

Materialising Oceania: New ethnographies of things in Melanesia and Polynesia

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Oceania occupies an intriguing place within anthropology's genealogy. In the introduction to this collection of essays, we examine the role of the ethnography of Oceania in the development of our anthropological perspectives on materialisation, the dynamic process by which persons and things are inter-related. Building upon the recent resurgence of theoretical interests in things we use the term materialisation (rather than material culture or materiality) to capture the vitality of the lived processes by which ideas of objectivity and subjectivity, persons and things, minds and bodies are entangled. Taking a processual view, we advocate for an Oceanic anthropology that continues to engage with things on the ground; that asks what strategies communities use to materialise their social relations, desires and values; and that recognises how these processes remain important tools for understanding historical and contemporary Oceanic societies. Examining these locally articulated processes and forms contributes to a material (re)turn for anthropology that clarifies how we, as scholars, think about things more widely.

How can we make any progress in the understanding of cultures, ancient or modern, if we persist in dividing what the people join and in joining what they keep apart?

(Hocart 1952: 23)

INTRODUCTION

In his examination of canoes on Simbo in the Solomons, Arthur Hocart astutely observed that ritual 'is just as much part of making a canoe as the cutting of the boards' (Hocart 1935: 109). On the surface, Hocart's study of canoe-making appears to position 'material culture' in the functionalist vein of anthropology: as a separate yet intrinsic component of social organisation alongside religion, kinship, economics, and politics. Many of Hocart's generation collected data on canoes and other forms of material culture, carrying them back to museums as tangible exemplars of social categories and practices (Haddon and Hornell 1936–38). However, unlike many of his contemporaries, Hocart was making an important assertion about Simbo processes of materialisation that involved the interweaving of words, materials and human action. As his description shows, these procedures were inseparable, all essential to making a 'canoe successful' (Hocart 1935: 110). Moreover, for his interlocutors these interrelations constituted a mode of being in the world and a

means of engaging with several realms: the sea, land, bonito fish, trees, ancestors and humans (*cf.* Hviding 1996) (Fig. 1).

Despite Hocart's insights, functionalism continues to inform contemporary appreciations of material culture and, in more recent years, 'materiality'. Objects, from kula armbands to imported Chinese calico, are rightfully understood as useful vehicles of social connection and exchange. However, at times this understanding has obscured the vitality of material forms in both the production of social life and of social theory, the ways in which things embody, inculcate and represent ways of thinking about the world. Ethnographers working in Oceania today have made 'objects' a prime focus of analysis—but objects redefined in terms of their innate subjectivities, their role as social agents and their 'promiscuous' material qualities (e.g. Strathern 1979, 1988; Battaglia 1990; MacKenzie 1991; Thomas 1991; Weiner 1992; Gell 1993; Foster 2002). In this volume, we build upon this rich body of work and argue for a view of objects that positions them as both creative processes and as products of these complex entanglements.

Our aim here is to revivify this particular view of the inter-relationship of things and people, as articulated by Hocart, and analytically engage with the practices and processes of materialisation in the contemporary Pacific.¹ In this introduction, we broadly chart the history of thinking about things in the region and synthesise some of this research to create a new focus on materialisation—a consolidation of relations between people and things in practice. The culturally diverse realm of 'Oceania', defined paradigmatically as a swirl of sea and islands (Hau'ofa 1993), by indigenous and by European, American, Asian and Australasian exchanges and cosmologies, colonial, and even academic, interventions, occupies an intriguing place within this disciplinary genealogy (Jolly 2001; Teaiwa 2006).² Oceania has been a critical region in the development of theories of material culture. Mauss's (2000 [1923–4]) influential discussion of the Gift was inspired by the power accorded to prestigious treasures in Aotearoa-New Zealand, alongside other Oceanic exchange networks; Malinowski's (2002 [1922]) understanding of the importance of reciprocal exchange emerged from his observations of the circular movements of armshells and necklaces; and the emergence of the indigenous category of *kastom* in Melanesia and the heated debates that developed around the 'invention of tradition' throughout the Pacific (e.g. Keesing and Tonkinson 1982; Hanson 1989; Keesing 1989; Trask 1991; Jolly and Thomas 1992; Akin 2004), highlights the continued importance of these kinds of performative artefacts and shows how they still resonate within contemporary indigenous movements to recuperate lost or disrupted customary practices, becoming symbols of newly formed nation states (e.g. Otto and Thomas 1997; Tapsell 1997; Akin and Robbins 1999).

In this volume, we explore ethnographically the different ways in which relationships between objects and persons are articulated and enacted within Oceania. We focus on *materialisation* rather than on the more static concept of *material culture*, or the less precise term *materiality* because, as the verb implies, materialisation is an ongoing lived *process* whereby concepts, beliefs and desires are given *form* that are



Figure 1 These processes of materialisation are exemplified in this image of a Western Solomons war canoe being launched at Chubikopi, Marovo Lagoon, in 1991. Built as a replica according to the design and construction of the famous headhunting canoes of pre-colonial days, the canoe was the end result of a locally initiated project aimed at reviving traditional canoe building. Besides helping materialise skills in younger generations, the canoe was also profitably used to paddle tourists coming in from a nearby diving resort (Photo: Edvard Hviding, University of Bergen).

then *transformed* and *transforming* in their social deployment.³ This perspective entangles ideas of objectivity and subjectivity, persons and things, minds and bodies, on the ground. By taking a processual view of objects, their concreteness emerges as a momentary point in a spectrum of making, use and dissembling that constitutes their biographies, their social lives (Appadurai 1986). Doing so enables a rethinking of where objects begin and end and what they entail. Moreover, materialisation reminds us that we must not 'naturalis[e] material culture as a category' thereby obscuring local distinctions (Bolton 2001: 266). With this in mind we have chosen to use the word 'things' in lieu of the terms 'material culture', 'material', 'art', 'artefact' and 'object'. We do this in the hope that 'thing', with its possibility of being 'an entity of any kind' (Oxford 1971: 308), allows us to consider more closely what it is that people during various temporal junctures have understood their world to be composed of, and how they have made it.⁴ For us, things, in all their permutations, evoke the idea of bringing into being and the interrelationships of form and process in different life-worlds.

Emerging from a session entitled 'Materialising Oceania: Why Things Still Matter', convened at the Association of Social Anthropology of Oceania meetings in 2006 and 2007, contributors to this volume address the nature of materialisation as a process in different contexts. Focusing on the growing of yams by the Abelam of Papua New Guinea, contemporary engagements of a Santa Cruz Islander in the British Museum, the role of photographs in Vanuatu, objects circulating at Tongan royal funerals, heirlooms and bureaucratic documents in the Purari Delta, and land and museum objects in Aotearoa-New Zealand, each paper interrogates the social relationships both invested in these vital objects and evoked by the experience of making, using, doing and undoing. Juxtaposing these papers also highlights the productive conversations that can emerge when the analytic divides of Melanesia and Polynesia are united within a more holistic analysis of the social relations both inveigled and embodied within things.⁵

HISTORIES OF THINGS IN OCEANIA

Within the history of anthropological thinking about material culture and materiality, a tension has emerged between the social and material as distinct conceptual domains. Early proponents of material culture viewed the object world as a separate but inextricable functional component of social life (e.g. Haddon 1920; Speiser 1999 [1923]). Later advocates of materiality have emphasised a more holistic approach by examining the social experience of the material world (Miller 2005). As Miller (2006) notes, 'Material culture is a condition for anthropology itself'. This condition points to the ways in which objects are so frequently evoked in discussions of cultural contact, immersion, difference and hegemony (for instance, the global proliferation of commodities such as Coca-Cola and blue jeans, their local articulations and forms of resistance) (*cf.* Foster 2008). In this way, discussions of the relation between the social and the material inevitably map onto broader discussions about

the nature of cultural difference and give rise to questions about alterity, ontology and translation (Henare *et al.* 2007), often in the broader context of commodification (Appadurai 1986; Strathern 1988; Thomas 1991).⁶ Our focus on materialisation as a process facilitates passage between domains of social experience and social worlds. Following proponents of materiality, we do not wish to set up dichotomies, which we then have to analytically overcome. However, we acknowledge that people experience the material world in a myriad of different ways and mediate them accordingly (Weiner 2002). Our focus on materialisation allows us to expose relationships between ontology and epistemology without a limited focus on either radical cultural difference or global hegemony/resistances. Instead, focusing on materialisation as a process allows us to expose the subtle nuances that objects bring to social lives and the ways in which objects both form and cross cultural, political and conceptual borders (Spyer 1998).

The goal of this introduction is not to provide an exhaustive review of literature on things.⁷ Rather, we highlight several moments in both the history and anthropology of the region that themselves materialise a particular view of the relationship between persons and things. We have divided this history into four paradigmatic moments of materialisation that, for us, crystallise key periodic and conceptual approaches to things in Oceania that continue to inform contemporary accounts. Our discussion of each contribution to this volume is interwoven into this account, as each paper engages with aspects of these legacies through their ethnography of materialisation.

CONTACT

The idea of contact, the visceral coming together of entities, is crucial to understanding the ways in which things mediate cross-cultural encounters, both close to home and far away. Canoes, as Hocart realised, condense these complex material encounters and embody theories of movement and stasis, form and flexibility. Canoes were not only things of movement and contact, but were also themselves moveable places in Oceania's seascapes (Bonnemaïson 1986). The materiality of theatres of contact, from island to canoes and ships, were intrinsic to the terms of materialisations of cultural difference. The death of Captain James Cook at Kealakekua Bay, for example, precipitated debates about 'how natives think' (Obeyesekere 1992; Sahlins 1995), yet this debate is underscored by the event's complicated materialisation. Whether or not Cook actually was thought to be a deity, with the attendant mode of being this assumed, the damage to the *Resolution's* mast, the landing on the beach and the dagger that killed him are shared historical forms, both indigenous and global. Anne Salmond has returned to the death of Cook by appraising this complicated encounter. It was, she writes, 'a cross-cultural combination of forces that killed him'. (Salmond 2003: 416). Salmond draws this conclusion from a detailed return to text, archive, oral history and image—in short, to the materialisation of the event and its continued reverberations.

Early colonial, missionary and academic forays into Oceania were mediated by the exchange of material that facilitated the expansion of ideas about trade, politics and cosmology (Sahlins 1993; Hooper 2006). With the arrival of Europeans in the seventeenth century, things were introduced and both new and existing forms were transformed into objects of mutual fascination and value. Things, in all their diversity (i.e. *beche-de-mer*, birds of paradise, iron, fish hooks, copra, sandalwood, muskets, sperm whale teeth), became a means by which various sets of cross-cultural encounters ensued, relations began and ideas proliferated, and which led to the creation of new entities (Smith 1985; Thomas 1991; Swadling 1996; Salmond 1997).

In this volume, Veys's discussion of the funeral of the late King of Tonga, Taufa'ahau Tupou IV, demonstrates how the King's body and its attending artefacts are a critical site of contact, and materialisation of shared histories and national values. Drawing on the work of Webb Keane (2005), Veys demonstrates how historical continuity and dissonance are encapsulated in the way that people materialise royal and divine values and their relation to the monarchy through different things, each of which has a specific effect. Veys elucidates how gifts of barkcloth, fine mats, baskets, coconut oil, cellophane-wrapped cakes and sweet packets are bound together through their visual affinities of shininess from applied oil and plastic, as well as through the labour used to procure them. As part of orchestrated funerary presentations they materialise complementary female and male powers that wrap, protect and bind the disorder resulting from the king's death. In doing so, these things mediate contemporary Tongan lifestyle, help to refashion the nation and reflect the bodily experience of history—the ways in which important events are constituted through the wrapping, shining and consuming of things.

COLLECTING

A parallel moment of contact running through colonial encounters was the drive to contain and understand the other through the making of artefact collections. The massive assortment of things that wound their way into the homes of academicians, merchants, and metropolitan museums were materialisations of these encounters and in their organisation materialised ways of evaluating and knowing the peoples of Oceania (Kaeppler 1978; Thomas 1991; Edwards 1992; Lawson 1994). Indigenous Pacific communities made their own collections and within their storehouses thought through the complex meanings of these political, economic and social encounters (Newell 2005). Moreover, European collecting activities often fed into pre-existing local sacrificial economies of object disposal. As Küchler (1997) demonstrates, the sale of *malanggan* in New Ireland fulfilled the need of ceremonial practice to dispose of these important funerary monuments. Their removal, whether to decay in the bush or to be displayed in European museums, facilitated the safe passage of the spirit of the deceased into the ancestors' realm.

As the discipline of anthropology developed, a ‘museological’ view of ‘primitive’ society was established (Stocking 1987). Culture was viewed not only archaeologically, in terms of the production of artefacts, but also as an artefact itself, capable of being destroyed and salvaged. The frailty of cultural artefacts and practices in the face of colonial and missionary interventions was often interpreted as an indication of an inherent weakness of Primitive Society itself. This in turn fuelled the collections of those wishing to ‘salvage’ some of this material—as trophy, religious vindication or scientific specimen (Corbey 2000; O’Hanlon and Welsch 2000).

These things, however, were more than just representations of ideas about culture and cultural difference, they were agents in producing these ideas in the first place. The colonial and missionary legacy of depopulation and destruction was the prime determinant of an anthropological panic to catalogue and preserve culture. These realities gave government representatives, blackbirders, entrepreneurs and missionaries fuel for their various agendas (*cf.* Douglas 1998), and enabled fictions such as *terra nullius* to become law with long-lasting devastation (Meijl and Benda-Beckmann 1999). Assemblages of material forms and people, such as those at the 1851 Great Exhibition in London, were used in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to elaborate various theories as part of comparative natural history (*cf.* Poignant 2004; Henare 2005). The conversion of living persons and human remains into museum objects was not a benign process of materialisation, but one which reflected how materialisation was itself a key colonial strategy that located scientific knowledge at the nexus of imperial power and expansion into the region. The exhumation and display of Truganini of Bruny Island in the Tasmanian Museum is an infamous example of this denial of coevalness and the dehumanising process of ‘scientific’ collecting (Ryan 1996 [1981]). Objects, drawings, paintings, engravings, and, later, photographs and film, functioned as signifiers of the people from whom they were collected or taken. Removed as they were from the social field of production, use and destruction, these material forms were an integral component of the anthropological enterprise and were seen to embody anthropological knowledge (Edwards 2001; Griffiths 2002; Penny 2002) (Fig. 2).

The region reached its apogee within British social anthropology during the so-called ‘Oceanic phase’ (1890–1930; Urry 1998), which partially mapped onto the ‘Museum period’ (1840–1920; Sturtevant 1969: 622). Emerging from the success of the second Torres Straits Expedition in 1898, A. C. Haddon, W. H. R. Rivers and C. G. Seligman became leading figures in British anthropology during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Haddon utilised things collected by himself and others to create a diffusion-based evolutionary model of Papua through which he attempted to reconstruct a history of the region and to find affinity through forms (Haddon 1894, 1895, 1920; Herle and Rouse 1998). As leaders of the ‘Cambridge School’, these men helped to revise the 1912 edition of *Notes of Queries in Anthropology*, transforming it from a guide for the interested traveller into a manifesto of how the trained observer should conduct fieldwork (Urry 1972: 51–2). In the 1912 edition, a general note on the collection of specimens advised:

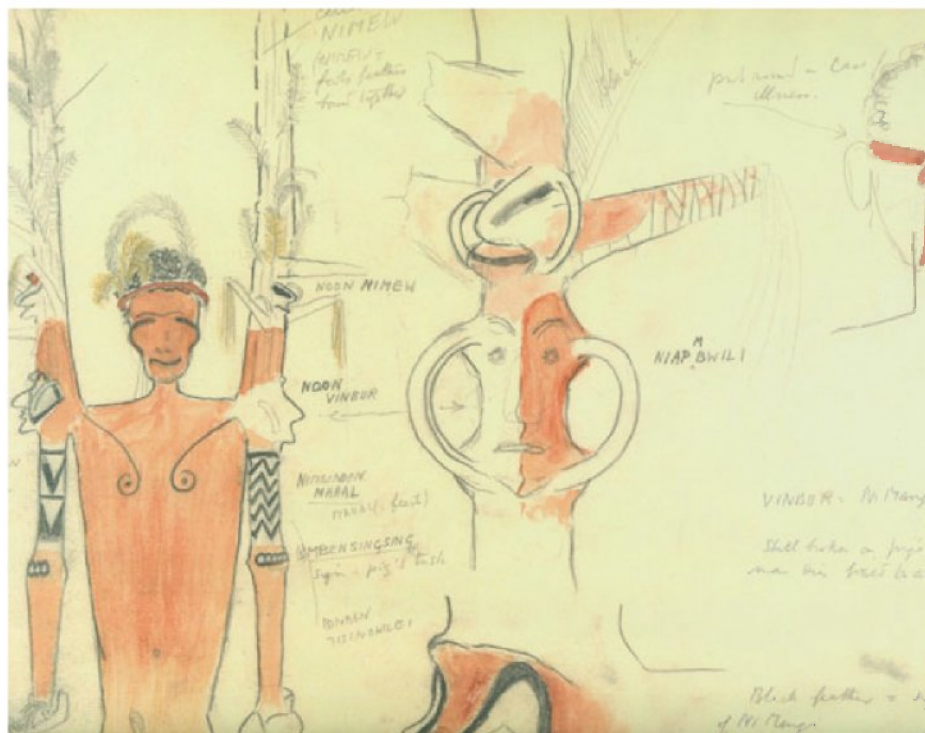


Figure 2 A. B. Deacon drew this *rambaramp* (funeral effigy) from Malakula in the National Museum of Victoria in Melbourne while on his way to do fieldwork in Vanuatu in 1926. He annotated these drawings in the field with local language terms. Drawings, photography, museum collections and elicitation formed important components of the materiality of Deacon's fieldwork (Detail of Sketch; Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Haddon Papers, 16-014).

Every collection ... should illustrate two principle things:-

The native adaptation of local or imported materials to local needs by native methods of construction and decoration; and

Social and religious ideas connected with manufacture and use.

Collect, therefore, not fine specimens only, but objects in common use. If possible, secure articles intended for the maker's own use or for native trade. To collect specimens of native work merely because they are pretty and without ample notes to identify and explain them is useless and may well be misleading to students. It is certain in any case to mislead the native craftsman and affect his standard of workmanship. If an article was made for European trade, or to your own order, as a model, specify this on the label. When you find a craftsman or craftswoman at work, you should watch the making of an article from start to finish; sometimes it is best to see the process through with out interruption, unless the article is large or seldom made. Then get the maker to start a similar example, ask the names of the raw material, the tools, of each

part of the decoration. Ask where and by whom the material is obtained and how it is prepared (British Association for the Advancement of Science (BAAS) 1912: 27).

By 1929, the section on collecting had been relegated to a mere appendix, and anthropological engagement with objects had been naturalised and rendered invisible within social relations. For a long period ‘material culture’ was negated as unimportant within anthropological theory and methodology. However, the use of the fieldwork manual up until the 1960s ensured that, even if anthropologists were not overtly examining things, things were a component of anthropological methodologies (Petch 2007).

Aspects of this legacy of collecting are addressed by Bonshek’s contribution. Within the context of the British Museum’s Melanesian Art Project, an attempt to explore the manifold histories and meanings of the Museum’s Melanesian collections, Bonshek explores the contemporary resonances of *tevau* (red feather ‘money’) from Santa Cruz for Salome Samou. Bonshek relates how she and Samou wove between the museum’s objects (themselves concretisations of past relations and values), the ethnographic legacy of anthropologist William Davenport’s collaboration with Samou’s father and Samou’s personal recollections of growing up on Santa Cruz. As Samou explored the legacy of these historical objects and attempted to reconstitute the practice of making the bundles as part of local traditions, these conversations entailed a metaphoric unweaving of the feather bundles. Querying their designation as money, Bonshek discusses how the practice of making red feather money has become synonymous with cultural regeneration and loss, and with inter-cultural relationships. In doing so, she points to the collaborative potentials and productivity that emerges from working with collections and communities (see also contributions by Baker and Geismar).

FIELDWORK

In 1922, Malinowski published *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* in which he delineated a new model of anthropology. Material culture was construed as a functionalist category within anthropological theorisation. As Malinowski asserted, ‘to summarise the first, cardinal point of method, I may say each phenomenon ought to be studied through the broadest range possible of its kind of its concrete manifestation. This method could be called *the method of statistic documentation by concrete evidence*’ (2002 [1922]: 17, italics in original). Despite this acknowledgement of the intrinsic material quality of social life, disciplinary historians have observed how, for the most part, things were relegated to dusty museums where their study had less purchase within the academy, as exemplified by the decrease of attention on collecting as a fieldwork methodology (Urry 1972; Stocking 1985). As Michael Young (2000) details, Malinowski notoriously lost his own field collection. Things, however, remained crucial within social acts such as exchange, mortuary ceremony, gardening, and magic (Malinowski 2002 [1922], 1929, 1935) and an important

component of the encounters of fieldwork, where they mediated exchanges between observers and observed (Stocking 1992).

Even if there was a growing reluctance to address the material world *per se*, anthropology was still implicitly engaged within processes of materialisation. Through the 'genealogical method', Rivers transformed otherwise seemingly transient social relations into analysable material forms, and in so doing shaped an abiding anthropological concern in social forms and relations (Urry 1998: 224–25). Perhaps his most important contribution to the discipline, Rivers's genealogical method is also the most evocative of the idea of materialisation we seek to evoke. In making manifest, in cartographic or diagrammatic way, the names people called each other, Rivers helped to clarify the ways in which people draw relations between each other. Establishing modern kinship studies and recognising the continual tension between mental map and material world is one of the most influential ideas in the history of anthropology (Langham 1981; Bouquet 1996; Taylor 2005).

While things became a means through which to understand local economic and social activities (Malinowski 1935: 460), scholars did not attend to indigenous understandings of things or an interest in the function, or nature, of materiality itself. Decrying what he deemed to be the outmoded model of object-oriented ethnology typified by Haddon, Malinowski famously commented, 'The canoe is made for a certain use, and with a definitive purpose; it is a means to an end, and we, who study native life, must not reverse this relationship, and make a fetish of the object itself' (Malinowski 2002 [1922]: 80). Malinowski's point was an important part of this nascent anthropological rationality: artefacts are fabricated by people to be used and, despite the claims of their makers, anthropologists should not impute agency to them. This approach helped to refocus anthropology away from the seductive charms of objects themselves onto issues of exchange, kinship, and theories of social function and structure.

This was less the case in the French school of anthropology, which was epitomised by Mauss's examination of the efficacious form of the *Gift* (1925) and a focus on bodily gestures, habitus and technology (Mauss 2006, 2007 [1947]). In his advocating a return to the integration of technology in anthropological analysis of materialisation, Coupaye reminds us of this disciplinary focus. Through the example of Abelam yam gardening, he foregrounds how the technological processes of making are a critical, but overlooked, aspect of things themselves. In doing so he brings into focus an implicit discussion in all the papers. That is, through a methodological attention to bodily gestures (operational sequences) and the value system in which they are enmeshed, artefacts are revealed to be complex things, both natural and social, that require the conjunction of a variety of forces, agents and practices. Quite literally, the growing of these artworks entails a whole set of operations that involve the negotiation of relations through which the community is sustained.

The strategic disavowal of objects as a prime focus of research removed anthropology from its legacy of colonial contact and museum collection, which was then subsumed by more popular culture. Malinowski's resistance to the idea of animism may;

however, have been as strategic as it was analytic. The increasing fetishism of Oceanic artefacts (for instance, their canonical place in the collections of Surrealist artists) from the 1920s and 1930s onwards promoted an idea of exotic primitivism from which rationalists such as Malinowski, Seligman and Raymond Firth were keen to disassociate themselves (*cf.* Firth 1992). The category of the fetish, originally a Portuguese sailor's term for the ritually effective carvings picked up on their travels (Pietz 1985), also came to emerge as a locus of analysis, reflecting European rather than indigenous reifications and impositions about 'savage' nature and primitive culture (Freud 2000 [1927]). As Julius Lips (1937) noted in his survey of material representations of Europeans by indigenous peoples of Africa, Oceania and the Americas, *The Savage Hits Back*, this was a political issue, not just an innocent vision of mankind's 'true' nature. As Malinowski explained in his foreword, the book aimed to

break down the barriers of race and of cultural diversity ... to find the human being in the savage ... to discover the primitive in the highly sophisticated Westerner or today, and, perhaps, to see that the animal, and the divine as well, as to be found everywhere in man (Malinowski 1937: vii).

Today, the idea of the fetish has been rehabilitated as a historical artefact itself—a concept that reveals the complex mediation of imagination and politics that material objects may afford (Spyer 1998). Coupaye's insistence on the nuanced process of Abelam yam cultivation and all that it entails reminds us of how complex things are and, without careful ethnographic attention to what people do, how easy it is to fetishise things and thereby distort the process of materialisation.

CARGO

If colonial and other contact, including collecting and anthropological fieldwork were and are crucial grounds for processes of materialisation, a third realm of engagement between people and things, encompassing points of contact and collection, is the global reach of 'cargo', and the intersecting history of religious practices, global commodities, and international conflict. The spread of Christianity involved islanders and Europeans in a complex series of mutual transformations, which continue to reverberate today (Robbins and Wardlow 2005). These various transformations co-opted, among other things, architecture (Wallace 2005) and clothing (Küchler and Were 2005), and redefined these forms within new cultural frames, thereby altering indigenous notions about such things as the body, race and gender (Jolly and Macintyre 1989).

The emergence of millenarian movements throughout Oceania, particularly those that engaged with the world wars, along with Christianity and the attendant influx of new commodity forms, has continued to force anthropologists to engage with local visions of materialisation and the distortions caused by our understanding of culture. These movements help reveal how, for Oceanic communities, 'power [is]...imminent in all things and... [is] accessible through direct physical participation' (Wagner

1981: 88). ‘Cargo-cults’ were, and are, indigenous responses to political, social, racial and economic inequities of contact, collection and colonialism (*cf.* Lawrence 1964; Kaplan 1995; Lattas 1998), as well as our analytic misapprehensions of the relations these responses entail (Lindstrom 1993). Regardless of our classification of these engagements, they focus our attention on how the destruction of local things and the conspicuous consumption of imported commodities reveal local creativity and epistemologies.

The infamous ‘Vailala Madness’ is a case in point. Here, communities in the Papuan Gulf of Papua New Guinea destroyed ritual paraphernalia and materialised new things, mimetic of European social practices, to hasten the return of ancestors in cargo ships (Williams 1923, 1934). Threatening the colonial regimes’ careful materialisation of racial division, adherents built a wireless station, special ‘hot houses’ to communicate with the dead, and erected special tables to offer the ancestors food. In doing so, communities refashioned Europeans ‘in the form of an artefact or performance’ (Strathern 1990: 26), thereby attempting to re-channel Europeans’ power into locally appropriate forms. As with other movements throughout Oceania, colonial officials responded by jailing the movement’s leaders (Fig. 3).

Despite this suppression, communities in the Papuan Gulf continued to use foreign forms to elicit a range of effects. A vivid material expression can be found in *eharo* masks, which formed a part of the celebrated *Hevehe* cycle (Williams 1940). Constructed out of barkcloth and rattan, *eharo* masks were topped with effigies of totemic ancestors, which alluded to the spirit beings that the mask materialised. Increasingly, in the 1920s and 1930s, the masks’ makers invoked the new things, such as cutters and hurricane lamps, which were an active part of villagers’ social worlds. The playfulness of these skeuomorphic forms belied their role as potent statements about men’s abilities to control the sets of relationships and values that these things embodied. Today their traces in museum collections and photographs are beguiling materialisations of a shared colonial and indigenous imaginary. While the *Hevehe* cycle was abandoned, the creative potency of Oroko men to tap into the relationships embodied in foreign things remains. As Michael of Iuku village explained while talking about the potential animacy of manufactured things:

When Europeans manufacture vehicles, you don’t name them so they don’t have ears. When our people buy them we name them and they have ears and you can talk to them and they can listen (Bell Fieldnotes 7 December 2002).

Such comments remind us of the profound ways in which things are constantly reconfigured by Oceanic communities. The intense relationships to the material world that ‘cargo-cults’ bring to the fore are indigenous theories and responses to connectivity that build on pre-existing categories and representational practices. They reveal the ways in which the material world can facilitate the making and unmaking of social relations, racial categories, cosmologies and political economies. Rather than interpreting the reification of modernity as an indigenous form of fetishism, ‘cargo-cults’ force us to interrogate our own assumptions of materiality



Figure 3 Surmounted by a skeumorph of a cutter, this *eharo* mask, made by Dyamu of Uaripi village, speaks to the creative reworking of European things in the materialisation of relationships during the colonial period in the Papuan Gulf. Similar examples found in the Queensland Museum collected in 1912 possess the navels (*hekore*) found on other *eharo* effigies of animals, suggesting that European things quickly became totemic forms (Photograph: F. E. Williams, Kerema, January 1932, National Australian Archives A6300, 60.2).

(Wagner 1981). This diverse literature provides a useful frame from which to examine the new frictions around resource extraction and other forms of global capital that are increasingly coming to dominate regional economic forces (*cf.* Rumsey and Weiner 2001; Foster 2008).

With an eye to understanding these shifting networks, Bell explores the contemporary resonance and legacy of material transformation within the context of

resource extraction in the Purari Delta. In doing so, he shows how, within the politics of land ownership, one set of potent things—heirloom objects—are being circumscribed by more efficacious bureaucratic things: Incorporated Land Group certificates. The rise of the latter is emblematic of the new material forms that increasingly shape community life. More than this, they speak to the transformative push across Oceania to make diverse property regimes more legible as part of Neoliberal reform (*cf.* Povinelli 2002; Strathern and Hirsch 2004). Bell examines how these things are being deployed within local and trans-local debates about customary land tenure whereby new relationships between persons, ancestors, things, the land, the State and resource companies are materialised. As such, he draws our attention to both the importance of the relationships that forms materialise and the material qualities by which they do this.

MATERIALITY

Despite this continued engagement with things, and these local theorisations of materiality invoked by social movements such as ‘cargo-cults’, it is only in recent years that ‘materiality’ has re-emerged as a field of enquiry within anthropological theory,⁸ and has provided a reinvigorated platform to examine ‘how the things that people make, make people’ (Miller 2005: 38). Examinations of materiality use methodological strategies of following the ‘social life of things’ (Appadurai 1986), the cultural biography of things (Kopytoff 1986), and examine how things materialise the ways in which people narrate their lives (Hoskins 1998). In the following discussion, we select a few key Anglophone anthropologists whose work on things in Oceania has contributed to contemporary theorisations of materiality.

Anthony Forge’s sociological approach has helped to refocus anthropologists’ attentions on the actions of the makers of things, and has demonstrated how artistic things are integral to social life (*cf.* Forge 1973). He has helped to initiate the development of a non-representational theory of art that has shifted the focus upon art away from language towards materiality, and his students have subsequently carried out various innovative studies in Oceania. Gell’s (1975) work among the Umeda pushed structuralist and semiotic analysis through his examination of the *ida* ceremony (*cf.* Juillérat 1992). Subsequently, Gell (1998) developed a more general theory of art and agency in which he linked the idea of art as a communicative system with an interest in understanding the efficacy of material form itself (Gell 1992, 1993, 1996). Influenced by Marilyn Strathern (see below), Gell’s argument for the agency of things has pushed anthropologists to approach artefacts from the perspective of what they *do* in social networks and not what they represent. Material forms are ‘prosthetic’ augmentations or ‘distributed objects’ through which social agency is extended and exerted (*cf.* Pinney and Thomas 2001; Layton 2003; Leach 2006).

Howard Morphy has also pushed the boundaries of anthropological investigations of the inter-relationships between art, landscape and the Dreaming through

detailed ethnographic work on Yolngu painting in Northern Arnhem land (*cf.* Morphy 1991, 2007). In an insightful article entitled 'From dull to brilliant', Morphy (1992) emphasises the ritual affect of bark painting and develops the idea of an aesthetic system based on ritual efficacy. This essay exemplifies a major contribution of the anthropology of Oceania and to the discipline more broadly: an ethnographically grounded appreciation of cultural difference that, in turn, becomes a benchmark for more general theorisations. Morphy's work on Australian Aboriginal art helps to redefine the material phenomenology of Aboriginal experience, just as Küchler's (1988) discussion of the Malanggan influences our understanding of Intellectual Property Rights more broadly (see Strathern 2001).

Working in parallel to Forge, Munn (1962, 1966, 1973) similarly merged an analysis of form, function and meaning in her innovative and influential analysis of the art of the Walbiri of Central Australia. Following Claude Lévi-Strauss,⁹ Munn describes how Walbiri graphic signs index and create their social and cosmological world. Munn provides a powerful account of a representational system and its capacity for facilitating intergenerational transmission of knowledge and values. In subsequent work on Gawa, Munn (1977, 1986, 1990) draws on phenomenology and semiotics as articulated by Charles Peirce to examine how Gawans create and transform value through production, consumption and exchange. By analysing otherwise separately examined phenomenon (food production and consumption, marriage, mortuary rites, witchcraft and inter-island exchange), Munn shows how these activities create and transform *qualisigns*, embodied aspects of positive or negative value (i.e. lightness vs. heaviness) that are situated in a given intersubjective space-time. Moreover, she demonstrates how *qualisigns* are exhibited in particular media (the body, canoes and kula shells) and how these entities are enmeshed within a cultural system of relating (Munn 1986: 17). As a result, Munn offers a distinctively materially grounded model of Gawan being in the world, using indigenous categories to do so. Munn's work has been influential for scholars seeking to unite semiotic theories of representation with an appreciation of the non-representational qualities of things (see Keane 2003; see also Veys this volume, p. 131).

Also working in the Massim, Annette Weiner influentially shifted focus from abstracted social relations to the materiality of exchange and thus helped strengthen arguments for a view of objects as processual. In her reworking of the *kula*, she focused on the vitality of women's banana leaf bundles (*yawovau*) and skirts (*dobe*). These seemingly prosaic things, previously ignored by Malinowski, are in fact key to the perpetuation of important social and cosmological relationships (Weiner 1976). In *Inalienable Possessions* (one of the few comparative studies to cross the boundaries of Melanesia and Polynesia), Weiner highlights how artefacts materialise 'cosmological authentication' (Weiner 1992: 100, 1994) for local hierarchies, ideologies and kin groups. Moreover, her volume on cloth helped to direct scholars to the importance of cloth and to its centrality to building relationships between the body, gender, technology and the material (Weiner and Schneider 1989). Weiner's work continues the legacy of Mauss, and has led to an appreciation of the crucial material

nature of exchange and how objects themselves effect the very form of their transactions. Fred Myers critically builds upon Weiner's developments through his ethnography of Pintupi notions of place (Myers 1986), and the role of art in their interactions with the wider world (Myers 2002).

M. Strathern's (1988, 1991, 1999, 2005) critical work on gender, gift exchange and property relations, whilst explicitly focused on the sociality of exchange relations, may also be read as an important theorisation of materiality. Disputing the gender essentialism of Weiner, Strathern persuasively argued that people, like things, are composed of the relations that they in turn engender (see also Wagner 1991). Things (here relations themselves are conceived as artefacts) are therefore both representations and performances; they are simultaneously embedded in context and break down the boundaries that the idea of context forges as an exegetical notion. In viewing the relations as object (rather than objects as relations), Strathern (1990: 40) provides us with an alternative interpretation of the significance of artefacts, whereby things are not only seen, but also experienced and are themselves the creators of experiences. In dialogue with this work, Melanesian ethnographers have elaborated on the ways artefacts and persons create one another by focusing on such diverse things as stone axes, string bags, wigs and slit-gong drums (*cf.* Battaglia 1990; MacKenzie 1991; O'Hanlon 1992; Leach 2002).

Strathern, more than any other anthropologist, has forged an ethnographic imagination of Melanesia as a site of cultural alterity to the representations and practices of 'Euro-America'. We have already noted how discussions of the relationship of the social to the material may also give rise to descriptions that focus on how these cultural domains may differ radically from those of the 'West' (see Henare *et al.* 2007). In our perspective on materialisation, we build Strathern's insights into the radical relationality of persons and things, but also acknowledge critiques by commentators such as Nicholas Thomas (1991), who emphasise the entangled nature of culture and society through time and across space.

Baker's discussion in this volume of the shifting meanings of the Gilbert Mair collection in Aotearoa–New Zealand highlights how, even when divorced from their original context and subsumed into museological discourse, the *taonga* collected out of a variety of colonial connections continue to exert the force of their own genealogies. Baker exposes the way in which these *taonga* materialise complex relationalities, between past exchanges, and present families and the Auckland Museum. By comparing museum practice to local understandings of *taonga*, and biography to *whakapapa* (or genealogy), Baker highlights how *taonga* are able to mediate cross-cultural relationships and materialise complex subjectivities on the border zones of different political, institutional and social contexts.

MATERIALISING OCEANIA

Tracking through the ongoing relations of contact, collection, fieldwork and cargo, we have traced how the anthropological focus on things in Oceania has raised vital

questions of cultural difference and the constitution of social experience. Museums have been at the vanguard of a sensitive re-appraisal of materiality, rehabilitating (or materialising) their collections of 'material culture'. Critical studies of collecting have challenged notions that artefacts provide an unbiased view of indigenous worlds, and show that collections are more often reflections of Western desires as well as colonial relationships of unequal power (cf. Clifford 1988; Marcus and Myers 1995). Museums and their collections have become 'contact zones' (Clifford 1997) that materialise (through collection management, object-based research, collection and display) complex subjectivities. For instance, a recent exhibition entitled *Paired Brothers: Iatmul Ritual Art from the Sepik, Papua New Guinea* (2004–06), curated by Andrew Moutu and Anita Herle at the Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (CUMAA), dealt with the legacy of multiple materialities: Bateson's collections in the Museum, the ways in which Iatmul engage with anthropologists and tourists in the production of new artefacts for sale, and how such artefacts are also crucial to the formulation of complex ideas about kinship, pairing and secrecy. The display was experimental, cases divided concertina-like and painted in different colours so that walking in one direction presented one narrative thread about the *bandi* initiation ritual while concealing the conjoined narrative of the publicly performed *naven* and vice versa (Herle and Moutu 2004). Many of the artefacts on display emerged from Moutu's own participation within these rites, and a wider point about the aesthetics of fieldwork and the connection that these practices have to forms of representation in museums was provocatively made.

This movement into the museum and the various processes of materialisation that they entail forms a productive counterpoint to Geismar's paper where, in moving out of the CUMAA to Vanuatu, she explores the continuing resonance of John Layard's fieldwork photographs. In developing an analogy between photographs and malanggan, Geismar highlights how photographs are artefacts of memory, materialisations of connections to place, objects of embodying complex historical consciousness and experience. Geismar's analogy helps us to rethink one seemingly evident thing with the intricacies of another, and in the process Layard's photographs as they are performed and understood in Malakula by communities is enlivened, and the intertwining of memory, time and things revealed (see also Baker (p. 112), Bell (p. 28) and Bonshek (p. 74) this volume).

Our aim within this volume is to build upon recent theoretical advances in the study of material culture/materiality to explicate how these forms and processes are locally understood within the diverse social and cultural worlds of Oceania. Our interests are manifold. We are interested in materialisation as a process that gives social meaning to things and vice versa; in how the interweaving of words and things is an intrinsic part of social action and how these locally articulated processes can contribute to a material (re)turn for anthropology, clarifying how we, as scholars, think about things more widely. As Miller (2005) points out so astutely, concerns regarding the relation of the material to the immaterial are universal. It is

for this reason that they also need to be a prime arena of anthropological concern and enquiry. While the material world impacts and shapes our fieldwork practices and thus our theories about the world (Geismar and Horst 2004), our main concern here is to discuss a continued engagement with things on the ground, to ask what strategies communities use to materialise their social relations, desires and values through things, and to consider why an understanding of these processes remains an important tool for understanding historical and contemporary Oceanic societies. As we have drawn out within this introduction, the idea of materialisation is a useful analytic tool which understands things as processes that are continually unfolding; as forms whose culturally understood qualities have effects in the world. It reminds us that the matter of things does matter.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank the various participants in the panel 'Materialising Oceania: Why Things Still Matter' convened at the Association for Social Anthropology of Oceania (2006–07). Participants Jade Baker, Liz Bonshek, Mark Busse, Ludovic Coupaye, Pei-yi Gou and Knut Rio – and audience – enlivened our ideas through the various productive conversations over the last three years. In particular we are grateful to Ludovic Coupaye, Rozanna Lilly and the volume's three anonymous reviewers for their insightful reading.

NOTES

- 1 This is not to suggest that ethnographic theory is geographically bound (Fardon 1990), rather we are interested in the productive illumination that the distinctive materialities of Oceania can have on our theories of the material, and how new theories of the material can help us better understand the region's multiple things.
- 2 While we recognise that Oceania as a discreet geographic region is a misnomer, we use the term here to refer to those islands that compose the equally constructed 'places' of Melanesia, Micronesia, Polynesia, as well as Australia (Thomas 1997). The term usefully invokes a now shared space of imagination, which may be understood as 'the setting for a sustained thought experiment' (Gell 1999: 34) as well as detailed ethnographic engagement.
- 3 Our understanding of materialisation builds on Miller's discussion of objectification (see Miller 1987, 1998). Our notion of materialisation expands Miller's description of the culturally specific Hegelian vision of a self-determining dialectical relationship between subjects and objects to include phenomenological, historical, processual, symbolic as well as political economic analytic perspectives.
- 4 This is a position also advocated by Latour (2004) and subsequently by Henare, Holbraad and Wastell (2007: 4).
- 5 The absence of papers discussing materialisation in Micronesia and Australia is an unfortunate lacuna of the present collection.
- 6 See the discussion between Holbraad and Miller in www.materialworldblog.com (Miller 2006).

- 7 Our focus is largely confined to Anglophone literature.
- 8 Notable overviews include Myers (2001); Miller (2005); Jeudy-Ballini and Juillérat (2002); Tilley *et al.* (2006) and Ingold (2007).
- 9 While Lévi-Strauss' oeuvre has been profoundly influential in Oceania, in terms of materiality perhaps his most influential works are *The Savage Mind* (1968 [1962]) and *The Way of the Masks* (1982 [1972]).

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