe the shaman as attending to the household or interpersonal sphere and serving as healers and midwives, whereas the priest is responsible for the maintenance of a community temple, sanctuary, or shrine, in charge of overseeing calendrical rites and large-scale public ceremonies (Zender 2004, p. 39). Findings in Mesoamerican ethnography have shown that these are false divisions. In Tedlock’s (1982, p. 47) study of ‘Daykeepers’ (*ajq’ijab’*) and ‘mother-fathers’ (*chuchkajaw*) among the Momoestecan highland Maya, she concludes: “If one adopted the analytical method cultural anthropologists use for separating shaman and priests, in which the priest serves as an intermediary between man and gods while the shaman directly possesses (or is possessed by) supernatural powers in the realm of divination and curing, one would have to refer to all Momostecan Daykeepers and mother-fathers as both priests and shamans.” Her solution is to refer to them as ‘priest-shamans.’

Despite the findings from ethnography and the concerted efforts to shake the “primitive” associations of shamanism (Pharo 2011, pp. 18–22), archaeologists studying complex state-level societies tend to systematically replace “shaman” with “priest” and describe Indigenous religion in terms of a formalized institution in line with other world religions (Wilkinson 2017, pp. 290–91; Pharo 2011, p. 18; VanPool 2009, pp. 178–80). Wilkinson (2017, p. 290) observes that terms like shamanism or animism are generally not characterized by proper nouns like the names used to designate world religions, such as Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, and so forth. Pharo (2011, p. 15) argues that these terms would be less problematic if they were viewed as similar “ideal types” (sensu Weber 1969) that strictly served as general comparative concepts of Indigenous theology, rather than discrete categories “with an actual empirical realization.” From this perspective shamanism and animism “[are] not a description of reality” (Weber 1969, p. 90 cited in Pharo 2011, p. 15), but still remain firmly within an Indigenous religious structure and system of beliefs identifiable by various transhistorical types of shared traits, such as altered states of consciousness (ASC), divination, and curing, among other variables of ritual practice and paraphernalia (*a la* Eliade 1964; see also VanPool 2009 for further discussion). Following Eliade (1964, p. 333), some scholars like Blainey (2016, p. 181), who describes these as “religious [categories] of shamanism,” has gone so far as to argue that, based on their widespread appearance in Mesoamerica, “that some elements of Siberian shamanism accompanied pre-Columbian migrations across the Bering land bridge.”

Rather than representing a vast diffusion stemming from Siberia, we would agree with Pharo that shamanism and animism are better understood as general comparative anthropological concepts and it is in this way that we employ them here. However, in order to move shamanism and animism beyond their firm lodging in the “savage slot” of anthropology, we suggest that divorcing these terms from an ontological reality is not the answer. On the contrary, we advocate moving beyond the Western category of “religious theology” and reinforce the ontological commitments expressed in shamanism and animism—as ongoing relations with the environment that Indigenous peoples describe as distinct ways of knowing the world and as alternative means of acquiring knowledge. Below, we take a closer look at how shamanism and animism have been applied as anthro-

pological constructs in the context of contemporary and ancient Indigenous Mesoamerica and cross-examine these ideas in terms of a relational ontological perspective.

3. Reassessing Shamanism and Animism as a Relational Ontology

Using broadly shared cross-cultural terms, like shamanism and animism, helps anthropologists to communicate with one another alternative epistemologies and ontologies that differ from a Western means of acquiring knowledge and knowing the world. Our approach to shamanism and animism relies heavily on Indigenous philosophies gleaned from epigraphy, archaeology, and ethnography from across Mesoamerica. Such anthropology-inspired ontological approaches are variously referred to as “social ontologies” (Alberti 2016, p. 164) or “relations of epistemologies” (Harris 2021a, pp. 16–17). Scholars have contrasted this social ontological approach with the so-called “metaphysical” approach to ontological archaeology, sometimes referred to as the New Materialisms (Alberti 2016). Such “relations of metaphysics” emphasize the role of emergent material relations that are always in a process of becoming (Harris 2021a, p. 20). This approach largely rejects anthropological theory and “the social” in favor of the fundamental nature of emergent matter (Alberti 2016, p. 165). The New Materialists are mostly concerned with “how the world operates regardless of what people think about it” (Harris 2021b, p. 17). A strength of the metaphysical approach is its attention to the complex “meshwork” of vibrant matter (bodies, soil, water, shells, and countless other phenomena) as emergent and continually changing, reinforcing an ontological reality that is not anthropocentric, static, or prefigured (see Bennett 2010). Yet, as Alberti (2016, p. 171) notes, the “painstaking work of developing new archaeological metaphysics on the basis of an alternative Western intellectual tradition brings us no closer to grappling with the ontological difference presented to us anthropologically.”

What most “metaphysical archaeologists” have in common is their focus on European prehistory where the (mis)appropriation of Indigenous philosophies is an ethical concern that remains far from resolved (Harris 2021b, p. 71; for a fuller critique see Todd 2016). A social ontological approach is more often applied in the Americas where archaeologists have ready access to ethnographies centered around descendant communities who offer a wealth of Indigenous knowledge. Social ontologies that rely heavily on Indigenous epistemologies often are considered part of a larger decolonizing effort in the field of anthropology, challenging traditional Western authorized accounts of the past (see Atalay 2006, 2008; Watkins 2000). Taking on board an Indigenous ontological project involves a shift in method and theory-building that serves to democratize knowledge production, moving toward a more ethically-grounded archaeological practice (Montgomery 2021, p. 55). An Indigenous ontological approach does not mean doing away with science, but rather, stresses a blended approach that Atalay (2012, p. 27) and the Anishinaabe refer to as ‘braiding knowledge’ to “create space for multiple ways of knowing that complement each other” (Atalay 2020, p. 1). Instead of Indigenous epistemologies serving as supporting evidence for Western theoretical frameworks, Indigenous knowledge itself serves as theory (Laluk 2017, pp. 100–2; Montgomery 2021, p. 55).

Indigenous ontologies and philosophies differ across the Americas. However, one generally shared aspect is the presence of an animate, other-than-human world where “knowledge is constantly changing, experiential, and contextual” (Montgomery 2021, p. 59). As the Indigenous scholar Todd (2016) observes, even if it is not explicitly stated (which it often is not), most anthropological theory regarding relational ontologies derives from Indigenous knowledge about how the world operates. For instance, our understanding of a relational ontology in Mesoamerica comes from observations of contemporary Indigenous groups, such as the Highland Maya who express their ontological way of being as a two-way relationship of mutual care and interdependency based on their positioning and activity in-the-world (Molesky-Poz 2006). Elsewhere, Nurit Bird-David (1999, pp. 68–69) has made similar ethnographic observations among Indigenous groups in South Asia, which she calls “relatedness” and defines as “mutually responsive changes in things in-the-world and at the same time in themselves.” Bird-David (1999) suggests that this

distinct way of knowing the world as a two-way conversation of “responsive relatedness” is linked with an animistic epistemology, but the concept is also helpful for conceptualizing an alternative means of acquiring knowledge that ethnographers have recorded and described cross-culturally as shamanism. This distinct way of knowing the world for many Indigenous peoples is achieved through bodily experience and two-way engagement with one’s environment, which, in a relational world, is both animate and inanimate, human and other-than-human.

People enmeshed in a relational ontology “turned, not to theological pronouncements and speculations to verify their ideas, but to experience—to what can be seen, touched, heard, and smelled” (Furst 1997, pp. 2–3). This distinct way of knowing the world and acquiring knowledge aligns with what we know from studies across Mesoamerica, where ethnographers record how trained specialists whom they describe as “shamans” seek answers through sensory experience (Furst 1997; Molesky-Poz 2006; Stross 1998; Tedlock 1982). For instance, the contemporary highland Maya *ajq’ijab’* (“Daykeeper”) acquire knowledge and “answerability” by reading the movements in their bodies (Molesky-Poz 2006; Tedlock 1982). Diviner’s are trained to understand how to read signals called the *cacha’ uquiqu’el* or “speaking of the blood” (Tedlock 1982, pp. 138–39). Pulsing in different parts of the body points to various concerns for a specific gender and can indicate different moments in time (past, present or future events) and space (in terms of the four-directional universe (Tedlock 1982, pp. 140–41, Figure 26)). In other words, the mind or ‘interpreting act’ of the diviner is intimately bound up and inextricably linked with their bodily feelings and positionality in the landscape.

This way of knowing and acquiring knowledge as a bodily-felt process has been recorded in a range of archaeological and epigraphic contexts (Freidel et al. 1993; Harrison-Buck 2012a, 2015; Houston et al. 2006; Houston and Taube 2000; Lopez Austin 1988). The ancient Maya, in particular, had signs in their art and writing that expressed this complex “synesthesia” which simultaneously communicated in visual, graphic, and permanent forms the affective experience of sound, smell and sight (Houston and Taube 2000; Houston et al. 2006, pp. 136–39). According to Houston and Taube (2000, p. 289), such affective relations were expressed in “synesthetic codes,” such as spirals, scrolls and volutes emanating from eyes and mouths of human and nonhuman beings, which not only communicate a multi-sensory experience but also are embodiments of the animate spirit or co-essence living within (Houston et al. 2006, pp. 136–37; see also Houston 2014). Among the ancient Maya, for instance, the eye is not just tied with vision but is agentive and the power of sight is procreative, having the capability of affecting and changing things in the world and “[establishing] communion between internal will and external result” (Houston et al. 2006, p. 167).

Elsewhere, we describe this meta-sensory form of embodied cognition as “conversively co-creative” (Harrison-Buck 2018, p. 274)—an approach that stems from ethnographic observations of Indigenous storytelling (see Brill de Ramírez 2007). In the study presented below, we consider shamanism and animism as a relational ontology that is conversively co-creative and entails both discursive (abstract cognition) and non-discursive (bodily) ways of knowing the world and acquiring knowledge. From this perspective, materialism and idealism are viewed as a continuum of relational fields where both humans and nonhumans are potentially animate agents (see Harrison-Buck and Hendon 2018 for further discussion).

4. Shamans as Animating Impersonators in Mesoamerica

In ancient Mesoamerican art, both human and nonhuman beings are regularly depicted in the same scene communicating with one another. These images suggest that certain humans were capable of transcending the nonhuman spirit world and vice-versa. In some instances, humans are shown wearing costumes and masks of the divine, suggesting that they could temporarily become a divine being by impersonating them (Houston and Stuart 1996; Houston et al. 2006, pp. 270–74; Pharo 2007, p. 61; Stone 1991). While Klein (1986, p. 159) argues that the mask and costume “constituted a false reality [creat-

ing] an image or approximation rather than constituting an actual being,” Stone (1991, p. 194) emphasizes the human agency of the masked impersonator who is able to “interject their presence in supernatural affairs.” In other words, for Stone these were two-way engagements that were mutually empowering since impersonation allows for a temporary harnessing of supernatural divinity. Stone (1991, pp. 194–95) goes so far as to say that the development of “impersonation cults” in Mesoamerica was directly linked to the rise of complex state-level societies and a system of divine kingship, beginning with the Gulf Coast Olmec by Early Preclassic times (ca. 1100–900 BCE).

Throughout the Olmec era, there are many examples of masked animal impersonation, often featuring jaguarian or avian counterparts, interpreted as evidence of shamanic shape-shifting and transformation (see contributions in Coe 1995). A famous example is a mural from the Oxtotitlan cave in highland Guerrero, Mexico, that depicts a masked royal impersonation of a raptor (Figure 2a (Grove 1970)). The Olmec ruler enthroned at Oxtotitlan reveals his human face, X-ray fashion, behind his mask. It is the face that contains essential spiritual qualities in ancient Mesoamerica (Houston and Stuart 1996), and it is probably for this reason that such portraits show masked individuals as X-ray depictions, emphasizing revelation over concealment. Another example of this is the standard royal helmet crown mask, commonly found in Olmec, Isthmian, and Mayan art, being worn by Preclassic rulers (Figure 2b (Taube 1996, Figures 18 and 19)). The trefoil headband jewel crowning the royal helmet is interpreted as maize foliage, suggesting plant impersonation (Taube 1996). One famous example is seen in the Late Preclassic (West Wall) mural of the Pinturas Building at the Maya site of San Bartolo in Guatemala (Taube et al. 2010, color supplement). Other examples of the trefoil motif denoting maize vegetation are found in Preclassic Oaxaca (Barber and Sánchez 2012, p. 17). Here, carved masks dating to the Preclassic period also have been found depicting distinctive elements of Cociyo, the Zapotec rain deity. In wearing such masks, an impersonator served as a receptacle for this “vital force of agricultural fertility, responsible for casting lightning bolts through the sky, splitting apart the clouds and allowing rain to fall” (Brzezinski et al. 2017, p. 517). The presence of numerous Preclassic examples suggest that masked impersonation of animals, maize plants, rain, and other life-giving phenomena was a central component of rulership beginning with the earliest kings in Mesoamerica.

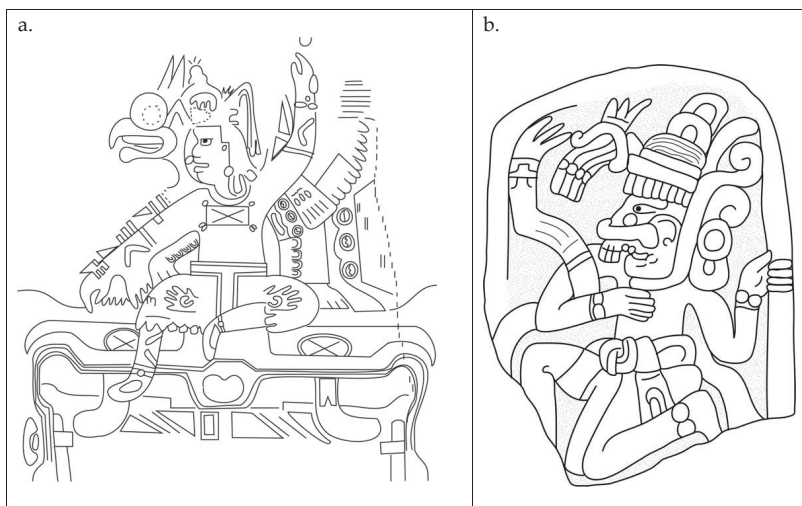


Figure 2. (a) Preclassic Olmec-style mural from the Oxtotitlan cave in highland Guerrero, Mexico (adapted from Grove 1970, redrawn by K. Titus); (b) Classic period Isthmian Maize God impersonator wearing a version of royal helmet mask with trefoil jewel (after Taube 1996, Figure 19a, redrawn by K. Titus).

Masked artistic conceit was employed throughout Mesoamerican history. For instance, Classic Maya rulers more than a millennium later are shown masked in the form of certain animals, maize plants, rain, and other personified forces (Schele and Freidel 1990, pp. 284–85). One example on a carved monument from the site of Yaxchilan shows a ruler masked as the powerful storm god Chaak (Figure 3). Another Classic Maya example on an incised jaguar bone from the Dallas Museum of Art depicts an Old God (“God N”) lifting the full helmet mask onto a young lord (Figure 4). Here the main upper divine image on that helmet is the Principal Bird Deity, solar bird avatar of *Itzamnaaj* who is often characterized as the principal “shaman-priest” and “creator” of the cosmos in both Postclassic Maya codices and Classic Maya imagery and epigraphy (Barrera Vasquez 1980, p. 272; Freidel et al. 1993, pp. 47, 210–13, 412, Note 19; Kappelman 2004, p. 114; see also discussion in Martin 2015).

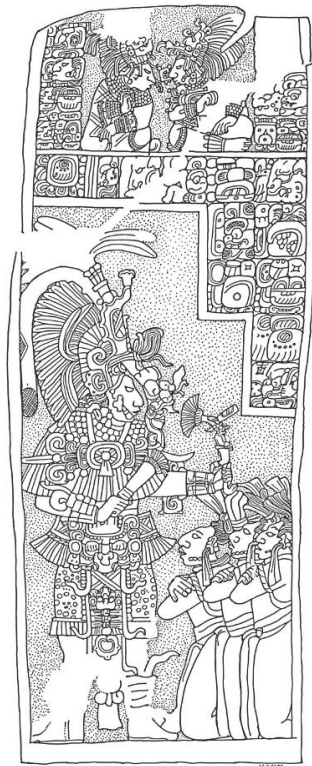


Figure 3. Stela 11 from the Maya site of Yaxchilan showing a ruler wearing the mask of the rain deity Chaak (courtesy of the Linda Schele Drawings Collection, © 2000 David Schele).

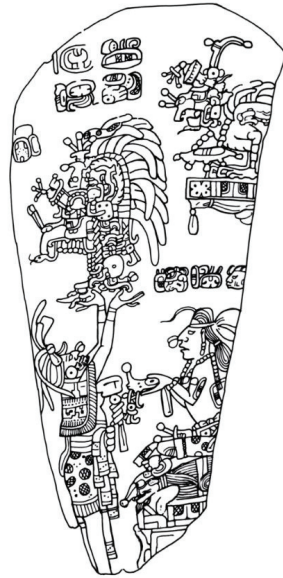


Figure 4. A Classic incised jaguar bone in the Dallas Museum of Art (courtesy of the Linda Schele Drawings Collection, © 2000 David Schele).

Depending on the context, different aspects of *Itzamnaaj* were impersonated by the ancient Maya (Martin 2015), ranging from the sun-filled *Kinich Ahau* to his night sun counterpart, the so-called Jaguar God of the Underworld (JGU). The latter was often called in to deal explicitly with death rituals that took place at night and involved fire-drilling (*hoch' k'ak'*), incense-burning, and fire-entering rituals performed in the tombs of ancestors (Stuart 1998, pp. 402–9). For example, Altar 5 from Tikal (Figure 5) depicts an exhumed female ancestor whose long bones and skull are shown with two kneeling JGU impersonators who hold fire-drilling staffs and have jaguar facial markings (Stuart 1998, pp. 407–8). Impersonators of JGU, equated with the role of *yajawk'ahk'* (“Lord of Fire” or “Fire’s Vassal”) conjured the night sun through objects, such as fire, smoke, and mirrors (Martin 2020, p. 93; Stuart 2005, p. 123–25; see Zender’s (2004, pp. 195–210) more lengthy consideration of the role of the *yajawk'ahk'* who he prefers to characterize as a “priest” rather than “shaman” probably for some of the reasons discussed earlier).

Censing and fire-drilling is also of central importance to the Aztecs and, like the Maya JGU, the Aztec Black Tezcatlipoca is closely associated with jaguars, smoke, and mirrors, specifically made of black obsidian (Saunders 2001). Notably, the Aztec Nahuatl “smoking mirror” glyph *atl tlachinolli* replaces the left foot of Tezcatlipoca (Saunders and Baquedano 2014, p. 4). Scholars describe Tezcatlipoca as “a truly shaman-like transformative figure” (Saunders and Baquedano 2014, p. 2; see also Saunders 1990, pp. 166–67). Referred to as *Yohualli Ehecatl* (“Night Wind”), Tezcatlipoca was much feared for he was considered “an inspirer of evil activities among sorcerers [and] also the origin of a number of illnesses, carried around by [the] ‘airs of the night’” (Olivier 2014, p. 60). An example of a Tezcatlipoca mosaic skull mask fastened with long deerskin straps suggests it was worn on the body of a Tezcatlipoca impersonator, perhaps as a back ornament rather than as a facial mask (Figure 6). A human skull forms the base of this elaborate mask dating to the fifteenth–sixteenth century, decorated with alternating bands of bright blue turquoise and black lignite, white conch shell eye orbits, and mirror eyes made of polished iron pyrite (Klein 1986; McEwan et al. 2006). Coltman et al. (2020, pp. 346–47) note that human skulls with associated smoking mirrors mark one of the calendric names for Tezcatlipoca, translated as “1 Death.” They illustrate how across Mesoamerica, during Postclassic times, skulls

and smoking mirrors were intimately bound up with “images regarded as Tezcatlipoca or of his earthly impersonators” (Coltman et al. 2020, p. 346).



Figure 5. Altar 5 from Tikal (courtesy of the Linda Schele Drawings Collection, © 2000 David Schele).



Figure 6. Mosaic skull mask of Tezcatlipoca (© The Trustees of the British Museum).

Milbrath (2014) observes that, for the Classic Maya, an equivalent for Tezcatlipoca may have been the deity known as *K'awiil* who also is associated with smoking mirrors and has a serpent replacing one foot (Figure 7a). *K'awiil* figures were commonly held by Classic Maya rulers, leading scholars to equate this figure with political accession and royal lineages (Rice 2012; Schele and Freidel 1990, pp. 294–301). For instance, on Stela 11 from Yaxchilan the masked Chaak impersonator holds a *K'awiil* manikan scepter (see Figure 3). Maya rulers impersonating the Jaguar God of the Underworld (JGU) also are shown holding *K'awiil* figures. For example, Stela 8 from Seibal shows the head of *K'awiil* being held by a ruler impersonating JGU (Figure 8). Like Tezcatlipoca, JGU appears associated with smoke, darkness, death, jaguar transformation, and sorcery (Figure 7b). Jaguars throughout Mesoamerica are connected to a range of “agonistic activities such as hunting, warfare, and sacrifice and [served] as the spirit familiar par excellence of shamans, priests, and political leaders” (Saunders and Baquedano 2014, p. 3). *K'awiil* is not as strongly associated with jaguars, but more closely connected to precious life-giving substances and fluids, such as maize and blood (Freidel et al. 1993, pp. 194–95). Stuart (1987) interprets the name *K'awiil* as “sustenance,” which nourishes both human and other-than-human beings in a form of mutual care and obligation (Freidel et al. 1993, pp. 194–95). Notably, maize seeds, smoke, fire, and other shiny things—all embodiments of *K'awiil*—are consulted today by Mesoamerican shamans for answerability and likely were also used in the past for prognostication. In grasping the *K'awiil* scepter and wearing the costuming of death-related gods like JGU and Chaak, we suggest Maya rulers acted as shamans, communing with powerful animate forces of life and death as a distinct means of knowing the world and acquiring knowledge.

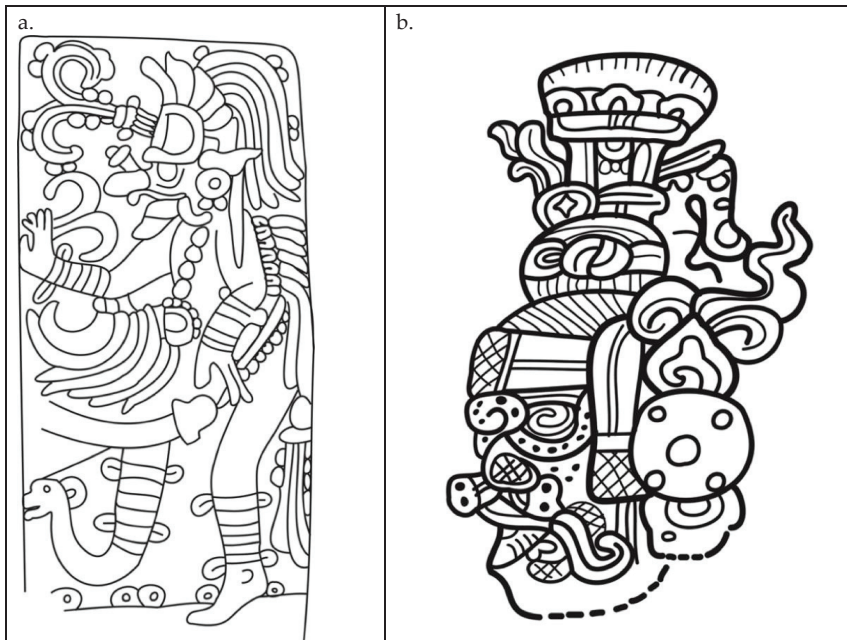


Figure 7. (a) Classic period relief of *K'awiil* from Maya site of Sayil showing both the serpent leg and smoking mirror similar to Tezcatlipoca (after Milbrath 2014: Figure 6. 3 h, redrawn by K. Titus); (b) Detail of Stela 31 from Maya site of Tikal showing JGU with facial “cruller” and smoking jaguar ear (courtesy of the Linda Schele Drawings Collection, © 2000 David Schele).

Seibal, Stela 8

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Figure 8. Stela 8 from Seibal (© 2000 John Montgomery).

5. Ontological Relationships with the More-than-Human

While most scholars agree that humans did not permanently assume power on a par with divinities (Houston and Stuart 1996; Martin 2020, pp. 144–48), human and divine beings both were capable of assuming a “preternatural quality in Mesoamerica, namely the ability to undergo a transformation into animals or natural phenomena at their own will” (Pharo 2007, p. 61). The presence of shape-shifting co-essences have been identified by the *wahy* glyph in Classic Maya epigraphic contexts, perhaps best understood as a “supernatural being with whom a person shares his or her consciousness” (Houston and Stuart 1989, p. 1; see also Grube and Nahm 1994). Stuart (2021, p. 184) in his most recent programmatic inquiry into the *wahy* category of being for the Classic Maya notes the cloudy relationship between these frighteningly demonic creatures and other kinds of supernatural beings often categorized as gods (*k’uh*) or “sacred entities” (Houston and Stuart 1989, p. 291). While the ontological relationships between such spirits and deities and their human counterparts remain complex and open to inquiry, it is clear that Maya royalty and elite engaged in conversive, co-creative bodily and spiritual engagement with

the more-than-human realm by “conjuring” (*tzak*) and “birthing” such supernaturals into existence and into action (see Taube 1994 for several examples). Stuart (2021, p. 201) further suggests that the dark sorcerous qualities of *wahy* spirits were dangerous and afflictive and illuminate the power of Maya rulers to cast curses, affliction, and death upon enemies (see also Classic depictions in Grube and Nahm 1994).

As terrifying as these *wahy* spirits could be (Nielsen 2021), they could also be beneficent and might be best understood not merely as an evil spirit, but as an expression of ongoing disequilibrium in the world. In a relational ontology, the balance of power and control is never absolute, preordained, or guaranteed (Harrison-Buck 2020, pp. 435–36: for a contemporary Maya example see Vogt 1976, pp. 95–96). The ongoing tension that exists in one of the most common phrases found in Classic Maya hieroglyphic texts—*ch’ahb ak’baal* (Stuart 2005, p. 278). Central to Classic Maya rulership, this diaphrastic kenning is often glossed as “genesis and darkness.” Stuart (2021, pp. 200–1) suggests this ancient couplet may allude to a “complex notion of power” that juxtaposes the positive and creative against the esoteric and nocturnal where the former embodies (re)generative power and the latter is an ontological status associated with death that is both dark and afflictive. The powers of shamans, generally, are both admired and feared because their use is always a matter of intention on the part of the human being in the ontological relationship, often overseeing aspects of procreation, birth, sickness and death. Successfully overcoming affliction, and death itself, is a common prerequisite to shamanic training and practice in Mesoamerica and rulers performed rituals of resurrection from Preclassic times onward (Freidel and Suhler 1999).

Shamans engaging with *wahy* spirits in ontological relation, with both living and deceased rulers, held the power to shift the equilibrium, either positively or negatively. The ambiguity and relational aspects of their power are cogently summarized by Oswaldo Chinchilla in his study of centipede spirits, including *wahy* spirits, and their conjuring by royal women who also appear to have wielded shamanic power, particularly in magical acts of birthing and midwifery. The imagery shows “... women as capable of controlling those creatures and summoning them to deliver children through their hideous maws. As conduits for the portentous birth of royal offspring, those beings seem to embody the genital organs of these powerful women, who are shown capable of magical control over the agents of sickness and death” (Chinchilla 2021, p. 228). Additional support for this form of shamanic impersonation is also found at El Peru-Waka, where Queen K’abel is depicted on the back of her mirror in Burial 61, shown conjuring a giant centipede and, in the tomb, she is shown birthing the death god Akan from her loins as a cave stone effigy (Navarro-Farr et al. 2021, Figure 6c; Navarro-Farr et al. n.d.). Through such intimate relations with the more-than-human, Maya kings and queens may have sought a moral balance between such forces and conditions in the cosmos (see Stuart 2021, p. 200). It may be that they were charged with managing the ongoing disequilibrium through their shamanic engagement and impersonation of supernatural powers where moral judgment would have had to be levied in light of the choices made and outcomes, good and bad, achieved through these interpersonal relations (Freidel et al. 1993, p. 224; Freidel and Shaw 2000; Golden and Scherer 2013).

6. Seeing and Knowing with Mirrors and Other “Communicating Objects”

Houston and Taube (2000, p. 287) note: “It is probably relevant that, in most Mayan languages, to see something is also to discern and understand; thus, the act of perception is regarded as physiological, but equally cognitive, intellectual, and, in the case of shamans, at once visionary and spiritually omniscient.” Across Mesoamerica, there are creation stories featuring a male-female pair, sometimes referred to as the first ‘mother-father’ or original grandparents, who were “all-seeing” and “all-knowing” and are characterized as the first shamans, priests, and sorcerers who had the ability to foresee events in the future through divination. As the first diviners, this creator couple was also responsible for the creation of the world and of humans. The progenerative aspects of the ‘mother-father’

creator couple are expressed in the Quiché Maya Popol Vuh creation story, where they are described as creating the first four humans who “have perfect vision and therefore perfect knowledge” (Tedlock 1985, p. 47). Ultimately, they decide that humans should not have the same all-seeing and all-knowing power as the divine; they “put a fog in their eyes” (Tedlock 1985, p. 47) and “[humans] were blinded like breath upon the face of a mirror” (Christensen 2000, p. 134).

Houston et al. (2006, pp. 167–70) describe the sight of the gods as an agentive, “emanating eye” with their pupils rendered either with a distinctive spiral or a mirror glyphic element, which may distinguish visionary spirits of the night and of the day, respectively. For instance, the night sun aspect of Itzamnaaj, the so-called Jaguar God of the Underworld (JGU) described above, has spiral elements marking the eyes and is associated with jaguar features (Taube 1992, Figure 9a). Olmec figurines sometimes have inset iron pyrite mirror eyes and Early Classic figurines at Teotihuacan also sometimes feature pyrite mirror eyes. The goddess figurine found in Burial 2 of the Moon Pyramid at Teotihuacan is one such example (Robb 2017, plate 99). A similar pattern is found later in the Postclassic where depictions, like the Aztec Tezcatlipoca skull mask described above, also feature mirror eyes made of polished pyrite (see Figure 6).

Across Mesoamerica, the jaguar and particularly the jaguar’s eyes are identified with mirrors (Blainey 2016, pp. 181–282; Saunders 1988, pp. 9–12). Saunders (1988, 2001) has observed the connection between the jaguar’s eyes and their mirrorlike reflections at night and has illustrated the close associations between jaguars, mirrors and Tezcatlipoca, the Aztec god of darkness, death, and sorcery described above. Jaguar elements are also commonly associated with the Postclassic Yucatec creator *Itzamnaaj* and his female counterpart *Ix Chel* (Tedlock 2010, p. 162). In addition to jaguar features, their divining seeds, acts of bloodletting, and their use of the 260-day ritual almanac exemplifies the all-knowing aspects of the creator pair across Mesoamerica. Their ‘all-seeing’ knowledge is also expressed by the rendering of their eyes, shown as shiny objects, usually interpreted as mirrors (Taube 1992, pp. 181–82). In Classic Mayan hieroglyphic texts, the “mirror” glyph, also more generally designating hard, reflective or shiny materials, such as polished jade celts (Taube 2005; Stuart 2005), is used to render the pupils of *Itzamnaaj* and other all-seeing powerful spirits (see Houston et al. 2006, p. 170, Figure 4.27).

When found in the archaeological record, mirrors often are interpreted as tools for divinatory “scrying” (Healy and Blainey 2011). Mirrors are found across ancient Mesoamerica, most often in burial and cache deposits, beginning as early as the Middle Preclassic period and continuing through the Classic and Postclassic (Blainey 2007). Where preserved, the reflective side of ground surface mirrors are made of iron ore, magnetite, ilmenite, hematite or sometimes obsidian; most often, however, mirrors were made with pyrite cut and polished into tesserae and assembled to create a mosaic pattern with a flat reflective surface glued onto a backing. For example, a plaster-backed pyrite mirror was found in a Late Terminal Preclassic (A.D. 100–250) burial from the site of Yogüé in the lower Rio Valley of Oaxaca, which was associated with a young male and worn as a pectoral (Barber and Sánchez 2012; Brzezinski et al. 2017). The average diameter of mirrors measures roughly 15cm and they are typically made with a carved slate backing with two to four drill holes, presumably so they could be worn. While the majority of pyrite mosaic mirrors have been found in Maya archaeological contexts, they have a widespread distribution (Gallaga 2014). It is clear that mirrors were central to ritual practice in the ancient city of Teotihuacan in Central Mexico (e.g., Sugiyama et al. 2013). Over two hundred slate backings representing such mirrors as protective military devices were discovered with sacrifices in the Feathered Serpent Temple at Teotihuacan (Sugiyama 1992) and many more have been discovered in other investigations of this ancient city (see also Robb 2017; Taube 1992).

Houston et al. (2006, pp. 167–71) conclude that the reflective brilliance of mirrors was equated with seeing in the form of a penetrating all-knowing agentive power linked with the eyes of personified supernatural essences who often were the focus of impersonation. According to these scholars, impersonators “share in the divinity of gods” and are what

they refer to as “the practice of ‘concurrency,’ of essences that can inhabit the same space at the same time” (Houston et al. 2006, p. 66). Impersonators and, by extension, their mirrors, masks and other costuming stand as representations of the deified co-essences; but are more than mere symbolic intermediaries or dramatological reenactments of a divine spirit. Taube (1992, 2016), in his extensive reviews of mirror-use in ancient Mesoamerica, notes that they were portals from which supernatural beings could emerge. These reflective objects may be best understood as “communicating objects” (Astor-Aguilera 2010) or what Taube (2016, p. 302) refers to as the “speaking mirror.” We suggest that mirrors as well as masks, headdresses, and other costuming—whether worn by a human or disembodied—functioned as active participants in acts of divination (see also Houston et al. (2006, p. 273) for an example from Palenque where a disembodied headdress engages with a ruler and members of the court). These “communicating objects” were not just a possessed object or tool; they engaged in intimate, intersubjective relationships between object and spirit, person and soul (Astor-Aguilera 2010) and actively engaged with the impersonator seeking “answerability” (sensu Molesky-Poz 2006).

7. Conclusions

In this study, we consider both the productive and afflictive engagements with the spirit world in ancient Mesoamerica, which wielded significant political power from Preclassic times onward. For instance, depending on the context, ancient Maya rulers impersonated *Itzamnaaj*, the sun-filled *Kinich Ahau* or his night sun counterpart, the so-called Jaguar God of the Underworld, or communed with various *wahy* spirits—all of whom had the power to potentially shift the equilibrium, positively or negatively. It is difficult to imagine how a relational perspective can be successfully employed in political understandings of ancient Mesoamerica if we only engage in shamanism as a “primitive” religious structure and consider animism as merely a projection of imagination onto things (sensu Ingold 2006, p. 10; see also Harvey 2006). To more effectively address alternative ontologies of power we suggest looking outside the normative structures of “Western” politics, where often power is “viewed only in the negative—equated with inequality, disenfranchisement, resistance, etc.” (Morehart et al. 2018, p. 12). Ethnographic studies across Mesoamerica describe other means of power in the form of spirit communication and affliction, targeted evil doings (“witchcraft” or “sorcery”), vulnerability and protection from evil winds, curing rituals to restore the souls of human and other-than-human beings, and a range of other practices that anthropologists describe in terms of a shamanic-animistic ontology (Knab 2004, pp. 153–54; Redfield and Villa Rojas [1934] 1964, pp. 177–80; Vogt 1976, pp. 61–96; Watanabe 1992, pp. 190–94, 208–10).

Shamans in ancient Mesoamerica held leadership positions because they had to contend with the serious and delicate matter of managing this disequilibrium, which was a central concern of power and politics and constituted an ongoing ontological struggle in-the-world. It is the tension between the spiritual and the material, or what Mesoamerican peoples refer to as the ‘Heart of Heaven and Heart of Earth’ that must be carefully managed by trained specialists (Hart 2008; Tedlock 1982; Vogt 1966, 1976). Importantly, answerability for contemporary shamans is formed through an embodied cognition, which involves both materialism—such as medicinal plants and other physical remedies—and spiritualism in the form of prayer and magical spirit communication (Hart 2008, pp. 119–20). In this way, shamanism in Mesoamerica is best described as “conversively co-creative” (sensu Brill de Ramírez 2007), relying on both discursive (cognitive) and non-discursive (bodily) experience as ways of knowing the world and acquiring knowledge (see also Harrison-Buck and Hendon 2018). Considering a relational ontology of shamanism and animism from a conversive perspective, we are more inclined to approach both the physical and mental properties of matter and thought as symmetrical and mutually dependent constitutive relations, considering the continuum of relational fields where both humans and nonhumans are potentially animate agents.

Like any comparative anthropological terms, concepts like shamanism and animism are only deeply informative when explicitly defined using specific case studies and when grounded in terms of the local language. In the case of Mesoamerica, we are fortunate to have a rich ethnographic, archaeological, and epigraphic record that helps us to establish the ways in which these groups are ontologically different and to avoid homogenizing Indigenous practices over time and space (Astor-Aguilera 2010, pp. 14–15). In our attempt to “refigure” shamanism and animism beyond the confines of a “primitive” religious structure, we follow in the path of others who have emphasized a plurality of epistemologies (Bird-David 1999, p. 68; see also Bird-David 2017) and ontological multiplicity (Blaser 2013, p. 552). In this way, we recast these traditional anthropological constructs in terms of a relational performance or enactment grounded in Indigenous thought, as opposed to a foundational claim or essentialist fact about how the world operates.

As Todd (2016) observes, to rely solely on Euro-Western thought to explore ontological difference in Americanist archaeology is to perpetuate a colonial legacy which historically marginalizes or discredits Indigenous thought. Taking Indigenous ontological commitments seriously means applying their philosophies as analytical framework, not just as archaeological evidence (sensu Montgomery 2021, pp. 54–55). To move shamanism and animism out of their long-standing “savage slot” in anthropology, we consider these comparative terms not as static religious structures, but as ongoing relations with the environment that Indigenous peoples describe as distinct ways of knowing and acquiring knowledge about the world in which they live. Rather than merely passive agents or inert objects, we consider spirit impersonation and objects like mirrors as “communicating objects” (sensu Astor-Aguilera 2010). These more-than-human entities were active participants involved in two-way divinatory relations with the impersonator. As relational beings, both humans and objects, such as masks and mirrors, served as receptacles for personified co-essences where they were able to temporarily engage in a shared consciousness to achieve answerability and to manage the ongoing disequilibrium in-the-world.

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Article

Meshkwajisewin: Paradigm Shift

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Abstract: In 2012, the Manitoba Museum began the development of an exhibit called “*We Are All Treaty People*”. Mindful of recent scholarship on animacy and the ontological turn in museum ethnography, this paper examines how this exhibit reversed decades of practice regarding ceremonial artefacts. Twelve pipes, formerly removed from view because of their ceremonial status, have now, as celebrated animate entities, become teachers in a collaboratively developed exhibit about treaties. They will work to educate thousands of visitors, many of them Indigenous children who visit the museum annually. The exhibit was imagined, shaped, and made possible by the Elders Council of the Association of Manitoba Chiefs and the Treaty Relations Commission of Manitoba who treat the pipes as active social partners and, from the outset, intended that the pipes would boldly instantiate Indigenous agency in treaty making. The relational world of the pipes has increased exponentially since they have become public actors in the museum, and more importantly, they have formed deep bonds with the school children and Elders of the community of Roseau River First Nation. They go to the school yearly to be celebrated, sung to, feasted, smoked, and honoured and return to the museum restored and ready for their newfound educational and diplomatic work.

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1. Relational Obligations

One of the most productive theoretical paths for museum anthropologists is a comparatively new application of anthropology’s “ontological turn” (Holbraad and Pederson 2017) which takes account of the social role of objects. From Alfred Gell’s *Art and Agency*¹ through Tim Ingold’s *Perceptions of the Environment* (2000) to the actor–network theory of Bruno Latour (2005) and the activist stance of Martin Holbraad and Morten Axel Pederson in *The Ontological Turn: An Anthropological Exposition* (2017), anthropologists are finding a vocabulary to interrogate the role and import of objects in modern lives. Museums are, in a sense, a material expression of these ideas—we would not have museums if we did not believe that objects speak—and museums offer fertile ground for examining the role of objects, especially when the relational obligations of collections bring the world views of Indigenous peoples to bear on museums and their practices.

This paper, like the exhibits to which we refer, is the product of a collaborative relationship between the Manitoba Museum’s Curator of Cultural Anthropology, Dr. Maureen Matthews, three Commissioners of the Manitoba Treaty Relations Commission, Elder Dennis White Bird, James Wilson, and Loretta Ross, and their excellent staff, and, very importantly, Dr. Harry Bone, Chair of the Elders Councils of both the Treaty Relations Commission and the Association of Manitoba Chiefs, who, along with the other members of the Elders Council, has guided the process of creating treaty exhibits at the Manitoba Museum from 2012 to 2021. This paper explains how treaty-related museum collections and new collections from First Nations communities have challenged the Manitoba Museum’s foundational paradigms and affected what in Anishinaabemowin you would call

meshkwajisewin, a shift in the way we imagine possibilities, a paradigm shift. The process of incorporating demanding artefacts into new treaty exhibits brings colonial legacies into view and re-establishes the agency and generosity of First Nations treaty makers. The Manitoba Museum now has a total of five different treaty exhibits, each one, in its own way, undermining the colonial narrative, instigating change, and providing models for respectful postcolonial relationships.

The history of the Museum's Numbered² Treaty exhibits offers an opportunity to explore the importance of *meshkwajisewin* in rethinking, reframing museum practice. A history of nasty betrayal followed the making of the Numbered Treaties in the 1870s, and people who visit the museum often ask why, given these bitter memories, First Nations people wish to commemorate treaties which have not achieved their promise. The Elders answer that making the treaties was not a surrender of land and not the end of negotiation, but that it was the beginning of an agreement about sharing land and sharing a future, that it marked the start of an ongoing relationship based on principles of caring, respect, and mutual obligation. They argue that as long as these respectful relationships are remembered, there is reason to believe that we will return to the mutually beneficial conversation initiated by First Nations leaders and representatives of the Crown in the late 19th century.

2. The Berens Family Collection

It was in the context of seeking mutually beneficial relationships that the museum began to discuss an exhibit centered in the story of the signing of Treaty Five at Berens River, Manitoba. In 2011, a member of the Berens family approached the Manitoba Museum and offered the original silver Treaty No. 5 medal and the original red Chief's jacket. The Berens family had been tending these important historic artefacts for over 136 years—ever since they were presented to Chief Jacob Berens, Naawigiizhigweyaash, on the day the treaty was negotiated, 20 September 1875 (Morris 1890). These historic objects, along with a silver 1901 commemorative medal given to Chief Berens by the Prince of Wales and his wife, the future King George V and Queen Mary, on the first royal visit to Western Canada, and a 1940s Chief's coat given to Jacob's son Chief William Berens, Tabasigizikweas, had been kept in a trunk in the family home. Over their lives, these pieces had been cared for by three women, Mary (McKay) Berens, wife of Chief Jacob Berens, Nancy (Everett) Berens, wife of Chief William Berens Sr., and Mary Rose Berens, wife of Chief Bill Berens Jr. The collection was brought to the museum in 2011 by another Bill Berens, a great-great-grandson of Jacob Berens, who asked that we use the artefacts to explain the importance of Treaty No. 5, and to tell the history of the Berens family who were Chiefs at Berens for 90 years.

Such a gift needed to be celebrated, so the museum organized a New Acquisitions Exhibit to welcome the collection. The exhibit reunited the coats and medals with portraits of Chief Jacob Berens and William Berens painted by Marion Nelson Hooker and stored at the Archives of Manitoba and the Winnipeg Art Gallery (See Figure 1). In organizing the opening event, we had the help of five energetic Berens cousins: Margaret Simmons, Myra and Jean Tait, Carrie Prystupa, and Myrna Kostiuik. Rather than inviting well-heeled donors for a fundraiser, we decided to keep the opening a family event. As a very new curator, I was asked how many people would come. I had sent 75 invitations and was told that, for these opening-type events, only 1/3 of the people you invite actually come, so we could expect about 25 people. On the night of the opening, over 150 Berens family members came, the largest Indigenous gathering the museum had ever had. Family came from as far away as BC and Ontario, brought together in new and renewed relationships by a couple of medals and a very well-kept red Chief's coat.

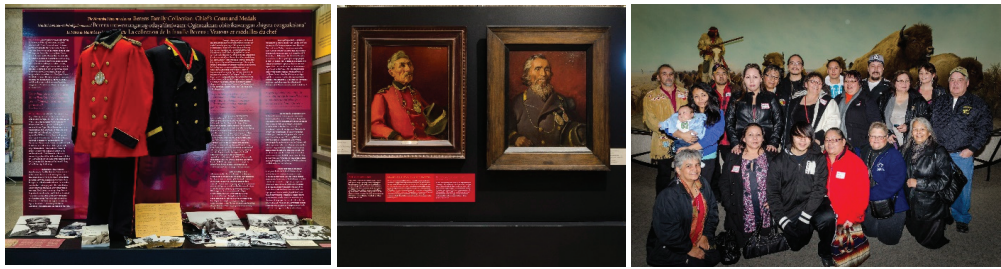


Figure 1. (Left) Berens Collection New Acquisitions case. 2012. Image Manitoba Museum; (middle): Berens Collection New Acquisitions case. 2012. Image Manitoba Museum; (right): Berens Family Event. 2012. Image Manitoba Museum.

Before Bill Berens’ donation, the museum did have one artefact in its collection associated with the Berens family, a beautifully embroidered moose hide jacket made by Nancy Berens, the wife of Chief William Berens (see Figures 2 and 3). This jacket followed the familiar trajectory shared by many works of Indigenous wearable art. It was made in 1912 for the Methodist missionary Percy Jones, a good friend of the Berens family at the time.³ The jacket does not appear to have been worn much, and in 1980, it was donated to the museum by the Jones family, having been preserved for all those years because of its beauty, and because it carries fond memories of a warm Anishinaabe friendship.



Figure 2. Silk embroidered jacket H4-11-12. Artist: Nancy Berens. Image Manitoba Museum.

This is the story of many Indigenous artefacts in the museum. They were preserved by non-Indigenous peoples as a remembrance of relationships and personal histories and then donated to the Museum as a material mnemonic of a former life both for the donor and the people they once knew. These trajectories may be the long tail of a public version of “salvage ethnography”, first practiced by anthropologists in the early 20th century, and more recently by missionaries, teachers, and nurses who spend part of their career in the north. The underlying idea of “salvage” collecting, that Indigenous cultures are fading, diminishing, or otherwise becoming inauthentic, has long since been rejected by museum anthropologists, but it has been a common motivation for donors and has resulted in the preservation of many important artefacts. It is probable that large Indigenous collections in many museums are gifts of this sort, originating with well-intentioned donors (Farrell Racette 2008). In the case of Nancy’s jacket, the relationship was rooted in admiration, and Nancy’s authorship as an artist was preserved along with the artefact which is not always the case. However, it is interesting to reflect on the fact that the Berens family themselves

did not collect Nancy's embroidered or beaded jackets, mitts, and moccasins, for which she was justly famous, and which so strongly signify Indigenous artistry. Simply put, they knew she could make more. It was the practice, rather than the work, which was preserved by the family. Through her own relationships, Nancy passed these skills, her skills, on to her daughters, and the museum now has wonderful, beaded gloves made by her daughter Rosie (Berens) Bittern in our collection, thanks to Rosie's son Bill who insisted they join Nancy's jacket at the museum as a testament to the family's ongoing artistry. Through these networks of relationships, these beautiful works have now joined the rest of the collection, challenging the colonial museum paradigm which suggests that Indigenous authenticity lies in the past.



Figure 3. Silk embroidered jacket H4-11-12. Artist: Nancy Berens. Image Manitoba Museum.

If the Berens family did not hold on to the objects Nancy Berens created, the Berens women did preserve, as family memory objects, the treaty coats and medals that represented the relationships brought about by treaties. For over 130 years, these women placed very great importance on these objects of European manufacture. They privileged them as material evidence of their family's leadership role in what was a profoundly important event in their community's history, the making of Treaty No. 5. They looked after them fondly, like old friends. They kept the moths at bay, kept them clean, sewed the buttons back on, brushed them, mended small tears, and stored the coats and medals in a special trunk that moved with them as they travelled. This is an important point because, as Greg Dening has observed, the survival of these objects is not an accident of history, "it is only the destruction of these relics which is accidental. Their preservation is cultural . . . They gain meaning out of every social moment they survive" (Dening 1996, p. 43).

By considering these Chief's coats as having social roles and an active type of personhood, they can be situated in an ongoing relational object biography (Peers 1999; Appadurai 1986), and one can pay attention to the additional meanings, as Dening suggests, that accrue with their new relationships. They may have begun life in a context of European manufacture and colonial intentions, but they acquire additional meanings as they become imbricated in Indigenous relationships, bound by Indigenous protocols, cared for by Indigenous hands, and brought forward to tell Indigenous histories. They come to the museum with the dignity of experienced diplomats who have honoured an Anishinaabe protocol; one that transforms gifts of clothing into a guarantor of treaty promises. More than fifty years before Treaty No. 5 was negotiated, as historian Bruce White illustrates, there was an established protocol around the exchange of clothing between Anishinaabe leaders and the Dakota which meant that "each [person] renounced his own self-interest. In the process they ceased being enemies and became brothers or friends" (White 1982, p. 65). On one occasion, William Johnston, a trader at Leech Lake, observed a group of Anishinaabe hunters. "While hunting they had met the Sioux, who came up, and extended

the hand of friendship: and to ratify it, as is their custom they exchanged all there[sic] articles of clothing".⁴ In 1833, Johnson wrote that when "the Ojibwa leader Okeemakeequid exchanged clothing with a Dakota, a potential enemy became a "brother". In the same way, the European trader became "kin" when he exchanged his clothing, cloth and blankets for the captains' furs".⁵ For the Berens family, these Chief's coats and medals constitute material proof of Canada's obligations to Anishinaabe people through Treaty No. 5; their new role is to remind museum visitors that promises made between the Crown and the leaders of the Lake Winnipeg Anishinaabe are personal obligations and they are not forgotten (Farrell Racette 2004).

However, if the Berens Family Collection reminds the people who visit the museum of the ongoing relationships created by the 1875 Treaty, it also continues to generate new meanings as it engages with the museum and its publics. This collection brings to the museum not one meaning but many. The Chief's coats, juxtaposed with the impressive paintings of Jacob and William Berens, support a growing public perception of Indigenous agency in treaty making. Nancy's jacket and her daughter's mitts contextualize other Indigenous art/artefacts by providing material and aesthetic comparisons and keeping the role of women and their artistic influences in mind.⁶ They embody ideas about how other similar artefacts might have been made, viewed, or used, thus increasing the historical and interpretive value of the rest of the collection to Indigenous communities. All of these artefacts have the capacity to upend conventional museum power relationships, especially when expertise related to their meaning, provenance, and physical care resides in the Indigenous community. They open museums to shared understandings and have the power to force institutions to concede authority. It is impossible to overstate the importance of contributions such as those of the Berens family to educating the Manitoba Museum about its relational obligations.

I have written elsewhere about Anishinaabe understandings of ceremonial objects (Matthews 2016, chp. 3, 5), that these Anishinaabe other-than-human persons have the capacity to act in the world, and that, given the right social environment, this can happen in museums. I have argued that they have the power to maintain or resume their place in families and, given the opportunity, can create new relationships in museums and between museums and communities. The Manitoba Museum has over 25,000 artefacts that once belonged to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples. Many of these items came to the museum under some level of duress and suffered the loss of most of their Indigenous provenance, and unlike the Berens coats and medals, most of them have long been estranged from their original families and communities. Thus, these contributions from First Nations families such as the Berens family to the Manitoba Museum are incredibly important. Their provenance is profoundly Indigenous. These objects embody their family's sense of history and instantiate their personal connection to the treaties. They bring Indigenous histories, Indigenous protocols, and Indigenous family connections with them into the museum. The museum is a complex relational environment, and colonial legacies are often dominant, but these artefacts, as diplomatic and political interventions by Indigenous families, challenge the museum. James Clifford spoke of the museum as a "contact zone" characterized by "copresence, interactions, interlocking understandings and practice, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power" (Pratt 1992, pp. 6–7; quoted in Clifford 1997, p. 192). The Manitoba Museum, as a "contact zone", remains a place of intersecting intentions, asymmetries of power, and conflicting attributions of agency. However, the relational obligations embedded in the museum's Indigenous collections combined with the museum's educational obligations to Indigenous communities have the potential to cause a paradigm shift that pushes back at the colonial inequities that remain part of the legacy of Canadian museums (Clifford 1997, p. 213; Matthews 2016, p. 242; Cf. Task Force 1992, Report on Museums and First Peoples).

3. The Gaagige-Binesi Photograph

For the Manitoba Museum, these stories of relationship and transformative potential embodied in treaty artefacts do not end here. A year after the Berens donation, Ted and Rachel Mann of Sagkeeng First Nation brought to the museum the 1901 commemorative Chief's medal that once belonged to Chief Gaagige-Binesi (Forever Thunderbird), Chief William Mann Sr. (also known as William Pennefether or Kakekapanais).⁷ Ted Mann told Dr. Matthews that his father once had a large, framed photograph, a framed original silver halide image from the 1870s of his distinguished ancestor Gaagige-Binesi who was one of the negotiators of the first Numbered Treaty, Treaty No. 1 (See Figure 4). Ted's father had loaned the photo in its big wooden frame to a student at the University of Manitoba twenty years before, and it had never been returned. He asked for help in finding it. Inquiries at the university turned up nothing at first, and then, in a chance meeting at the grocery store, the head of the Native Studies Department told us they had been cleaning out a bookshelf and found this incredibly dusty old photo on top. They would not have known that it was the 1870s photo of Gaagige-Binesi, or that the family were looking for it, had we not asked. The photo was returned to Ted and Rachel Mann, but after a few months they asked that we use it at the museum to tell the story of their famous ancestor's role in making Treaty No. 1. This gift is not just a photo. As with the Berens Collection, it brings with it the relationships, with families and others, that follow such gifts into the museum, enriching exhibits and collections, building connections to other Indigenous researchers, curators, and visitors, and challenging harmful stereotypes.

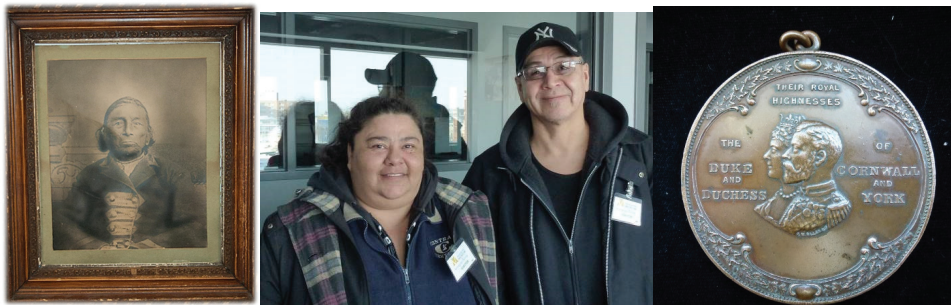


Figure 4. (Left): Chief Gaagige-Binesi, Forever Thunderbird. Image Manitoba Museum; (middle): Rachel and Ted Mann. Image Manitoba Museum; (right): Mann family 1901 commemorative medal. H4-2-318. Image Manitoba Museum.

Every museum is different in mandate, scope, and affordances. The Manitoba Museum is fortunate that so many Indigenous people have a relatively positive view of the institution. As with the Berens and Mann families, they see the provincial museum as an institution which can tell their stories while helping them to address the challenges posed by protecting and preserving precious histories. The museum has an enviably broad mandate to conduct research, collect artefacts and specimens, and prepare exhibits related to Manitoba, its lands, and peoples—a concise geographical focus. There are currently seven curators whose disciplines include human sciences: anthropology, archaeology, and history; and natural sciences: botany, zoology, and paleontology. The Manitoba Museum has much the same colonial baggage and most of the same structural limitations as other Canadian provincial museums, including a horrifying colonial legacy of artefacts obtained from First Nations and Métis peoples when they were at their most vulnerable, and a rigid taxonomical cataloguing system for Indigenous artefacts that provides no room for acknowledging Indigenous cultural and community relationships (Greene 2016). There are also unavoidable moments of friction when museum rules must be set aside in favour of Indigenous imperatives. The unconditional commitment to consultation is not always easy to achieve in a museum institution. The institutional willingness to take direction from

others within an exhibit development process is often hard won. Surrendering the final edit to a community must occasionally be strongly defended within the museum's exhibit development processes. Permitting and even encouraging hands-on engagement with museum artefacts by community members—from children, through artists and Elders, to ceremonial experts—requires the wholehearted surrender of museum authority. To allow for the relational bonds between communities and artefacts to reassert themselves, these obstacles have to be overcome.

4. The Relational Obligations of Collections

All museums share these frictions because of the unavoidable “asymmetries of power” Clifford identifies, but the Manitoba Museum also has a unique set of affordances that provide opportunities for improving relationships between Indigenous communities and their collections with a minimum of institutional resistance. The most important structural difference between the Manitoba Museum and other provincial museums is that, at the Manitoba Museum, most research and exhibitions are organized around the idea of “biomes”—natural areas of the province which provide the ecological field upon which human and natural history takes place. In these parts of the Manitoba Museum, humans have ecologies, and nature has history. When we talk about the loss of over 90% of native prairie habitat, it is a shared disaster. Throughout the museum, Indigenous and non-Indigenous histories are interwoven and share the same time frame. At no point was there ever a separate exhibit space at the Manitoba Museum for the “timeless” Indigenous culture exhibit, the harmful exhibit that ignores the idea of Indigenous histories and political activism and situates Indigenous peoples and their “lost” cultural identity in the timeless “Indigenous ethnographic present” (Clifford 1983, p. 125). Additionally, as a relatively small museum, the curators at the Manitoba Museum who deal with Indigenous communities are the same individuals who conceive the exhibits, manage their development, select artefacts, and write exhibit text. This means that communities deal with curators and museum management who are in a position to honour requests made in consultation. The other gift that the Manitoba Museum has is its immediate visitor communities. These include many school children and their families from Indigenous, settler, and more recent immigrant communities, and although it is hard to be sure, the curators use a working assumption that 30% of the school kids who will come to the museum in the next few years will have Indigenous family connections.⁸ The museum's claim to be “the province's biggest classroom” and our mandate to serve these Indigenous children place a welcome obligation on the museum to direct programming and exhibits to the needs of this important audience segment. We have stopped writing exhibit text that refers to “they” and “them” because we are now well aware that Indigenous visitors reading this text may be thinking of “me” and “mine”.

Due to this relational imperative, the Manitoba Museum has been a leader in conversations with First Nations peoples about representation. There is a long history of personal connections between Indigenous community leaders and curators. For the last 35 years, there have been no exhibits about First Nations or Métis people which did not involve substantial community engagement. Exhibit development is informed by the values of respect, of making sure that community members are seen and can see themselves in the stories as they are presented. For example, a recent exhibit tells the story of the Métis community of Ste. Madeleine. There, in 1938, with little warning, thirty-five houses, the store, and the community's school were burnt to the ground while the people were away working. The land was expropriated without meaningful compensation to create a big pasture for cows. At the museum, the story of Ste. Madeleine is told in Michif, with six Métis voices. Creating this exhibit involved substantial engagement between Ste. Madeleine community members and museum staff.⁹ On opening day, two hundred Métis came to celebrate the exhibit, and five members of the Manitoba Métis Federation Cabinet spoke about the importance of this exhibit to them. At the end of his presentation, Elder George Fleury, who witnessed the tragedy as a child, turned to us and said, “I think at last we have been heard”.¹⁰

The museum has also had a leading role in exploring, innovating, creating, and sustaining relationships with Indigenous communities. For the last 20 years, the museum has maintained a “keeping place”, commonly called the Sacred Storage area, cared for by a respected Elder, where Indigenous individuals, communities, and institutions can temporarily place precious objects for safe keeping.¹¹ There is no expectation that the museum will acquire these objects or hold them permanently. Access protocols and care instructions are specified by the owners or the community Elders. There is a slow but steady stream of requests to place important historical and ceremonial objects in this “keeping place”. At present, the museum is caring for objects needing this type of specialized care that include the Tommy Prince medals¹², the Pauingassi Collection which was recently repatriated from another Manitoba institution (Matthews 2016), and special ceremonial or sacred objects collected by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.¹³

5. A Paradigm Shift

However, despite all of this, the Manitoba Museum is also a product of its colonial past. As with other institutions with colonial roots, the museum has not always found it easy to move away from a structural legacy—the far from congenial organizing principle of “cultural evolutionism” or “cultural Darwinism”—and the paradigm that cultures evolve over time on a single trajectory with Indigenous people and other “Stone Age peoples” at the bottom and modern educated Canada at the top has informed museum exhibit strategies and public education for a long time (Stocking 1965). This stigmatizing paradigm specifically disadvantages Indigenous people who appear on this ladder next to Stone Age hunters, as living examples of the primitive past. As a theory, the idea of “cultural evolutionism” or “cultural Darwinism” was discredited by anthropologists more than 120 years ago. As professionals, anthropologists have long since accorded the peoples with whom they work the respect they deserve for finding ways to live meaningful, technically complex, and happy lives in every corner of the world. Franz Boas, the father of modern North American anthropology, wrote in 1896 that anthropologists must “renounce the vain endeavour to construct a uniform systematic history of the evolution of human culture” (Boas 1896, p. 908; Stocking 1966, p. 880; Greenhouse 2010, p. 5).¹⁴ The Manitoba Museum’s Orientation Gallery, which opened in 1970 and remained unchanged for 45 years, proposed a cultural Darwinist view of Manitoba history. For years before its closure, museum staff were aware of the problematic nature of this gallery. The Indigenous components of the exhibits had offensive labels and inappropriate photos, but financial constraints and long museum planning cycles meant that in January 2015, this racist and colonial paradigm was still part of visitors’ introduction to the museum.

In this introductory exhibit (See Figure 5), three panels exemplified the steps of the cultural Darwinist paradigm. The first image, “Man the Hunter”,¹⁵ was followed by “Man the Herder” and then “Man the Farmer”. The unspoken assumption was that farming was a sophisticated technical achievement involving the latest intellectual and economic advances.

In this triptych, the panel relating to hunting featured a bare-chested Hopi man with a dead hare in one hand and a wooden club in the other.¹⁶ The panel offered no explanation as to why a Hopi hunter in a state of partial undress, whose home was over 2000 km from Manitoba, should be featured in the introductory exhibit to the Manitoba Museum. However, the implication was clear. An Indigenous hunter is an example of the most primitive cultural form; he is our past in the present. As I have mentioned earlier, this idea was rejected by anthropologists more than a century ago. At the time that the museum was built, it was already offensive and out-of-date science. Its presence and persistence in an otherwise sympathetic museum have everything to do with the power of racist stereotypes that have informed Canadian ideas and beliefs about First Nations people more generally. When this panel with its cultural Darwinian paradigm was juxtaposed with the first temporary treaty exhibit in a nearby hall, with paintings and photographs of the thoughtful, suit-wearing First Nations treaty negotiators, its offensiveness became so

apparent that it could not be avoided any longer. Within months, a curtain went up across the exhibit, and soon it was gone for good.



Figure 5. Orientation Gallery panel, Manitoba Museum 2014/08/18. Image Manitoba Museum 2014/08/18.

However, it is a much bigger job to get rid of this idea in the minds of our visitors. If the paradigm of cultural Darwinism seems familiar, it is. The Manitoba Social Studies and History school curriculums, and I strongly suspect most Canadian school curriculums, are still organized around this paradigm. School children throughout the province, and probably in many other jurisdictions, learn about social history by following the trajectory of the cultural Darwinian paradigm. They start with the Stone Age, and then First Nations people and First Nations culture. They then learn the story of the ascent of humanity as a single-track history traced through the Middle East and Europe from Mesopotamia, and the invention of agriculture and writing through the Egyptians, the Romans, the Dark ages, the Renaissance, etc., up to the present. Students will climb this intellectual ladder at least three times before they are out of high school. Before they arrive at the museum, our visitors' brains are fully furnished with the cultural Darwinian paradigm and the ideas that flow from it. The celebration of the triumph of European technical and academic achievement which sits at the heart of this racist structure frames Indigenous lifeways as an anachronism.¹⁷

Not surprisingly, this insidious paradigm has profoundly negative consequences for Indigenous people. It establishes a story about European cultural superiority and the inevitability of European political dominance. It normalizes the idea that resistance to the brutality of colonization is futile, and that no credible resistance can be mounted. Additionally, it places First Nations cultural authenticity in the past. However, sympathetically, Indigenous cultures may be taught in schools, their anachronistic otherness and their former, but now lost, perfection implicit and unchallenged. In this frame, successful Indigenous people today are hopelessly contaminated by modernity. They can be either culturally whole but part of the past, and therefore irrelevant, or they can be competent in the present but inauthentic. This framing makes First Nations people vulnerable to the judgement of others who use stereotypes about this imagined "authentic past" to criticize the authenticity of successful Indigenous members of society, without considering the impact of one hundred years of intentional cultural genocide under the Indian Act and through the Indian Residential School System. Their current "issues" are constructed as the natural consequence of an inability to be culturally whole in the present.¹⁸ When the histories of successful First Nations peoples are told, they are told as exceptions and framed by an assumption of cultural loss. When stories of resistance are told, they are framed by a sense of inevitable failure; the triumph of colonialism and Indigenous powerlessness to cope in the present is assumed. Stories of First Nations struggles are boxed in by the pre-

sumption that “their” “issues” are related to categorical Indigenous cultural and personal fragility.

It is this racist and colonial paradigm that the Berens Collection and its strong community relationships challenge (See Figure 6). The coats and medals presented the museum with an opportunity to develop a new exhibit incorporating the latest First Nations thinking about treaties: to turn visitors away from the idea of a treaty as a forced, once-and-done property transaction and toward the idea of the Numbered Treaties as instances of successful First Nations diplomacy.¹⁹ Over seven years, one temporary exhibit called “*We Are All Treaty People*” grew into five permanent exhibits including the introductory exhibit visitors now see when they enter the museum. Throughout, the exhibits were imagined, shaped, and made possible by the Elders Council of the Treaty Relations Commission and the Association of Manitoba Chiefs who looked to the museum’s collection of pipes as socially active allies. From the outset, they intended that the pipes would boldly instantiate Indigenous agency in treaty making.



Figure 6. (Left): Berens Family Collection/Treaty No. 5 exhibit.; (right): Berens Family Collection, Treaty No. 5 medal H4-2-212 A, B, and 1901 commemorative medal H4-2-213. Image Manitoba Museum.

The discussion between the Manitoba Museum’s Curator of Cultural Anthropology and the Elders Council about how to create an exhibit that would emphasize First Nations agency in treaty making was an opportunity to explore the relationships the treaties set in motion. The Elders Council visited the museum to see the galleries, and Dr. Matthews was a guest at many Elders Council meetings. They felt that the best idea was to match every one of the treaty medals that stood for treaties in Manitoba, *Zaagaakwa’on*, with a peace pipe, *Opwaaagan*, and pipe bag, *Opwaaagani-mashkimod*. The medals would signify Canada’s treaty promises; the pipes would signify First Nations treaty promises and remind everyone of the sacred nature of the agreement. Beaded pipe bags for each of the pipes would represent the social and spiritual wealth of First Nations people at the time of treaty making and, not incidentally, the artistic and political contributions of First Nations women. The discussions, many of which took place in Anishinaabemowin, ranged from the appropriateness of the display of pipes *at all*, to the role of a female curator, the *wemitigoozhiikwe*, because the care and handling of these types of Anishinaabe pipes is conventionally the task of an *Oshkaabewis*. Ultimately, the discussion turned on the role that the pipes could play in educating First Nations children about their own treaty history. After a lively Anishinaabemowin debate, Elder Dr. Harry Bone carried the day when he said to the others, “If we don’t put these pipes on display, *our* children will never see them”.

The Elders Council insisted on an exhibit that highlighted First Nations concepts about treaty making. They wanted the respectful long-term relationship that was initiated at the time of treaty making to be explained in First Nations terms, with reference to First Nations protocols, and they wanted visitors to understand that the treaties signed with Canada were neither treaties of conquest, nor land transactions. They were agreements about First Nations' willingness to share traditional ancestral lands with newcomers as part of an anticipated long-term respectful relationship. The Elders encouraged the museum to use the title, *We are All Treaty People*, because it contains within it the main ideas about treaties: that all Canadians benefit from the ongoing respectful relationships made in treaty, and that the making of those treaties can provide a valuable model for rethinking obligations and creating future respectful, sharing relationships with First Nations people.

The Elders Council also wanted to introduce visitors to the idea that First Nations negotiators of the Numbered Treaties brought to treaty making a lifetime of experience with settlers, that they had, for the previous 150 years, capably initiated and maintained trading relationships on their own terms. During the fur trade era, trade Chiefs called *Odaawaagani-ogimaakaan* negotiated "*Wiidaakonige'idung*, trade treaties". These annual discussions ordered diplomatic and exchange relationships with newcomers as they had done between First Nations trading partners before ships arrived. In the presence of the "ancestors, *Aadizookaanag*", and "spirit guides, *Manidoog*", "pipes, *opwaaganag*", were smoked, feasts were shared, and gifts were exchanged. First Nations expectations about treaty making were framed by their experience with these ongoing trade relationships. In the context of the Manitoba Museum's exhibits, both Chief Jacob Berens, Naawigiizhigweyaash, and Chief William Mann, Gaagige-Binesi, were trade captains negotiating with the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) before they entered into treaty negotiations with the Crown (Brown 1998; Berens 2009, p. 207, fn. 23).

The fact that there is no one word for the Numbered Treaties in Anishinaabemowin reflects the novelty and significance of these treaties initiated by the new country of Canada as well as the scope, importance, and even polite scepticism with which they were viewed by Anishinaabe people at the time. Linguists speak about the talents of a language, and while English is prized for its complex sentences, what they say of Anishinaabemowin is that there is no end to the words that can be constructed, and that the words are full of meaning as "tiny imagist poems" (Sapir 1921, p. 244). The language also reveals a tendency to withhold judgement until more is known so the names given to the Numbered Treaties reflect both astute Anishinaabe observation and the nature of the promises made at the time (Cf. Black 1977). Many speakers formally call them *Zagaswe'idiiwin* or *Agwi'idiiwin*—literally, to make a relationship by smoking a pipe, the words imply oversight by the *Aadizookaanag* in whose presence one would never speak falsely. Additionally, to show that this was not always the case, an American treaty is often called *Adaandiiwin*, a sale or contract, indicating a secular transaction and the idea that money changes hands. In Northwestern Ontario, the words used for treaty specifically reference the idea that it was concluded by writing, either as "*Ozhibii'igewin*, something that is written", or as "*Nakobii'igan*, a written agreement which is endorsed by two parties". This idea of endorsing something already written is also part of the word for signing an adhesion to an existing treaty, "*Nakwebii'igan*". In the southwest corner of Manitoba, the word for the Numbered Treaties, *Onashowe'idim*, is based on a very old morpheme and refers to a new relationship "brought into being" by the agreement. Others use *Maaajiseg agwi'idiiwin*, which means that the treaty is comprehensive and will provide for all eventualities, that it "covers everything, like the snow covers the ground in a snowstorm".²⁰ These words all contain the hope and expectation that the promises made will be honoured because a pipe was asked to witness events. In all of these instances, the exchange of clothing and the role of pipes in concluding a treaty would have been taken for granted.

6. Pipes Are Diplomats

If the Berens Family Collection placed certain types of relational obligations on the museum with respect to telling the treaty story, the Elders' desire to have pipes as part of the exhibits created a more challenging obligation because exhibiting pipes is contentious. The Manitoba Museum, as with many other museums, has been taking pipes off exhibit for the last thirty-five years at the request of First Nations groups for whom the casual display of pipes is offensive. They are ceremonial objects, and from an Anishinaabeg or Ininiwag perspective, pipes, when they are assembled—*opawaaganag* in Anishinaabemowin (Ojibwe), *ospwâkanak* in Inininowin (Cree)—are other-than-human persons and ought to be treated as such. In these and many other Indigenous languages, pipes are spoken of as if they were a dignified and powerful Elder with work to do. The verbs used to speak of their actions are identical to those used for a human person. Accepting an Anishinaabe perspective and according pipes their proper ceremonial place brings their Indigenous personalities, identities, and surprising relational obligations into the museum.

In this way, pipes challenge a category of object, the sacred object, that is dear to museums, and which often overpowers Anishinaabe understandings within the museum. Sacred objects make perfect sense in a Christian and European context and offer an apparently inoffensive cross-cultural category for conferring respect and cultural deference. Indeed, the Manitoba Museum, long before I came to the institution, had already named the space where pipes are kept the Sacred Storage area. The name remains because it is useful in defining a space for a class of object which museums wish to accord special treatment, involving Elders in their care and using their special status to explain the enforcement of rules about limited access. When speaking English, many Indigenous people also use the word “sacred” to refer to objects they treasure or use in ceremony, but there is no equivalent Anishinaabe category to match the Christian idea of objects which have been made “sacred” for use in a church. That would imply a pre-existing secular identity, a dichotomy which is not an idea conventionally expressed in Anishinaabemowin. The pipes and other Anishinaabe ceremonial objects are “*aabajichigan(an)*, tools, inanimate”, and even “*regalia, wawezhi'on(an)*”, or the most beautiful of ceremonial decorative objects, *mayagaabishin(an)*, remain grammatically inanimate until they are actually in ceremony or have been identified as *wiikannag*, ritual brothers actively participating in ceremony (Matthews 2016, p. 253; Cf. Hallowell 2010, p. 540). For instance, a pipe bowl alone, *onaagan(an)*, is grammatically inanimate as is the “pipe stem, *okij(iin)*”. It is only when they are assembled and the pipe bowl is attached to the pipe stem and the pipe is ready to make smoke that the grammatical attribution changes, and as *opawaaganag*, pipes step up as other-than-human persons. I am reminded by my Anishinaabe linguist colleagues to be careful not to overdraw the implications of Anishinaabe grammar, and that grammatical animacy is not the straightforward guide to “sacred” status or ceremonial importance that museums might wish (Matthews 2016, p. 72).²¹

There is no doubt that pipes were present and playing their historic diplomatic role at the signing of the Numbered Treaties. The photograph below, taken at the Northwest Angle where Treaty No. 3 was signed (See Figure 7), shows four men standing at the center; three are wearing treaty medals and two are holding long ceremonial pipes.²² When the idea of pairing pipes and medals first came up, we consulted Elder Doreen Roulette, who looks after the needs of these ceremonial objects at the museum. She directed us to what you might call “peace pipes”. This type of pipe has a particular shape, usually a long slim t-shaped bowl of sometimes highly decorated red catlinite or black steatite pipestone. These pipes often have a very long pipe stem as in the photo below.

These dramatic peace pipes were often given as gifts to confirm a treaty or establish a relationship. For example, when Thomas Douglas, 5th Earl of Selkirk visited his Red River colony in 1817, in what is now Manitoba, he made treaty with five Chiefs, including Chief Peguis, an Anishinaabe leader who played a very important role in the early history of the settlement. In 1814, well before Selkirk's 1817 visit that resulted in a peace treaty, Chief Peguis paid a visit to Miles Macdonell, the colony's governor. Macdonell described

the visit in his diary: “Peguis came to visit me with his Flag and Pipe of Peace which he leaves with me as a token of his Friendship”.²³ This gift of a pipe to honour or initiate a friendship follows Indigenous protocols related to the establishment of long-term personal relationships.²⁴ Another journal entry, this time by fur trader Peter Fidler in 1815, shows that Peguis had sent pipe stems to England to stand in for him in negotiations and that he expected they would return once their diplomatic journey was completed.²⁵ In 1824, Peguis sent a pipe with the Hudson’s Bay Company’s Governor George Simpson as a present to his “Friends in England”.²⁶ In 1838, he sent a pipe to the Church Missionary Society with the explanation that “I send by you a pipe and a stem. The stem according to Indian custom, personifies [or stands in the place of] the one who sends it, and ratifies and confirms the message which accompanies it”.²⁷



Figure 7. (Left, middle): Treaty No. 3, 1873, at the Northwest Angle, Ontario. Image Manitoba Museum. (Right): Treaty pipes. Image Manitoba Museum.

7. Pipes Are Teachers

Accepting the idea that pipes can be diplomats and represent First Nations political concerns means accepting that they can be teachers and represent First Nations perspectives in the museum. In coming to grips with this idea, the institution is tacitly recognizing that museum artefacts as other-than-human persons have the capacity to act in the world. These are objects (and relationships) that can turn museum authority on its head. Not only are they grammatically animate and spoken of as if the subject was a powerful old man, they are “*wiikaanag*, ritual brothers”. The pipe and those who smoke it become brothers through participation in ceremony, a foundational relationship in the context of the museum and Indigenous communities.

This idea of objects with familial relationships, ceremonial obligations, and a capacity to act in the world is not just a form of magical thinking indulged in by Indigenous people. We would not have museums if we did not, at some substantive level, believe that historical and cultural information inheres in objects: if we did not believe that these objects speak to us across time and convey cultural meaning across cultural boundaries. This way of thinking parallels a new body of anthropological theory which considers the implications of treating certain types of objects as having qualities of personhood (Strathern 1995, 2004a, 2004b; Gell 1998; Latour 2005; Ingold 2000; Bird-David 1990, 1999; Vivieros de Castro 1996; Matthews 2016),²⁸ and that has turned to the possible personhood of objects to critique those who understate the role of objects in social relations. Museum scholars have long been aware that objects have the capacity to change understandings and reinvigorate cultures (Conaty and Janes 1997; Peers and Brown 2003; Krmptich 2014). In this context, while these exhibits might seem, on the face of it, to be just another uneventful collaboration with Indigenous people, they are also a disruptive gesture toward respectful relationships with person-like objects that have long First Nations histories and unknowable power. When the pipes are invited to stand up for First Nations people in an exhibit and use their influence to convey the message that treaties were made in good faith, we are all obliged to honour them.

In this way, the pipes are bringing their world into the museum, and as they do this, their points of reference become ours. As I mentioned earlier, when we began thinking about the first treaty exhibit, we were given a tutorial on pipe taxonomy from our most senior Elder who looks after the objects in the “keeping room”. Elder Doreen Roulette identified the pipes which had the necessary combination of competence and public purpose to be comfortable in an exhibit (See Figure 8). As an Anishinaabe speaker, Elder Roulette’s context for the pipes and their possible role as museum performers is framed by the Anishinaabe language. *Izhigaabawi* is the word she uses to speak about the pipes having the appropriate social standing or status to perform a particular task. *Oniibawitaan* is a pipe that will stand and speak on one’s behalf or represent someone in negotiation. *Zaagaswe’idim* is the way that Elders “share tobacco and a pipe with one another”. As she pointed out, the pipes which have been given a role at treaty and peace negotiations in the past, witnessing, attending, and assisting, have become “*wiikaanag*, ritual brothers”, of those who led the negotiations. Those pipes were created with the intention of having this public persona and could therefore be used for display in the museum. She said that they were confident, even “kind of proud, *wawezhi’owag*”.²⁹ These pipes are “*nindoonabiitaan*, ready to stand up or do what they are called upon to do”. In ceremony, you say to such a pipe as you pass it on to others, “*Gügidootamishin*, Speak on my behalf!” There are other types of pipes, she explained, including women’s pipes like her own, that are very personal and would not be suited to this task. Elder Roulette checked each pipe in the museum’s collection and carefully selected pipes which she judged to be in a certain “state of grace, *izhigaabawi*”, that they would “*oniibawitaan*, they would appreciate this task”.



Figure 8. Elder Doreen Roulette and Elder Charlie Nelson at the opening of the *We Are All Treaty People* exhibit, 2015. Image Manitoba Museum.

What does it mean to interact with a pipe as an animate entity capable of acting in the world, a pipe that is willing to take up this teaching task, *oniibawitaan*? In treaty making, these types of pipes initiate communication with “*Bawaaganag*, spirit entities”, and in so doing, they bring the concerns and protocols related to the *Bawaaganag* into the museum. The pipes have been asked to make smoke, *asemaa* (also animate), which acts as a messenger to the world that *Bawaaganag* occupy, a world that shares the same geography as the world of everyday life, but which can be visited only in dreams.

Hallowell called this geography the “unified spatiotemporal frame” of the Anishinaabeg (Hallowell [1955] 1988, p. 97). Anishinaabemowin translator Roger Roulette suggests you could say the Anishinaabe employ a sort of many-worlds quantum physics model of the universe (Everett 1957; Cruikshank 1979), in which these two parallel Anishinaabe worlds occupy the same geography: one, the everyday world of human existence, and the other, the home of the *Bawaaganag*. The *Bawaaganag* act as intermediaries between humans and the overarching power of the universe, “*Gaa-dibenjiged*, the owner of all”,

whose powers transcend both worlds. The spirit world is rarely encountered by humans, and no one would expect to see *Bawaaganag* in everyday life, but what happens there affects everyday life, and this boundary is frequently crossed in dreams, during a young man's vision quest, or in the course of a medicine man or woman's practice. There are various indications of the demarcation between the two worlds. In stories, a narrator might step over a log, dip under the surface of a lake, or enter a magical black and white world.³⁰ On other occasions, clouds or the morning mist would be said to indicate the proximity of unseen spirits. This is the type of experience referred to by the Anishinaabe word "*manidoobaa*, where the spirit exists". An anglicized version—Manitoba—is the name of our province. Apparently, when the smoke of a peace pipe dissipates, it is said to be "going there". It is understood to be crossing that intangible border between this world and the spirit world. The smoke carries with it a request to the spirits to observe and verify the promises being made. Roulette says of the spirits, "They like smoke, and it's also the closest way to contact them, [from] their world to ours. Smoke is apparently enjoyed by the spirit-beings" (Matthews 1995a, p. 14; 1995b).

Having once decided to include pipes and their protocols in the exhibit, the Elders Council directed me to Charles Nelson, a respected and thoughtful Elder from Roseau River. There is, of course, no "traditional" ceremony to facilitate the presence or exhibition of a pipe in a museum. One hundred years ago, from an Anishinaabe traditional ceremonial perspective, it would have been inconceivable. What this situation required was an innovative approach: the creation of a ceremonial invitation to the pipes to perform as Anishinaabe ambassadors in a treaty exhibit, to play a diplomatic and educational role within a museum on behalf of First Nations people. Elder Nelson agreed to think about how this might be done using a combination of existing ceremonies to initiate a pipe, to honour it, and to offer it as a diplomatic gift. The ceremony for the temporary exhibit in 2012 was ground-breaking and heartfelt. It took place in a small gallery where a temporary treaty exhibit had been set up. All the case lids were removed, and the pipes were placed on bison hides on the floor of the gallery. Smoke billowed through the museum as the pipes were prayed to, sung to, and feasted. The Elders present (25 in all) read every word of exhibit text, rightly observing that they were not just addressing the pipes but endorsing the exhibit itself. A sometimes emotional discussion about the obligations of the Manitoba Museum to truth telling, especially around the issue of Residential Schools and the fate of missing and murdered Indigenous women, was followed by songs, prayers, and feasting.

In preparation for the opening of the permanent exhibit a year later, we spoke to Elder Nelson and suggested that, rather than have all of those Elders come to Winnipeg, we could bring the pipes to them in Roseau. That fall, the Treaty Pipe Feast ceremony was held in the gymnasium of Ginew School in Roseau River First Nation two hours south of Winnipeg (See Figure 9). Eight pipes, several medals, two Chief's headdresses from the 1870s, and a 3D model of the exhibit travelled to the school.

Elder Nelson's "*oshkaabewisag*, his apprentices", took possession of the pipes as soon as we arrived at the school. They took the pipes to the gym, unpacked them, and placed them on the bison hides in the middle of the gym floor. The Elders sat on low benches around the edges of the hides. The preparation of a water drum for ceremony takes about 30 min, so as the children came into the gymnasium, Elder Nelson spoke to them about the significance of the event. Songs had been sung and prayers given when Elder Nelson suggested that perhaps it was time to smoke some of the pipes. His *oshkaabewis* pulled out his pen knife and began to clean and prepare the stone pipe bowls. Some of these pipes had not been smoked for 125 years, and not all were completely intact, but Elder Nelson chose five working pipes and handed them out to men around the room, choosing pipes with special meanings for certain individuals. He gave the Treaty No. 5 pipe to Commissioner Wilson whose home reserve is part of that treaty. Toward the end of the ceremony, Elder Nelson observed that the pipes, now lying on a bison hide robe after they had been smoked, would be behind glass for a year, and that they would find this easier with more human connection. He invited everyone in the room to lay a hand on each one and wish them

well. He touched each pipe thoughtfully and looked at me, so I followed his lead, and then a sort of impromptu reception line formed, and everyone in the room, from the Treaty Commissioner to the smallest child, knelt and touched the pipes in a gesture of community support and connection. This was a mind-changing experience, and everyone involved felt that they had been a part of something magical.



Figure 9. Treaty Pipe Ceremony at Roseau River First Nation. 2016 Image Treaty Relations Commission of Manitoba.

When people hear about this ceremony, they will often ask if they can attend, but this is not a show; it is not a performance. This is the ceremonial work that needs to be performed for such an exhibit to be at the museum. Its purpose is to invite other-than-human persons to perform in a museum institution on behalf of First Nations people. The museum is committed to taking part in this ceremony annually, and after seven years, it has stabilized as an event which is welcomed by the museum and the community (See Figure 10). In inviting Elders to smoke the pipes, Elder Nelson made it possible for the pipes to initiate new relationships, many of which have been sustained ever since. These pipes, with little in the way of museum history, now have new and profound First Nations relationships and a meaningful political and teaching role to fulfill.³¹

Since this first ceremony, Charlie Nelson's sister, Josephine Hartin, the school's vice principal, has organized the event each year. She says that the ceremony is important because "the children need to see how we care for these pipes. We want to pass on that knowledge. It is physical, the touching of the pipes. You help us to do that work when you bring the pipes. What matters is your intention, your connection to us" (Pers. Comm Feb 2021). It never fails to be a wonderful experience, but more importantly, without the work that is performed at the school each year, we could not have pipes on exhibit in the museum, and there would be no treaty exhibits.

James Clifford suggests that a museum, in welcoming a mission of "contact work" such as this, and submitting to the relational obligations of its collection and its Indigenous community, could become a museum "decentered and traversed by cultural and political negotiations that are out of any imagined community's control—[a] museum that begin[s] to grapple with the real difficulty of dialogue, alliance, inequality and translations" (Clifford 1997, p. 213; Matthews 2016, p. 242). In welcoming the pipes in their role as teachers, the Manitoba Museum has made tentative steps in this direction. The new treaty exhibits provide a radical departure from the patronizing arrogance of the cultural Darwinist paradigm. The presence of the pipes firmly places interpretive authority outside

the museum among contemporary Indigenous ceremonial experts. Their participation in the treaty exhibit has made the museum an institution dependent upon multiple Elders including Doreen Roulette for the selection of the pipes, the Elders Council of the Treaty Relations Commission for the authority to organize the exhibit, and the Elders at Roseau River for the ceremonial expertise to make the exhibit possible. Through their work, the pipes have created the possibility that the museum will become a thoughtful partner in the type of respectful long-term relationship with First Nations people which the makers of the treaties envisaged.



Figure 10. Elder Nelson Johnson sharing a Treaty pipe with students at Roseau River First Nation. Image Josephine Hartin.

At about the time that the *We Are All Treaty People* exhibit opened, the idea of voicing a treaty land acknowledgement became an imperative throughout Canada. During a visit to the museum by the Elders Council, we asked what the next step at the museum should be, and after some thought, they said that when we were renewing the galleries, we should move the treaty exhibit up to the entrance of the museum so that it would become the first thing people see, so that the pipes and medals would stand before visitors like the treaty acknowledgement at the beginning of a meeting.

This new treaty exhibit (See Figure 11) opened in April 2021 with eight pipes and eight medals.³² Here, the eight pipes offer a declaration that before you learn anything else about Manitoba, you need to know this: *You are on Treaty Land* and your teachers stand before you.



Figure 11. (Left): Exhibit panel, *You are on Treaty Land*. Image Manitoba Museum; (right): Exhibit case with pipes and medals. Image Manitoba Museum.

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Notes

- ¹ Alfred Gell argues that “[s]ince the outset of the discipline, anthropology has been signally preoccupied with a series of problems to do with ostensibly peculiar relations between persons and ‘things’ which somehow, ‘appear as’ or do duty as, persons” (Gell 1998, p. 9).
- ² There are many treaties with First Nations in Canada, but the Numbered Treaties start after Canadian Confederation and are related to traditional territories of First Nations peoples from west of Lake Superior to the Rocky Mountains. Treaty No. 1 was made in 1871, and Treaty No. 11 and various adhesions were still being ratified in 1921 (Craft 2013; Foster 1979; Price 1979; Taylor 1979).
- ³ William and Nancy’s third son Percy Jones Berens was named after Rev. Jones who was the United Church Minister in Berens River at the time.
- ⁴ William Johnston, in Michigan Pioneer Collections, 37:186. See also William W. Warren, “History of the Ojibways, Based Upon Traditions and Oral Statements”, in Minnesota Historical Collections, 5:268 St. Paul 1885 cited in (White 1982, p. 65) (Cf. Podruchny 1995).
- ⁵ As quoted in (White 1982, pp. 63–64) from the letters of William Johnston, 1833.
- ⁶ Nancy (Everett) Berens’ Méis grandmother was a Cree woman from Norway House married to Joseph Boucher, a French voyageur from Quebec. Nancy’s embroidery style is typical of Cree and Cree Métis women from Norway House, and although

Nancy eventually became the wife of one of the most famous Anishinaabe chiefs on Lake Winnipeg and lived in Berens River most of her life, the embroidery and beading styles she passed on to her daughters were Norway House Cree/Cree Métis.

- 7 This is a bronze version of the silver medal belonging to Chief Jacob Berens. These bronze medals were sent to Chiefs who were unable to meet with the Prince of Wales in person. In all, over 200 medals were distributed to Western Canadian Chiefs. Ted Mann's father gave him the medal as a wedding present 30 years earlier. Ted told us that his father also had the treaty medal at the time but later sold it to buy golf clubs. After the photograph was located, Ted and Rachel kept it at their house for several months before they decided it needed to be at the museum. In working out the provenance of the photo, I was directed by a friend to an old CTV, W5 investigative story from the 1960s about terrible housing on Sagkeeng First Nation. The reporter was interviewing people with inadequate housing, and one of them was Ted's father, Sam, who told the audience that he did not understand why he, his wife, and seven children had to live in such a small house when his grandfather had signed Treaty No. 1. As the reporter looks on, he climbs on a bed and brings down this photo and continues the interview while stroking grandpa's photo. W5, Air Date: 07/01/1968. Item: Native Poverty and Indian Affairs Panel Discussion—Item No. 124451634.
- 8 The proportion of Indigenous children in Winnipeg schools has been rising over time as First Nations families move to the city. Statistics Canada 2016 census data for Manitoba show that 28% of Manitobans under 20 self-identify as Indigenous and those under 5 years of age constitute 30% of Manitoba's population. Please see: https://www.gov.mb.ca/healthychild/publications/hcm_2017report.pdf (accessed on 6 October 2021), p. 39. The City of Winnipeg Infrastructure Planning Office extracted census data for Winnipeg and found that 28% of Winnipeg residents under the age of 14 are Indigenous and that the proportion of Indigenous Manitobans living in the City of Winnipeg has increased from 34% to 38% over the last 20 years. "The self-identified population of Indigenous people in the City of Winnipeg", they write, "has grown by more than 10,000 people over the past 5 years". There is no reason to think that this has not continued. Please see: <https://winnipeg.ca/cao/pdfs/IndigenousPeople-WinnipegStatistics.pdf> (accessed on 6 October 2021), pp. 6–7. Coming to the museum is a favourite trip for First Nations schools so this estimate may be conservative.
- 9 Ste. Madeleine exhibit is called "*Ni Kish Kishin, I Remember, St. Madeleine*". The exhibit text is in three languages: Michif first, English, and French. The case includes ecological information as the site of the village is now an example of the rare survival of critically endangered native prairie birds, insects, and plants and an ecological diversity hot spot—an example of museum story telling which includes natural and human histories. See also: (Paul 2019).
- 10 Elder George Fleury repeated this quote in an article by CBC journalist Shane Gibson (2019), "'We lost our homes': Museum exhibit tells story of Métis village's displacement": CBC News Posted: 24 May 2019. 9:36 PM CT | Last Updated: 24 May 2019, accessed 7 May 2021.
- 11 This space is also designed to store objects that are within the museum's collections to ensure their needs are met, they are under the proper care of an Elder, and access is restricted.
- 12 Tommy Prince, a member of the Brokenhead First Nation in Manitoba, was the most decorated Indigenous soldier in World War 2, and his medals were lost for a time. When they were rediscovered and purchased at auction, the owners asked the museum to keep them in our vaults. They are visited and go on outings from time to time at the request of or with the permission of the owners but otherwise remain in the museum. They have recently been put on permanent display because several copy sets have been purchased by the medal owners for use in schools and public events, but they still go out at least once a year for commemorative events.
- 13 Dr. Katherine Pettipas, former Curator of Ethnology at the Manitoba Museum, was one of the major contributors to the Task Force on First Nations and Museums (1993) and remains a respected advocate for repatriation and collaborative exhibit development. Dr. Leigh Syms, the former Curator of Archaeology, developed a pioneering project community archaeology project to salvage Cree gravesites inundated by floodwater on South Indian Lake.
- 14 Stocking explains that Boas, over a period of 30 years, developed a critique of cultural Darwinism that "involved the rejection of simplistic models of biological or racial determinism; it involved the rejection of ethno-centric standards of cultural evaluation; it involved a new appreciation of the role of unconscious social processes in the determination of human behavior; it implied a conception of man not as a rational so much as a rationalizing being (Cf. Stocking 1966. Taken as a whole, it might be said that this change involved-to appropriate the language of Thomas Kuhn-the emergence of what may be called the modern social scientific paradigm for the study of Boas and the Culture Concept".
- 15 The Man in each of these panels was removed 15 years before when the museum changed its name from the Museum of Man and Nature to the Manitoba Museum.
- 16 Image credit: Peter Newark American Pictures/Bridgeman Image PNP246124.
- 17 Building community relationships is a hidden part of museum work. What the public experiences is the galleries. It is expensive and complicated to change "permanent exhibits" in galleries. In 2016, with the help of Indigenous Curatorial Assistant Amanda McLeod, we documented 92 instances of unfortunate language in the existing exhibits, including "Half Breed wives" and more than 20 "Indians". This is not language we use, nor have we used it in a long time, but it lives on in old, outdated exhibits. The three panels mentioned here introduced the visitors' experience for more than forty years, framing the interpretation of Indigenous stories within the museum, including photos of an "Eskimo" hunter and an artefact labelled "Indian knife".

- 18 For more on the negative consequences of this idea that First Nations and Métis peoples are unable to adapt to modernity, see Mary Jane Logan McCallum (2014), on Indigenous women and work, and Evelyn Peters et al. 2018, about forced removal of Métis families to make way for a Winnipeg shopping mall.
- 19 The Elders were chosen for their knowledge, their history of advocacy, and the respect that others have for their wisdom. This cohesive group represents the Dakota, Ininiwak, Anishiniwak, Anishinaabeg, and Denesuline people of the province First set up in 2005, they had been meeting, commissioning research, conducting extensive community oral history interviews, and publishing books about treaties for ten years when discussions about this exhibit began. The Elders Council were ideal partners for this project because their educational mandate neatly parallels that of the museum. Some of the other famous Canadian Indigenous exhibit collaborations, such as the creation of the Blackfoot Gallery at the Glenbow (Cf. Conaty 2003; Conaty and Janes 1997). were, in large part, facilitated by the existence of a First Nations institution with the mandate and community support to confidently answer questions of culture, message, and representation. In the case of the Glenbow, it was the Mookaakin Culture and Heritage Foundation (Cf. Peers and Brown 2015; Nicks 2003). The Elders Council played this role for the Manitoba Museum with respect to treaties, and without their encouragement and firm direction, the museum would not have developed the treaty exhibits in the way that it did.
- 20 Roger Roulette Pers.Comm. (July 2021). James Chalmers wrote an excellent student paper in 2020 on the Anishinaabe words for treaty as part of the Manitoba Museum's Indigenous Scholars in Residence program. We thank him for gathering most of these terms together and examining their history. In his paper, he lists several other words for treaty used in other parts of Canada and the US (Chalmers 2020).
- 21 Anishinaabemowin speakers are well known for the distinction they make between animate and inanimate things. The meaning of this grammatical propensity is hotly debated, but there is no doubt that speakers do attribute social agency to entities such as pipes, treating these objects as responsive and sentient beings. Sometimes these attributions become grammaticalized; particular classes of entities receive special grammatical treatment and are cast as grammatical animates. This is true, for example, of many items associated with traditional religious practice and ceremony, such as "*opwaaagan*", "pipe", "*asemaa*", "tobacco", and *dewe'igan*, "drum". However, even in the case of the drum, there is a grammatical form which is inanimate, and using inanimates to disguise the importance of an object fits an Anishinaabemowin convention that Mary Black Rogers calls "discrete speech, waawiiimaajimowin". See (Black 1977; Matthews 2016, p. 72).
- 22 In the photo of a Treaty No. 3 event at the Northwest Angle (the western most tip of Ontario), you really cannot tell the Treaty Commissioners from the Chiefs. They were all wearing suits. For the most part, they knew one another well. Many of them had been involved in the fur trade together, and by the 1870s, there existed a 200 year-long history of relationships built on non-Native dependence on Indigenous skills and technologies. The canoes in the photograph are an example. The negotiator for Treaty No. 1, Weymouth Simpson, was the son of Sir George Simpson, Governor of the Hudson's Bay Company and resident in the west for many years and Governor of the HBC from 1820 until he died in 1860. I would like to thank Anne Lindsay for pointing me to the identity of the people in this photograph.
- 23 He then lists a keg, blankets, and other presents he gives to Peguis and his family in exchange. In Miles Macdonell Diary, Friday, 20th May 1814, Selkirk Papers, f. 16900, Reel C-16, https://heritage.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.lac_reel_c16/414?r=0&s=2 (accessed on 6 October 2021) Library and Archives Canada. I would like to thank Anne Lindsay for directing me to this section of Macdonell's diaries.
- 24 In the case of the people of Peguis First Nation and the Lord Selkirk, this relationship is still honoured. For the 200th Anniversary, the 11th Lord Selkirk, James Douglas Hamilton, came to Manitoba to personally renew the relationship with the current Chief at Peguis, Glenn Hudson. Gifts were exchanged, and whenever Peguis and Brokenhead FN Chiefs are in London, they are invited to dine with Lord Selkirk at the House of Lords (Bill Shead and former Chief Jim Bear Pers. Comm. 2017).
- 25 As Sarah Carter writes, "Speaking to an assembly led by Saulteaux chiefs Peguis and Yellow Legs in June, 1815, HBC surveyor Peter Fidler referred to the King as the 'Great Father of us all', encouraging them to believe that the British monarch had a special interest in their welfare. Fidler told them that the Governor of the HBC had gone overseas, and had taken the Cree and Saulteaux's pipe stems with him '... in order that he may talk to our Great Father, that he may be charitable to you and your Friends—and we expect that when you see your Pipe stems again, you will be proud from having been the Friend to his Children in his Absence...'" (Carter 2004), http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/mb_history/48/greatmother.shtml (accessed on 6 October 2021). Thanks to Anne Lindsay for her assistance with these historical records. The text of the document can be found here: https://heritage.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.lac_reel_c17/909?r=0&s=4 (accessed on 6 October 2021). 1815, June 24th entry, f. 18498–18499, in Library and Archives Canada, Selkirk Papers, Journal at Red River Settlement with the account of the Population of the Free Canadians and the three Tribes of Indians in this Quarter with a Meteorological Journal and Astronomical Observations made at different places by Peter Fidler, to which is added the Astronomical Observations of Thomas and Charles Fidler 1815.
- 26 Letter, R.P. [Robert Parker] Pelley, June 7th, 1824, Library and Archives Canada, Selkirk Papers, f. 8302, https://heritage.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.lac_reel_c8/520?r=0&s=4 (accessed on 6 October 2021).
- 27 Quoted in (Podruchny 1995). Medals played a similar role in Crown/First Nations diplomacy. The medal given to Peguis by Lord Selkirk was replaced three years later by Selkirk's estate because Peguis had used the first one to quell a disturbance. "Last spring War parties assembled to bar the road ... through the Sioux country. I gave my flag and two medals to stop them and succeeded. I have now no mark of a Chief and request my father [Selkirk] to replace them. Father, I have told you the truth

& I have done and remain thy dutiful son. Signed, Peguis, Colony Chief". This letter was written 12 June 1821 to Andrew Colville, one of the executors of the Selkirk estate on behalf of Peguis. In the topmost corner of the letter, there is a note that "Pegouise, Indian, A new flag and medal will be sent to him". ff 7309–7310, Library and Archives Canada, Selkirk Papers, https://heritage.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.lac_reel_c7/699?r=0&s=3, accessed on 20 February 2021.

- 28 Alfred Gell argues that, "Since the outset of the discipline, anthropology has been signally preoccupied with a series of problems to do with ostensibly peculiar relations between persons and 'things' which somehow, 'appear as' or do duty as, persons" (Gell 1998, p. 9).
- 29 *Wawezhi'owag* means proud in a good sense, like an Elder who is sure of his gifts. See (Matthews 2016, pp. 1212–213). Roger and Doreen Roulette, May 2021.
- 30 It could be argued that this is a stretch, but when you consider that Vaidman describes the many worlds interpretation of quantum physics as implying that "There are many worlds existing in parallel in the Universe" and goes on to say that "in every world sentient beings feel as "real" as in any other world" and that "In this world, all objects which the sentient being perceives have definite states, but objects that are not under observation might be in a superposition of different (classical) states", he does seem to be describing the Anishinaabe idea of multiple worlds in a "unified spatiotemporal world" as Hallowell puts it (Hallowell 2010, p. 468; Vaidman [2002] 2021, chp. 2.1, 3.6). Vaidman laments the fact that language is insufficient to express these ideas, but for an Anishinaabemowin speaker, multiple worlds are a given and speakers are comfortable in an open-ended state of being that Mary Black Rogers describes as "percept ambiguity" (Black 1977) and at ease with a world in which possibilities are open.
- 31 One of the museum's medals, a Treaty No. 6 medal, was recently repatriated to Red Pheasant First Nation in Saskatchewan. During the speeches which accompanied the repatriation, the current (2021) Treaty Relations Commissioner of Manitoba, Loretta Ross talked about the Treaty No. 6 medal in this way, telling the people that before the medal returned to them, it had been a teacher, educating the visitors to the Manitoba Museum about how we are all treaty people. July 2019.
- 32 The exhibit includes a medal for the Dakota who have no treaty with Canada but made treaty with the Anishinaabeg in the area. When they returned in the 1860s to reclaim former traditional territory, they presented medals to English officials that they had been given by British Army officers in the War of 1812.

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Article

Gods and Things: Is “Animism” an Operable Concept in Korea?

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Abstract: Shamanship is a thing-ish practice. Early missionary observers in Korea noted that features of the landscape, quotidian objects, and specialized paraphernalia figure in the work of shamans (*mansin*) and in popular religious practice more generally. Subsequent ethnographers observed similar engagements with numinous things, from mountains to painted images, things vested with the presence of soul stuff (*yŏng*). Should this be considered “animism” as the term is being rethought in anthropological discourse today? Should we consider shamanic materiality in Korea as one more ontological challenge to the nature/culture divide? Drawing on existing ethnography and her own fieldwork, the author examines the (far from uniform) premises that govern the deployment of material things in Korean shaman practice. She argues that while the question of “animism” opens a deeper inquiry into things that have been described but not well-analyzed, the term must be used with clarity, precision, and caution. Most of the material she describes becomes sacred through acts of human agency, revealing an ontology of mobile, mutable spirits who are inducted into or appropriate objects. Some of these things are quotidian, some produced for religious use, and even the presence of gods in landscapes can be affected by human agency. These qualities enable the adaptability of shaman practices in a much transformed and highly commercialized South Korea.

Keywords: shaman; animism; material religion; materiality; image; Korea

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1. Introduction

In early ethnology, shamanship was a phenomenon bursting with things—robes, rattles, and drums—collected, documented, and taken back to museums. The emergence of modern socio-cultural anthropology has been described as an enterprise more immediately concerned with the intangible products of the human social imagination, things that become legible through extended participant observation and with some measure of linguistic fluency. Materiality returned to anthropology over the last few decades with parallel developments in religious studies, art history, social history, and other linked fields. In a manner thoroughly consistent with the core premises of socio-cultural anthropology, we are now encouraged to regard objects, at least some objects, as agentive actors in their own right (Gell 1998; Henare et al. 2007). As a consequence, we are reading more about the roles that different objects play in shamanship, objects that become registers of presence in their own right (e.g., Bacigalupo 2016; Desjarlais 1996; Kendall and Yang 2015; Pedersen 2007; Santos-Granero 2009b), and even new things, such as a vacuum cleaner, reveal uncanny possibilities (Humphrey 1999). The question of shamanic materiality is almost inevitably intertwined with the return of “animism” to the anthropological conversation as an ontological challenge to the nature/culture divide. Much of this writing emerges from studies of Amazonian people where souls or energies are not only resident inside people, animals, and things but are shared and passed between them (Descola [2004] 2014; Viveiros de Castro 2004; Santos-Granero 2009a). Other animistic ontologies have been productively discussed in other places (Pedersen 2007, 2011). Ingold broadly characterizes an indigenous animistic perception of the world and all it contains as in a constant state of rebirth (Ingold 2006) and, for Harvey, it is “the widespread indigenous and increasingly popular ‘alternative’ understanding that humans share this world with a wide range of persons, only some of whom are human” (Harvey 2006, p. xi). The new animism, thus,

inverts “a long-established convention” [where] animism is a system of belief that imputes life or spirit to things that are truly inert” (Ingold 2006, p. 9). What was “primitive” and mistaken is now “indigenous” and a salutatory worldview for our troubled planet. I have worked with shamans in Korea, a state society with a long and literate history. In the East and Southeast Asian world, many shamanic and mediumistic traditions and their associated iconographies evoke and, in some instances, were historically associated with courts and kings through long, if fragmented histories (Blacker 1975; Brac de la Perrière 1989; Childs-Johnson 1995; Michael 2015; Sukhu 2012). These are not the shamans who came to anthropology via ethnographies of hunters and herders, not “indigenous” as the term is usually deployed. The powers Korean shamans manifest usually assume human, not animal, form and appear garbed in the accouterments of temporal power, if only the power to disrupt and demand in domestic space. Moreover, whatever their speculative pedigrees, shamans in East and Southeast Asian places are also emphatically contemporary. Korean shamans today inhabit a commoditized lifeworld where the imagery of “raising a tall building” is a prognostication of good fortune and a spirit Official governs the fortune of a family car (Kendall 2009).¹

The notion of “anima” appears in passing in a now-classic essay by the renowned Korean folklorist Yim Sök-jay. Yim wrote to distinguish those practitioners called “*mu*” or “*mudang*” (including the *mansin* of my descriptions) from a more motley assortment of exorcists and inspirational diviners on the one hand, and from the “shamans” of Mircea Eliade’s generalization on the other (Yim 1970; Eliade [1951] 1970). The extremely well-read Yim describes a multi-faceted polytheism where concepts like “anima,” “mana,” and “magic” (*chusul*) may have, just possibly, been an ancient influence, but Yim is at pains to assert how Korean spirits, the forms they take, and the work that they do stem from the lived experience of rural Korea as it was there to be studied at the time of his writing (p. 77). While Yim’s intention was to establish a clear and accurate sense of Korean “*mudang*,” I would like to think that he would have accepted the characterization of “shaman” used by scholars today, an understanding that has been broadened in part by descriptions of Korean practice (Atkinson 1992; Vitebsky 1995). In the spirit of Yim’s clarifying inquiry, “animism” in its 21st-century sense requires a careful examination with respect to the materiality of Korean shamanic practices, the transmissibility of soul stuff, and the mutability of phenomena. In Korea, what, exactly, would we be talking about?

2. “Animism” in Korea?

Early missionary observers, some of whom knew their Tylor and Frazer, encountered the religious materiality of Korean popular religion with intellectual curiosity, aniconic disgust, and, just possibly, the frisson of a call to arms against “demons.” George Heber Jones, writing about what he characterized as the “spirit worship of the Koreans,” describes a world riddled and tormented by perceptions of unseen forces said to inhabit things: “*they hallow to themselves certain material objects, such as sheets of paper, calabashes, whisks of straw, earthen pots, garments, heaps of stones, trees, rocks and springs, and that many of the objects thus sanctified become genuine fetiches (sic.), endowed with the supernatural attributes of the being they represent, this being especially true in the case of portraits sacred to demons*” (Jones 1902, p. 40). Jones calls these practices “fetichism”: “Spirit and fetiche become so identified in the mind of the devotee that it is hard to determine which has the greater ascendancy, but it is certain that the fetiches, however decayed and filthy they may become from age, are still very sacred and the Korean dreads to show them violence (41) [. . .] He has no refuge from them even in his own house for there they are plastered into or pinned on the walls or tied to the beams” (58).

For Jones and his contemporaries writing in Korea and other places, as for the Victorian anthropologists whom some of them were reading, animistic practices constituted “a vast undergrowth in the religious world through which the student must force his way with

¹ For recent accounts of contemporary shaman practice see (Kim 2012; Park 2012; Sarfati 2021; Yun 2019).

axe and torch. [. . .] it is prehistoric, document less and without system, and it lacks all articulation which would permit the religious anatomist to dissect and classify it. [. . .] If we attempt to trace its origin historically, we get lost" (Jones 1902, pp. 40–41). This sense of something stratigraphically underneath and inchoate is implicit in many discussions of popular religion throughout Asia, particularly those aspects that cannot be readily conjoined to so-called world religions and are therefore attached to "a single rubric signifying 'beginning,' 'incipient,' or 'elementary'" in Masuzawa's exegesis (Masuzawa 2005, pp. 4–5). Thus, the anthropologist Cornelius Osgood wrote that "For the Koreans, Shamanism is still an essence of their culture which was distilled in the subarctic night thousands of years before they even reached the Peninsula" (Osgood 1951, p. 217). Invocations of primordialism also appear in contemporary discussions of Korean shamanism, proclaimed by scholars and increasingly by *mansin* themselves as a tenet of cultural nationalism, an otherwise unprovable commonsense.² It will be necessary to set mythologized pasts aside, at least for the moment, in order to evaluate the possible utility of a 21st-century approach to the question of "animism" in Korea.

While Jones had his own missionary agenda and a now-archaic vocabulary, he was not a bad observer. His list of "hallowed objects" or "fetiches" includes objects and practices that would be described in greater detail in subsequent writings, both missionary and academic, Korean and foreign. The question becomes: what did these things mean to those who used them? In what sense were they regarded as "hallowed?" and do they, in this condition, belong in a reconceived discussion of "animism" wherein both matter and soul stuff are recognized as mobile? For heuristic purposes, I will group Jones's itemization of spirited materiality into three different bundles of things. On the one hand—and particularly tempting for a discussion of "animism"—there are the *heaps of stones, trees, rocks, and springs* whose resident deities the *mansin* invoke for inspiration. Then there are objects of human manufacture, ordinary things transformed into something more than ordinary through acts of human agency, the *sheets of paper, calabashes, whisks of straw, earthen pots, and garments*. These enter the discussion either as placings for spirit presence or as their vehicles, a not insignificant distinction. Then, there is the abundant materiality of the shaman's own shrine, less abundant in Jones' day—incense pots, candle holders, vessels of rice, brass mirrors, and all manner of offerings. Here too, stored under the altar, are containers of bright costumes and props that *mansin* use when, with voice and body, they make the gods a performative presence during a *kut*, their signature ritual. Presiding over the shrine space are what Jones characterized as *portraits sacred to demons*. Nearly everything in this final bundle had prior lives as objects of commerce and, today, most of them are mass-produced. Inside the shrine, they become more than ordinary, but to different degrees of "more than ordinary." Everything in my three heuristic bundles, and some that Jones never imagined, such as a television set, become media or conduits in relationships with entities otherwise unseen. Let me deal with each of the three bundles in turn.

2.1. Heaps of Stones, Trees, Rocks and Springs . . .

The veneration of spiritually empowered sites in East Asia is generally assumed to predate iconic representations of buddhas or other divinity (Wong 2021, p. 2). Numinous features of the landscape—a rock, a tree, a mountain—have been celebrated in Korean communities as sites of divine presence sometimes marked with a community shrine and a periodic celebration of the resident tutelary. Dragon Kings inhabiting significant bodies of water have been similarly feted. Old Seoul shamans relate that for a successful induction into their number, a prospective *mansin* would hold her initiation *kut* at the Kuksadang on Inwang Mountain and receive a flow of inspiration standing in front of the Sönbawi, a contoured double-headed karst boulder.³ My primary *mansin* conversation partner, Yongsu's Mother, described how, as an intimation of her calling, she would be drawn to

² This discourse has a historical context in Korea (Janelli 1986; Kendall 2009, pp. 11–24).

³ The site is now contested by Buddhist competition on the mountain.

the rock to bow and rub her hands in compulsive supplication. The Sönbawi and some other renowned rock sites are also efficacious places to offer fertility prayers. Smaller rocks are more portable sources of inspiration. David Kim describes a diviner who has built her practice around a stone, now installed in her shrine, that revealed its numinous qualities through a vision of radiant light (Kim 2015).

Celebrations at village shrine trees and at shrines on mountains or beside bodies of water were frequently noted in early 20th-century accounts (e.g., Clark [1932] 1961; Jones 1902) and were still in evidence when the Ministry of Culture, Bureau of Cultural Properties Preservation conducted an ambitious province-by-province survey of folk practices in the 1960s and 1970s (MCBCPP Ministry of Culture, Bureau of Cultural Properties Preservation, cum. vols.). In contemporary and nearly completely urbanized South Korea, these community *kut* are hard to find, save where they have been maintained, with outside encouragement, as cultural heritage. But certain features of the landscape, particularly mountain landscapes, remain active sites of shaman practice where *mansin* seek out a concentration of powerful gods in spaces conducive to visions, enhancing their own store of inspiration or “bright energy” (*myönggi*) without which a *mansin* cannot practice. Initiates might spend several days at an isolated mountain site seeking visions that will confirm and empower their calling. Senior shamans return periodically in order to, in the words of one old shaman, “recharge their batteries,” revivify their store of inspiration. I have described elsewhere (Kendall 2009, pp. 184–203) the periodic mountain pilgrimages that *mansin* make to potent, literally “bright” mountains (*myöng san*) and their prayers and offerings on mountain peaks, at springs, and in front of guardian shrine trees along the way (Figure 1). These journeys are now more frequent and far-flung than they were in the 1970s owing to better roads, more ubiquitous vehicles, and even international travel to experience Mount Paektu from the Chinese side of the North Korean border. In South Korea today, the lower slopes of potent mountains have come to be covered with *kuttang*, commercial spaces rented for *kut* that can no longer be performed in dense urban residential areas.



Figure 1. A *mansin* on Kampak Mountain purifies the site of a sacred spring, 1977. Photograph by author.

Something very like an animistic ontology seems to be at play in these consequential human engagements with entities and energies resident in the landscape, but the substance of this engagement must be cautiously clarified. Mountains, bodies of water, and trees are not gods; they are inhabited by them; a particular mountain god is sovereign on a particular mountain. Likewise, in their discussion of shaman practices in and around the city of Incheon, [Kwon and Park \(2018\)](#) describe the bodies of water as the domains of different divine generals, including the American General MacArthur. The relative potency of a mountain site is mapped not only by the anticipation of gods but by a scheme of potent energy (*ki*, Chinese *qi*) in veins (*maek*) that run through and charge the landscape. This geomancy (*p'ungsu*, Chinese: *fengshui*) encourages a concentration of potent gods to descend from the sky onto high mountains and transmit their inspiration to a shaman. Good geomancy is now sometimes offered as a marketing point for a particular mountain *kuttang*. However ancient the notion of a charged mountain-scape (and this is unknowable), its basic principles came to Korea via scholarly writing and learned practice as a complex technology of person, time, and place that was subsequently adapted to local practice ([Yoon 2006](#)). The five-element (*ohaeng*) cosmology that undergirds geomancy informs divination, traditional medicine, and most ritual practices. It ascribes relative energies to most matter, stone, wood, metal, and the human body as it interacts with the shifting properties of cyclical time and seasonality. This is a world in constant transformation, in Ingold's sense, but far from primeval or even indigenous. Within this scheme, the energizing potential of a mountain landscape and the presence of powerful gods on mountains is mutable. Energy veins can be altered by changes in the physical landscape, cut or disrupted by roads or other construction. Shamans claim that a mountain's potency is further diminished by environmental degradation in the form of real estate development and increased recreational access. Because high gods are less likely to descend with the same force onto a stripped and noisy mountain-scape, inspiration does not come so easily on the mountain as it is reported to have done in the past ([Kendall 2009](#), pp. xvii–xviii). The mobility of gods and of a broader universe of spirits is a recurring motif in this discussion.

2.2. Sheets of Paper, Calabashes, Whisks of Straw, Earthen Pots, Garments

Jones notes how some of these things, objects of human manufacture transformed by human agency, “become genuine fetiches, endowed with the supernatural attributes of the being they represent” ([Jones 1902](#), p. 40). The sheets of paper he references are suspended as placings for different house gods, notably, but not exclusively, Söngju, the House Lord ([Jones 1902](#), p. 54; [Clark \[1932\] 1961](#), p. 204); [Guillemoz 1983](#), p. 170, 176, Pls. 12 and 13; [Kendall 1985](#), p. 118). Central to both Clark's and my account is the notion that the House Lord periodically leaves—because of an accretion of pollutions from births and deaths—and must be graphically inducted back into the purified house through the medium of a shaking pine branch.

Earthen jars (*tok*, *hangari*, *tanji*) filled with grain as placings for different household gods, ancestors, and other family dead appear in many accounts as do small covered baskets and pouches ([Akiba 1957](#), pp. 102–4; [Clark \[1932\] 1961](#), p. 206; [Guillemoz 1983](#), p. 119, 150, Pls. 9, 10; [MCBCPP Ministry of Culture, Bureau of Cultural Properties Preservation](#), “Chölla Namdo”, 258–59; 1971 “Chölla Pukto”, 94, 96; 1972 “Kyöngsang Namdo”, 185, 186; 1974 “Kyöngsang Pukto”, 157–163, 1975; “Ch'ungch'öng Namdo”, 174, 1976; “Ch'ungch'öng Pukto”, 103, 104; 1978 “Kyönggido”, 90–91). Baskets or jars holding bits of cloth or clothing for ancestors or other unquiet dead—including one *mansin*'s spurned suitor who had committed suicide—had, by the time of my fieldwork, been replaced by small cardboard boxes from the tailor's shop. I encountered the “calabash” as a gourd dipper filled with rice grain and held in the hands of an infertile woman while a chanting *mansin* induced the Birth Grandmother (Samsin Halmöni) into the womb-like vessel ([Figure 2](#)). The woman's hands should shake with the agitation of the descended spirit. She would be instructed to carry the grain-filled gourd home, hoping that the

Grandmother would be present and a safe birth forthcoming (MCBCPP 1971, “Chölla Pukto”, p. 92; Kendall 1977).



Figure 2. This gourd dipper (*pakaji*) was filled with rice as a fertility charm for the author, 1984). By the 1970s, dippers for domestic use were made of plastic in this shape. Photograph by Homer Williams.

Korean folklorists who combed the countryside in the 1960s and 1970s on behalf of the MCBCPP noted that these material placings were disappearing. Their survey forms included the category *pongan sinch'e*, literally “the material body-form of the god’s enshrinement.” Their interviews reveal variations within a single village between households where a particular god had a dedicated container, basket, pouch, or signifying strip of paper and households where identical offerings were made in the same locations but without a material marker of presence. During my fieldwork in rural Kyönggi Province in 1977 and 1978, I saw housewives set down offerings for the household gods in places appropriate to each god, but only once did I encounter a jar meant to contain a deity. During a *kut* in a rural home, a *mansin* assisted the housewife in emptying out old grain, filling the jar with new grain, and setting it on the veranda as a placing for a Talking Female Official (Malhanün Yö Taegam), the source of this family’s good fortune (Kendall 1985, pp. 113–24). In the *mansins’* view, the gods are present in all houses; this particular placing implied a particularly active, demanding presence requiring special attention and respect.

The jars and baskets, then, are containers installed and animated with a presence, much as a statue in a temple is ritually invested with the presence of a buddha; albeit the jars and baskets are rustic forms that would otherwise have had quotidian lives (Figure 3). Prior to their conscription as containers for gods, they had shown no spontaneous indications of uncanny presence. In Peter Pels’ invocation of Tylor, they were not fetishes—objects of innately extraordinary matter—but animated objects; a spirit/soul/god/energy had been inducted into matter (Pels 1998, p. 94). Animation in this context is an action verb describing an intentional performance by a human agent, and because animation can also describe the work of a puppeteer or a cartoonist, perhaps “ensoulment” is the more precise word choice (Santos-Granero 2009b; Silvio 2019).



Figure 3. The jars are in domestic use, filled with condiments, but because the storage platform is a clean, high place, the tall jar here becomes a temporary platform for offerings to the Mountain God and the Seven Stars, 1977. Photograph by author.

But if jars and baskets are not gods or ancestral souls, are they subsequently transformed by their extended contact with gods or other soul stuff (*yöng*) as Jones implied and as a deconsecrated buddha statue or a once-blessed plaster saint is owed respectful treatment (Kendall 2021)? My evidence is limited but suggestive. Robert Sayers, collecting tools and examples of *onggi* pottery for the American Museum of Natural History, was gifted with a jar once used to house a god (AMNH Anthropology 70.3/5083); since the donor's family had become Christian, they had no further use for it and wanted him to have it (Figure 4). They had kept it apart and not returned it to its original utilitarian function. Sayers reports a sense of guilt at removing such an object and bringing it to New York (Sayers 1991). I see it another way; his benefactor seized an opportunity to remove an object of ambivalence and possible danger. I remember another jar, one sighted in a *mansin's* vision during an initiation *kut*. Yes, the initiate's mother confirmed, there had been such a jar in her marital home, one they filled with rice as a site of veneration but, in her time, the practice had lapsed and the container became a water jar, even a piss pot. The *mansin* expressed horror and told the poor woman that this was why she was having such a miserable life (Lee and Kendall 1991).



Figure 4. The jar that was once associated with a god. AMNH Anthropology 70.3/5083.

2.3. Garments and Other Vehicles

Clark describes a Christian faith healing for a recent convert, “on the day the woman took sick, some new cloth had been brought into the house, and the devil being angered at thus being ignored punished his former slaves” (Clark [1932] 1961). I read this as a familiar story, bright cloth or clothing attracting the jealous attention of an ancestor or family ghost. I had heard of jealous dead first wives following festive clothing into the house, riding it to intrude and make trouble. A variety of noxious forces would similarly adhere to a delivery of wooden furniture or shiny goods if the transfer had not been timed for an auspicious day. Wealth brought into the house—a new cow, a new car, electronics as attractive “shiny” things—might arouse the anger of the House Site Official who wanted a cup of wine as his cut of the expenditure. In the logic of noxious influences and greedy gods, I once witnessed the spiritual fumigation of a family’s new television set. (Kendall 1984, 1985, pp. 90, 97–99). Garments and television sets are not animated objects in the sense that some jars and baskets become animated. They are less containers to be inhabited than attractants that draw in an unwelcome presence.

The *whisk* is yet another kind of thing if I take Jones to mean a *chori*, a rice strainer. These would be suspended over the door at the new year with a small coin in the scoop as a talismanic wish for prosperity (MCBCPP Ministry of Culture, Bureau of Cultural Properties Preservation, “Kyönggido,” 92). I encountered them as artifacts of playful folklore, made and distributed by the agricultural cooperative to raise funds while housewives used more efficient plastic.

2.4. Shamanic Materiality Especially [. . .] in the Case of Portraits Sacred to Demons

The placings for the household gods were ordinary, everyday objects before being dedicated to this work. They appeared in the muted earth tones of rural life—brown jars, tan basketry, white paper. The shaman’s shrine, by contrast, is a place of bright, primary color and specialized form, things made for a particular ritual function (Figure 5). Before the advent of industrial textiles and commercial chemical dyes, Korea was an earth-toned place where most people dressed in off-white. Muted colors remain a sign of taste and decorum among the more conservative sectors of the population. Primary colors, the colors of five-element cosmology, set persons and time apart—court dress, robes worn by brides and grooms, rainbow-sleeved garments for children on holidays, and the billowing pure white robes and peaked caps of Buddhist liturgical dances. This is also the clothing worn in the god pictures that hang above the altar, mirrored in the costumes worn by *mansin* when

they manifest gods during *kut*, singing their praises, speaking in their voices, miming, and bantering in their personas. Color makes atmosphere, an attribute of transformation and power “at odds with the normal” (Taussig 2009, p. 8)



Figure 5. A *Mansin* manifesting a Mountain God in a shrine displaying offerings for a *kut*. God pictures are on the rear wall; the Buddha image would not have been seen on early 20th-century *mansin* altars, piles of candles (left) are from clients. Photograph by Homer Williams.

The costumes, and especially the painted images are the most consequential things in the shrine, but the shrine is abundantly thingish and different kinds of objects are transformed by association. Offerings of rice grain, fruit, meat, and alcohol are the basic stuff of rituals large and small. Attractively piled fruit and sweets enhance the surround of a *kut* as they do 60th, 70th, and first birthday celebrations (Figure 6). Some of the offering food brought in by clients goes back home with them, charged with auspiciousness, and some used to be shared around the community, a piece of rice cake torn off and cast away to mollify any wandering ghost who might have followed the offering home. But in contemporary *kut*, held discreetly in commercial shrines and nearly always far removed from everyday life, ostentatious piles of fruit and meat are sometimes left to rot, provoking critical media commentary.

Contemporary abundance is also evident in the more permanent accouterments of the shrine. While jars and baskets dedicated to household gods have disappeared with country houses, the shrines reveal a flowering of shamanic materiality ever more abundant than in the past. Early 20th-century photographs reveal spare altars with basic ritual equipment, occasional candlesticks, a water bowl, cups, an incense pot, or bags of offering rice (e.g., General Commission on Archives and History, United Methodist Church, Mission Albums-Korea; https://web.flet.keio.ac.jp/~shnomura/mura/contents/album_6.htm accessed on 4 March 2012). Today, the shrine of a successful *mansin* contains multiples of incense pots, candlesticks, stacks of offering bowls, electric lamps in lotus shape, and other goods sold in shops catering to ritual needs (*manmulsang*). *Mansin* say that they are expected to return the largess that the gods have brought to them in the form of good business and by this logic, a well-fitted shrine testifies that a *mansin* enjoys the favor of powerful gods (Kendall 2009, pp. 129–78; for *mansin*; Yun 2019, pp. 81–101 with respect to Cheju *simbang*). Some gods have particular tastes; Child Gods receive bags of candy and other treats, Warrior Gods have appetites for meat and alcohol, some being particularly bibulous, and the pock-marked Princess Hogu craves make-up and jewelry to assuage her vanity. Altars sometimes acquire idiosyncratic touches, toys, dolls, or a fish aquarium to amuse

the Child Gods while the shaman is out working, or little figurines in the form of childlike monks (Figure 7). Yongsu's Mother, my primary *mansin* conversation partner, kept the books I wrote on a tray on her altar (Kendall 2009, pp. 154–76).



Figure 6. A *Mansin* performs a *kut* for the dead in front of an offering tray. Bananas and tomatoes have been added to a traditional display of apples, pears, and carefully constructed towers of traditional sweets. In 2003, the crown to the right of the *mansin* is more elaborate than it would have been in the 1970s. Photograph by author.

Particularly consequential are the mirrors, fans, knives, and other media with which the *mansin* directly engages the gods (Yang 2019). Some of these, along with the incense pots and bowls on the altar, costumes, prayer cushions, and other paraphernalia are inscribed with the names of clients who have particular relationships with particular gods in the *mansin*'s own pantheon and who have consequently been advised to make this gift, a link between their own household and the power of the shrine. All of this material recalls Pedersen (2007, p. 153) evocation of a “knotted virtuality” in the scraps of signifying cloth that connect a Mongolian shaman’s altar to things unseen, but the conduits of connection in the *mansin*'s shrine are finished products from a specialized commerce in ritual goods. Jongsung Yang suggests, however, that while “in the past, shamans knew where every item in their shrine came from, who made it, and when it was made, with each item having its own meaningful story and a connection to human energy,” these ties are muted when commercial objects are factory-made and purchased in abundance for ostentatious display (Yang 2019, p. 219).

The god pictures (*musindo*, *taenghwa*) that hang above the altar, Jones’ “portraits sacred to demons,” are the most significant and power-charged objects in the shrine, indeed in this entire discussion. The portraits function as seats for the gods who work with a particular *mansin*, gods whose presence she has seen in dreams or visions (Kendall and Yang 2015; Kendall et al. 2015; Kim 1989; Walraven 2009; Yoon 1994). The gods must be present in order for the *mansin* to practice, to see a vision, hear a voice, feel a bodily sensation, or simply intuit the gods’ intentions, which she must then put into “the true words of the spirits” (*parün kongsu*) conveyed to her client. This is not play-acting or should not be. In *mansin* logic, the stakes are high and if her words are wrong, she and her clients will suffer.



Figure 7. Idiosyncratic offerings for the Child Gods and, on top, a flowery headpiece for Princess Hogu, the early 1990s. Photograph by author.

In the successful resolution of an initiation *kut*, the gods take up their seats in the shrine, but this outcome is by no means certain. The gods may choose not to enter the paintings, the gods may be present but not strongly present, and the gods may later depart from the shrine and leave the *mansin* to silence. To sustain the gods' favor, a *mansin* daily venerates them in front of their portraits, asking for a clear flow of inspiration. When the paintings are old and tattered, the gods are petitioned to temporarily vacate their seats until clean, new images can be installed. Again, one encounters the anticipated mobility of things unseen in the movement of gods into and out of the paintings.

In contrast with the repurposing of domestic objects for sacred use, god pictures are produced for the *mansin's* work and have been for many centuries (Yoon 1994). A god picture must be an accurate representation of the deity seen in the *mansin's* vision, ideally rendered by a painter who labors to capture the *mansin's* description in his own mind and who observes protocols of purity during his work (Figure 8). In the past, a *mansin* would acquire such paintings only when her gods had favored her with sufficient business to be able to afford them, the installation of the paintings certifying a fully realized *mansin*. Since the late 20th century, most paintings have been produced in commercial workshops and

only a few painters claim to follow traditional production protocols for prayer and purity when executing a commission. *Mansin* who patronize traditionalist painters describe this kind of work as an essential precondition for a painting that will house a soul, but even the purists will acknowledge that it is the *mansin's* own inspiration, the degree to which she is favored by the god, that causes the god to descend into and work through the painting (Kendall et al. 2015). In the 1970s, a far less affluent time than the present, most of the *mansin* I encountered in rural Kyōnggi Province hung cheap commercial prints. Today, it is the workshops that are being undersold and supplanted by itinerating painters from China's Korean Autonomous Region where most of the material contained in the ritual supply shops is also produced (Kendall et al. 2015). Whatever their origin, many regard the objects and paintings from a *mansin's* shrine as having souls attached to them, a cause of reticence when old god pictures came to be collected and displayed as art.



Figure 8. Mountain God paintings are now conventionalized images but these two old images, probably by the same hand, reveal distinctive visions of different Gods on different mountains, early- to mid-20th-century. Museum of Shamanism, photograph by Jongsung Yang.

The *mansin's* shrine is a visual cliché in the contemporary Korean imagination, a legible setting when it appears in Korean film and TV drama. And yet, as the foregoing discussion suggests, a visual continuity of color, costume, and painted image elides the many changes in South Korean life over the last century as reflected in the shrine. Relative affluence is indexed in the piles of offering food and material goods on the altar. Rationalized production has meant not only accessible, affordable things, it has generally redefined understandings of how a god picture is made. The shrine also witnesses a shift in the loci of engagement with the gods who are the substance of the *mansin's* work. The ordinary jars and baskets once conscripted as spirit placings in country households have become the stuff of folkloric display. The country households whose floorplans once mapped the location of resident gods are also nearly gone. Ritual engagements with the gods, often performed by housewives themselves, have shifted from residential space to the specialist space of the shrine and the *kuttang*. I say this not as a nostalgic backward glance but to mark sifts in an adaptable ontology of gods who sometimes inhabit things. Can we call this ontology “animism”? Do we gain anything by doing so?

3. Conclusions

Gods, souls, and more generalized spirits make use of different kinds of material things and they do so in different ways. This is not, in Tylor's sense, an animist worldview that invests inert matter with spirit, nor do spirits, in the strictest sense, become pots or baskets or even trees and mountains. Material objects are not, in Ingold's sense, "alive," although in five-element cosmology they might be considered energized to different degrees or in shaman practice, charged with spirit presence much as a *mansin's* mortal body is charged with inspiration. A 21st-century perspectivism developed in another place applies best to a *mansin's* capacity to sometimes see and feel the world through the eyes and appetites of a greedy god or a hungry ghost, but as an avatar of recognizably human-like forms (cf. Viveiros de Castro 2004). The mobility of gods, spirits, souls, energies, the mutability of their presence has been a salient motif in the foregoing discussion, activities compatible with, if not identical to Ingold's sense of a world constantly being reborn and of new animism writing more generally. In the Korean examples, the mobility of spirit necessitates acts by human agents to invite and encourage their presence in otherwise inanimate things and in shaman bodies. I suggested above that "animation" is best understood in these contexts as an action verb, a generalization extended to most of the things that I have been describing. Human agency, combined with spirit intention, causes gods to be present in jars or baskets and paintings and may also cause them to depart. Even with respect to a landscape where spirit presence may be ontologically anterior to human acts, the supplicant encounters the divine in a state of carefully prepared purification. Conversely, human activities can trouble the landscape, the household, or the shrine, disrupting and disbursing both gods and energies. Mobility and the role of human agency have made this an adaptable ontology, such that practices once associated with farming households are sustained in the *mansin's* shrine and the commercial *kuttang*. Likewise, gods and *mansin* have incorporated a variety of new goods, most significantly god images as the products of rationalized production. This is not a primordial, nor even an "indigenous" Korean worldview melting into air, but rather, an ontology that continues to take shape within an emergent South Korean present. If "animism" has any use at all in a discussion of shamanic materiality in Korea, it is in causing us to take a closer look at things on the ground, to see them as mobile, and to not shy away from the contrasts between a "now" and a not so distant "then."

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