

THE OCCULT LIFE OF  
**THINGS**

Native Amazonian Theories of Materiality and Personhood

EDITED BY Fernando Santos-Granero

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### **From Baby Slings to Feather Bibles and from Star Utensils to Jaguar Stones**

*The Multiple Ways of Being a Thing in the Yaneshá Lived World*

Fernando Santos-Granero

Don Juan Tuesta claims that things are not as they are, but as what they are. (César Calvo, *Las tres mitades de Ino Moxo*)

“Things have a life of their own,” the gypsy proclaimed with a harsh accent. “It’s simply a matter of waking up their souls.” (Gabriel García Márquez, *Cien años de soledad*)

Many Amerindian peoples would agree with Juan Tuesta, the wise but unassuming *ribereño* shaman of César Calvo’s novel, that “things are not as they are, but as what they are.” They would also agree with Melchiades, the gypsy merchant of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, that “things have a life of their own.” More importantly, however, they would concur with him that the animacy of things is not necessarily a permanently manifested condition. Things—objects—might have souls, but their souls are not always active. Indeed, things differ in terms of the degree of animacy they possess, which depends on the kind of “soul stuff” that animates them. The subjectivity of some things—particularly those that do not possess powerful souls—must be “awakened” in order to reveal itself. From an Amerindian point of view, things are not all equally animated and thus are not agentive to the same degree. In fact, from this point of view, some objects are just plain objects—they are not endowed with souls.

This chapter explores the notion of materiality among the Yaneshá of eastern Peru. It suggests that the Yaneshá theory of materiality is multi-centric, based on the notion that there are multiple ways of being a thing. The bottom line of this indigenous theory is that most objects are

endowed with souls but that subjectivized objects do not possess the same degree of animacy and agentivity. Defined as “the paradigm instance . . . in which an animate entity, X, intentionally and responsibly uses its own force, or energy, to bring about an event or to initiate a process; and the paradigm instance of an event or a process . . . that results in a change of the physical condition or location of X or of some other entity, Y” (Lyons 1977:483), the notion of “agentivity” comprises that of power. Thus, the Yanesha claim that objects possess different degrees of animacy and agentivity is tantamount to saying that they have different degrees of power. This power depends on, and can only be ascertained by, their particular ontological trajectories, social histories, and/or personal biographies.

### **The Multiple Ways of Being a Thing**

In Western societies, the term “thing” refers broadly to “an entity of any kind” and includes both animate and inanimate beings. In one of its more narrow meanings, however, it designates “a being without life or consciousness: an inanimate object” (*Oxford Universal Dictionary Illustrated* [1974]). The Yanesha have a term—*es*—that has the same connotation as the Western broad meaning of “thing.” But the range of entities within this category that the Yanesha deem to be “inanimate” is much smaller than in Western societies. In contrast, the diversity of things that we conceive of as objects and the Yanesha people consider as being animated is quite high.

The Yanesha discern at least five different classes of things that we would describe as “inanimate objects”: (1) objects that have originated through self-transformation, (2) objects that have originated through metamorphosis, (3) objects that have originated through mimesis, (4) objects that have originated through ensoulment, and (5) plain objects. These categories are not named, but their existence can be deduced from the different ontologies the Yanesha ascribe to them. In some cases, they can also be deduced from the use of particular linguistic markers. This is not, however, an exhaustive, objectivist classification of Yanesha “things.” There might be other classes of objects that I am not aware of at present. The aim of this categorization is thus, above all, to stress the point that among the Yanesha, there are many different ways of being a thing. A brief description of the origin of these different classes of things will provide the basis for a more thorough discussion on their animacy, agentivity, power, and perspectival perception.

Objects that have originated through self-transformation are mostly natural objects—such as the sun, moon, and stars—or geographical formations—such as waterfalls, lakes, and hills. The Yanesha consider this class of objects to be the material expression—they would say the “body”—of ancient divinities, who transformed themselves at the end of the second of the three eras into which the Yanesha divide their history. Prior to their self-transformation, the divinities lived on this earth side by side with other spirits and the primordial human forms of present-day humans, animals, plants, and objects. When Yompör Ror, Our Father Flower, decided to ascend to the heavens, he self-transformed into the sun. He was followed by many other divinities, who transformed themselves into the main celestial bodies and natural phenomena (Santos-Granero 1992:68).

A few among the divinities who transformed themselves into stars were artifacts or were associated with key artifacts, particularly musical instruments but also domestic utensils. These artifacts are nowadays conceived of as being the actual or metonymical extension of the ancient divinities. Yompör Ror, the sun, is associated with the playing of *requërcanets*, the five-tube panpipes that are now thought to be animated by his vital breath. Yompör Pencoll, who used to play the side-blown, three-holed flute known as *pencoll*, self-transformed into what we know as Orion’s belt—the three stars of this constellation embodying the three holes of his flute. Yompör Oncoy, a somewhat mean divinity, ascended to the heavens playing his drum (*con*) in the company of numerous followers; they self-transformed into the Pleiades. Yompör Oresem is associated with the playing of the *pallot*, a small, end-blown flute with two or three holes, made of deer bone or a thin section of white cane. He climbed up to the heavens playing his little flute and is now visible as a bright star (unidentified). Other object-divinities that ascended with Yompör Ror and self-transformed into stars were Maize Mortar (Corona borealis), Fire Fan (the Orion Nebula), and Small Knife (Altair of Aquila and Sagitta). Thus, members of the class of objects that originated through self-transformation often have a double objective existence, present both as heavenly bodies *and* cultural artifacts.

Some of the major landmarks of the Yanesha territory also belong to this category of objects (Santos-Granero 1998, 2005). At the time of Yompör Ror’s ascension, many ancient divinities self-transformed into the geographic formations that are visible nowadays. Yato’ Caresa transformed

himself and his followers into a lake to escape from the cannibalistic Muellepen. Yato' Ror transformed himself into the waterfall Sa'res, which has the property of prolonging the life of those who bathe in it. Most *mellañoieñ* spirits—powerful spirits closely associated with human life—“hid” in rocks, ponds, fishing pools, and salt springs, becoming the guardians of these particular sites and animating them in the process. The most important skymarks and landmarks in Yanesha tradition have the character of objects born through self-transformation.

Objects that have originated through metamorphosis or other-transformation are those that were originally people who were transformed by the divinities into objects at the end of the second era of Yanesha history or early in the present-day era. Among them, the most important are what we could call “mineral people.” Posona', or Salt Man, was sent by Yompör Ror so that his human creatures would have something to flavor their food with. He was transformed into salt (*pos*) through the intervention of Achaquë'llem, or Sharpening Stone. Yachor Aser was transformed into iron by Yompör Santo, the divine emissary, so that his followers would have the raw material to make machetes, needles, axes, and knives. And limestone (*eshoc*), used to precipitate the minute amounts of cocaine present in coca leaves, originated in the sperm of Yompör Ror and was transformed by the divinity for the benefit of his creatures. All these minerals are conceived of as the actual or metonymical expression of the bodies of the primordial persons from which they originated.

Within this class of metamorphosed or transformed objects are also many of the landmarks created by Yompör Ror and other higher divinities immediately before their ascension to Yompöresho, their celestial abode. It is believed that on his way to the mountain from which he climbed up to the heavens, Yompör Ror transformed into landmarks many of the people he found on his way, an action done out of anger for their inappropriate behavior. Some of these subjectivized landmarks became important pilgrimage sites after the advent of the present era, their original subjective nature being remembered by both the old and the younger people (Santos-Granero 1998). In this class of things are also several magical objects that were originally human but were transformed into animals at the time of Yompör Ror's ascension to heaven and, later on, were transformed into objects. The most outstanding among them are “jaguar stones,” the shamanic stones that embody familiar spirit jaguars.

Objects that originated through mimesis are replicas of foreign objects—generally associated with white people—that capture the powerful subjectivities believed to reside in the originals (Taussig 1993). This class of objects was more common in earlier times, particularly in those periods of Yanéscha history characterized by heavy missionary presence. The objects replicated were generally linked to Christian liturgy, festivities, or religious items of clothing. The most well known of these objects was a feather Bible made by the priestly leader of the ceremonial center of Palmaso in the early 1900s (Bailly-Maitre 1908:623). In contrast to the previous two classes of objects, mimetic objects are not the result of an actual transformation, but of the appropriation through magical means of the power of the Other—a mimetic appropriation that produces a different class of subjectivized objects.

Objects that originated through ensoulment are objects that have become subjectivized through direct contact with a subject's soul or vitality in accordance to what James G. Frazer (1996:12) called the "Law of Contact or Contagion." Yanéscha people assert that human beings have two kinds of souls: *yechoyeshem*, "our shadow"—a kind of soul that is inert and permanently attached to the body until death—and *yecamquém*, "our vitality"—a kind of soul possessed of sensory faculties and that can detach from the body under certain circumstances (Santos-Granero 2006). All "vitalities" are believed to be a manifestation of the vital breath/strength (*camuequeñets*) of the creator divinities. Being made of breath/strength, they are believed to lack corporality and physical boundaries. This condition allows vitalities to diffuse into those objects that are in closest contact with a given person. This is particularly true of personal ornaments and other objects of daily use. Thus ensouled, or subjectivized, these personal possessions become as it were an extension of their owners' bodies.

Finally, the Yanéscha view certain objects as plain objects, that is, objects that were never subjects and have little chance of ever becoming subjectivized—although this is always a possibility. Among them are included sand, water, air, dirt, and most stones. However, whereas in their generic dimension these natural objects are considered to be plain objects, in their particular manifestations they are sometimes conceived of as objects that originated through self-transformation or metamorphosis. Thus, air in general is considered to be inanimate, but strong winds are believed to be ancient people, *huomenquës*. Water is an object, but specific ponds, lakes, waterfalls, and salt springs are self-transformed divinities. Stones

are generally inanimate, but some are ancient people transformed into stone and others are the hiding places of particular mellañoñeñ spirits.

Most alien objects are also considered to be plain objects devoid of subjectivity. There are, however, certain exceptions. "Small Knife," the prototype of present-day small knives, is considered to be an ancient person self-transformed into a constellation. This is also probably true of other iron utensils. The explanation for these exceptions is that for at least one century (1742–1847), Yanesha people produced their own iron tools in ironworks associated with their ceremonial centers (Santos-Granero 1988). Appropriation of metallurgic techniques and direct production transformed soulless alien tools into soulful native utensils. Other alien objects, such as pans, plastic tableware, watches, radios, flashlights, batteries, and so on are considered to be so alien that even if they are used on a daily basis they do not have the capacity of becoming ensouled. Briefly, both generic natural objects and generic alien objects are considered to be intrinsically lifeless and impregnable by the vitalities of the individuals with whom they come into contact.

### **Variations in the Theme of Animacy and Agentivity**

Western ontologies are based on a series of distinctions that always have an anthropocentric quality. At the more general level, the main distinction is that between inanimate and animate entities. At the level of animate beings, the most important opposition is that between animality and humanity. At the level of humanity, the main oppositions are those that distinguish between higher and lesser forms of humanity—e.g., those resulting from debates centered on racial theories—or between higher and lesser forms of personhood—e.g., those resulting from debates centered on the status of human embryos. Thus, the greatest concern in Western thought is the issue of humanity and personhood, namely: What is it that distinguishes humans and persons from all other beings and entities? In contrast, in Amerindian societies—where most beings and entities are believed to have a human-shaped soul—the main philosophical concern is not so much what distinguishes humans from other states of being, but rather how the host of animate beings differentiate themselves.

In effect, native Amazonians have no doubt that most entities in this world are animated or that they possess a human-shaped soul. Most Amerindian mythologies mention a time in which all beings were human



and narrate the causes that led to their transformation into the animals, plants, natural phenomena, spirits, and objects that exist today. They thus understand that although not all beings are human, all of them are persons. Amerindians recognize, however, that the difference between these diverse types of persons is not only one between “human persons” and “other-than-human persons,” as Alfred Irving Hallowell (1975) and Kenneth M. Morrison (2000) have proposed, but also a difference in terms of beings’ respective degrees of animacy, agentivity, and consciousness. Distinctions such as this one, as I have suggested elsewhere (Santos-Granero 2006), seem to derive from the different constitution of beings’ souls and bodies.

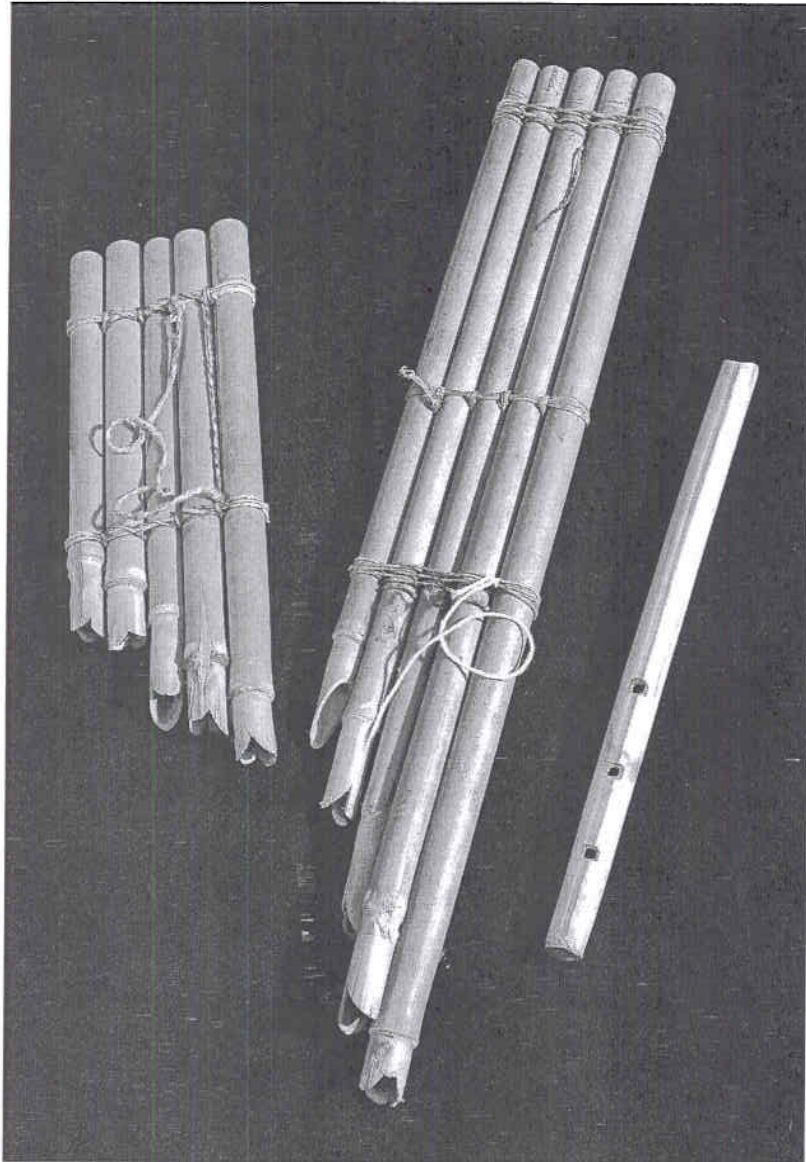
It has been argued that in the “multinaturalist” Amerindian ontologies, all beings share a similar human-shaped soul and differ in terms of their bodies, understood as “bundle(s) of affects and capacities” (Viveiros de Castro 1998:470, 478). This notion has been contested by Carlos Londoño Sulkin (2005), who suggests that souls and bodies are shaped by the substances of which they are made, rendering them more or less moral, as well as by Dan Rosengren (2006), who argues that souls are not generic but are highly personalized as the result of the particular experiences and influences to which they have been exposed. I have argued, in addition, that without a careful examination of the sensorial capacities that native Amazonians attribute to the souls and bodies of different kinds of persons, it is impossible to understand certain asymmetrical aspects inherent in Amerindian notions of perspectivism, such as the lack of awareness in animals, spirits, and plants of the perspectival nature of perception (Santos-Granero 2006).

Here, I propose to explore these issues through a series of anecdotes that occurred to me during my fieldwork among the Arawak-speaking Yanéssha. At the time, I did not pay too much attention to those events, concerned as I was with gathering information for my proposed subjects of research—so I have had to reconstruct these events by resorting to the few field notes that I quickly scribbled at the time and to my own reminiscences. Thus, rather than field reports, the following vignettes must be read as field memories.

### Musical Awakenings

That morning, when I got up at dawn, I saw Matar sitting next to the fire, chewing coca leaves. After a while, he climbed up on a stool and took down from the rafters above the kitchen fire a large number of panpipes that were partly hidden under the thatch. This did not surprise me, since I knew that he was holding a drinking party that night and at some point guests would want to sing and dance to the rhythm of *coshamñats* sacred music. With a thin stick, Matar started cleaning the panpipes one by one, sticking it into each panpipe's five cane tubes to clean out mud wasp nests, dead cockroaches, and other pests. He was especially meticulous while cleaning the two shorter panpipes—the leading panpipes. Then he proceeded to clean the longer ones. Since he had eight of these, cleaning them took some time. When he finished cleaning all the panpipes, he took a bowl of manioc beer and poured a little bit into the tubes of each panpipe, all the while muttering something under his breath. When I asked him what he was doing, he said that he was soaking the tubes so that they would expand and tighten and, thus, produce a finer sound. Then he put into his mouth a new wad of coca leaves and asked me for a cigarette. He lit it and started smoking. After a while he started blowing smoke into the panpipes to appraise—he told me—how they sounded. When the sound was wrong, he stuck the little twig into the tube that was out of tune to further clean it, often finding some more dirt stuck in its bottom. When he was satisfied that all panpipes were tuned, he hid them again under the rafters.

At the time I saw Matar cleaning his panpipes, I was satisfied with the idea that he was merely cleaning and tuning them. His matter-of-fact answers to my questions—which sounded sensible—and his down-to-earth behavior deflected my attention from what he was really doing. It was only much later that I understood that the “cleaning” of the panpipes was only one of the many ritual actions intended to “awaken” the vitality vested into *requërcanets* panpipes, which is none other than the power of the creator divinity, Yompor Ror (see fig. 4.1). The pouring of manioc beer is always a ritual act (*amteñets*). Men and women pour a little manioc beer on the ground before drinking as an offering to the divinities who so generously share with their human creatures their strength and vitality. They also pour manioc beer on the ground prior to the opening of a



**Figure 4.1.** *Requërcanets* panpipes and *pallot* flute. Photo: Marcos Guerra, 2006.

new garden or the building of a new house. In all cases, the offering is accompanied by silent thanksgiving prayers.

Coca leaves and tobacco smoke are also central to *a'mteñets* ritual offerings. When I saw Matar tuning the panpipes, I barely noticed that each time he tried one, he blew tobacco smoke—as well as his coca-perfumed breath—into them. This is exactly what Yanesha hunters and fishermen do when divining the best place to hunt or fish. They blow tobacco smoke and spray coca juice in all directions as an offering to the masters of animals or the *mellañoñeñ* spirits that guard particular fishing pools and salty waterholes so that these spirits will allow some of their wards to be hunted or fished.

Manioc beer, coca, and tobacco are the main nourishment of supernatural beings. By pouring manioc beer and blowing coca juice and tobacco smoke into the panpipes, Matar sought to nourish the souls of the panpipes so as to activate them. As in the ritual offering of manioc beer to the solar divinity, this act triggers, in turn, the vitality inherent in the panpipes—a vitality that, when the panpipes are played in honor of the divinities, is disseminated to all those present in the celebration. Briefly, although the Yanesha do not consider panpipes sacred, they conceive of them as endowed with a kind of power/vitality that can be awakened through the proper ritual gestures and substances. The panpipes acquire their maximum degree of animacy and agentivity, that is, their highest degree of personhood, when being played in honor of the divinities. In such a context, the two short panpipes, always played in a sort of canon, are called “leader” (*arequercañ*) and “helper” (*panmapuer*) respectively; the longer panpipes, which mark the rhythm by following the second leading panpipe, are called the “pursuers” or “followers” (*actañ*). The use of such terms recognizes the highly personified nature of *requercanets* panpipes, especially when they are being played.

### Shamanic Transmutations

When he finally showed it to me, I took it as a personal, albeit fleeting victory. For several days, I had been harassing Jeñari, a shaman renowned for his healing and bewitching powers, his many wives, and his insatiable appetite for meat, to show me his jaguar stone. At first, he denied possessing one, arguing that only the greatest shamans had such stones. But I knew that Jeñari was considered one of the most powerful

living shamans among the Yanesha—a *pa'llerr etso'ter* or “shaman with supreme mastery.” And I had been told that he possessed at least one jaguar stone. Later on, he smiled slyly each time I made oblique references to his famous jaguar stone, neither denying nor admitting its existence. It was only after I asked him to cure me of a chronic back pain that had been bothering me since before going into the field that he opened up. I can still feel his penetrating eyes searching mine when he asked me if I believed that he could cure me and I said yes. Truth be said, at the time, I was not all that sure that he could, but I must have looked very firm in my conviction because Jeñari agreed to treat me. The cure was a combination of bodily manipulations—resembling a Thai massage—a spraying of tobacco juice, and sucking of sorcerous objects from the affected part. That night, somewhat relieved by his treatment while we chewed coca and smoked in the darkness of the male section of the house, he opened his fist and showed me a small stone in the form of a jaguar’s paw, asking: “Is this what you wanted to see?” After saying this, he closed his fist and put the stone back into his shoulder bag. He then fell silent and despite my many attempts to entice him to talk, he did not say a word until we went to bed. Postscript: My chronic back pain disappeared and did not come back until many years later.

Jaguar stones, sometimes referred to as *ma'yarromapue'*, are rare and prized gifts bestowed by Yato' Yemats, Our Father Tobacco, upon diligent shamans or would-be shamans. Yemats is considered to be the “owner” of all spirit jaguars. Shamanic apprentices strive to obtain familiar spirits (*pabchar*) through the practice of prolonged vigils, fasts, and sexual abstinence. But the key to obtaining such spirits is the intensive consumption of concentrated tobacco juice. In tobacco-induced states of consciousness, the apprentices hear the songs of different animals—generally fierce animals or animals of prey. If they are careful in distinguishing “true” from “false” animal spirits, they might befriend some of these spirits and engage them as their familiars or protectors.

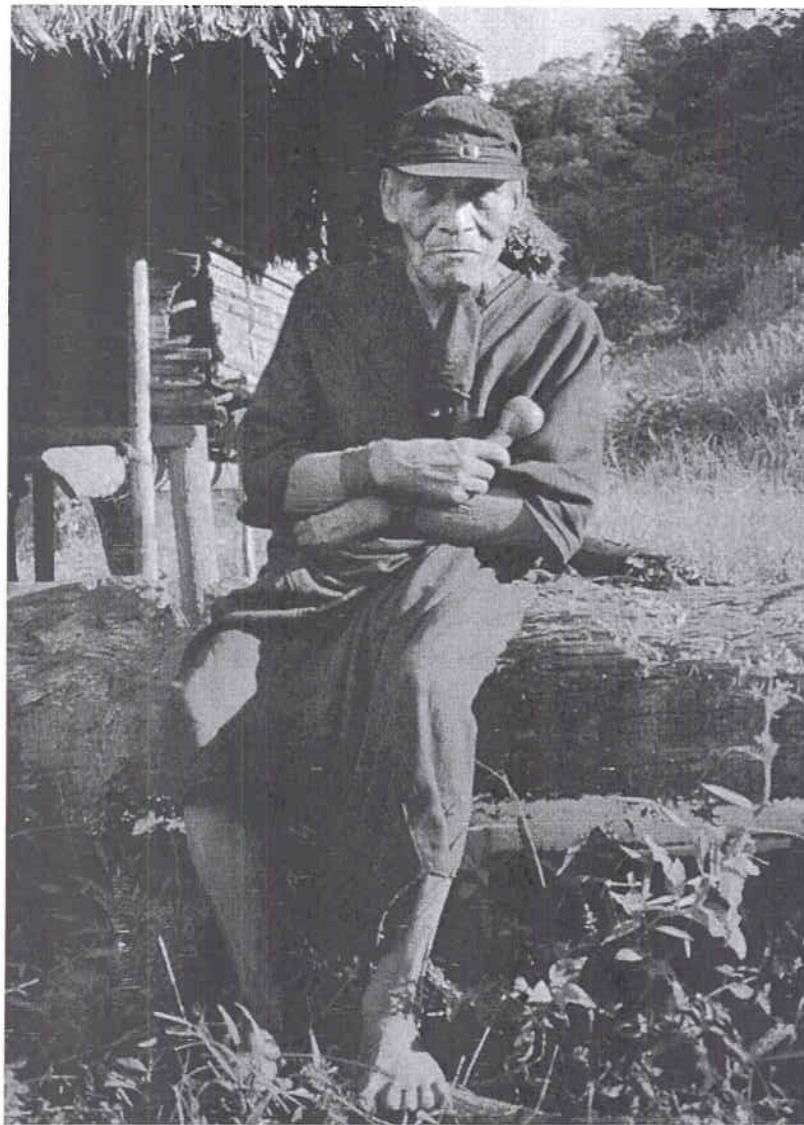
The most powerful *pabchar* are jaguars. Indeed, the power of Yanesha shamans is often measured by the number of jaguar spirits they are said to possess. Yato' Yemats gives away his jaguars to worthy shamans either in dreams or while they are under the effects of the ingestion of tobacco juice. Some he gives away in their spiritual form; others he transforms into stone, telling the shaman where he can find them. These jaguar stones are

thus the result of a double metamorphosis: they have been transformed from people into animals by Yompör Ror and from animals into stones by Yato' Yemats. It is said that Jeñari possessed eight jaguar spirits, only one of which was in the form of stone (see fig. 4.2).

In contrast to other jaguar familiars, with whom the shaman has established a relationship of friendship and who cannot be seduced to abandon him, the spirit jaguars contained in jaguar stones are trapped and do not have the kind of autonomy and agentivity of their spiritual peers. For this reason, they are carefully hidden and guarded against loss or theft. Otherwise, if the person who finds or steals one of them has the proper knowledge, he or she could animate it and make it do whatever they want. Shamans use their jaguar stones when fighting against a particularly strong sorcerer or to combat the downriver spirit jaguars that periodically attack the upriver communities in search of people to eat. Under such circumstances, they activate their jaguar stones by blowing tobacco smoke on them and reciting some magical chants—reminiscent of Wakuénai musical modes of materializing the occult (see Hill, this volume). Thus animated, the potent spirit jaguars summon all carnivorous animals and with their help fight off the intruders. Once the battle is over, the shamans recall their spirit jaguars and induce them back into their stone shape.

### Devout Simulations

While Poniro was telling me in vivid terms his impressions of Berna's *puerahua*, I could imagine his excitement when he was nine years old, a child making his first visit to a ceremonial center. Berna was the last officiating *cornesha'*, or priestly leader, and his temple operated for only a few years, between 1956 and 1959. "When I walked into the *puerahua*, I was dazzled by the brilliant colors of the flower crosses woven into the thatch roof," Poniro said. "They changed the flowers every two days." The temple was a two-floor building with a rectangular plan and a thatch roof with rounded ends. It was completely walled. "On the second floor, Berna kept three images of saints, Saint Francis being the largest." The images were made of plaster. They were kept on a kind of altar. "No one was allowed onto this floor except Berna and his closest associates." During temple ceremonies, Berna passed the images around, saying: "Take it, hold our god." Then, he would pick up the image of Saint Francis and show it to all the celebrants gathered on the ground floor. "When he shut



**Figure 4.2.** Master shaman Jeñari possessed seven spirit jaguars and one jaguar stone. *Photo:* Fernando Santos-Granero, 1983.

down his puerahua, he took the images to his house. One night, during a party, some youths broke the head of the Saint Francis. The headless image stayed around for a few years until one day it disappeared.”

The Yanesha have a long tradition of mimetic appropriation of the power of the Other. This is especially true in relation to the Franciscan missionaries, who for several centuries were the main representatives of white society and power in the Selva Central region. The mimetic function applied to a large variety of things brought by the missionaries in colonial times: crosses, medals, and even the hoods of Franciscan robes. But the Yanesha also mimed some of the central legends of Catholic hagiography, such as the legend of St. Christopher and the Child Christ (Santos-Granero 2002). And they mimed the bonfires lit during the St. John’s summer solstice festival, which in eighteenth-century Europe was as prominent in the Catholic calendar as Christmas.

The mimetic operator continued to be active in postcolonial times with the reentry of Franciscan missionaries into the region after more than one hundred years of absence. The most important mimetic agents at the time were the cornesha, or Yanesha priestly leaders. It is reported that the most important among them—the priest of Palmazu, a prestigious pilgrimage site that housed the stone images of Yompor Yompere—and his wife and classificatory son spent one year attending mass and catechism at the neighboring mission of Quillazu, after which time he started replicating in front of his “idols” many of the liturgical acts of the Catholic mass (Bailly-Maitre 1908:623). The most important of these acts was the solemn “reading” of a book made of feathers, which undoubtedly replicated the Bible, so prominently displayed in Christian celebrations. It is more than possible that the feathers used to make this mimetic Bible were those of Amazon parrots (of the *Amazona* genus), which are renowned for their capacity to talk. By using such feathers, the priest of Palmazu would have sought to appropriate the power of the foreign book—under the form of divine messages—through the communicative skills of native parrots.

Mimesis continued to be an important mechanism of cultural innovation in later times, as the decoration of Berna’s 1950s puerahua suggests. It is not clear whether the plaster images Berna kept in his temple were originals or replicas, but even if they were originals, they acted as replicas insofar as they had not been adopted as Catholic saints but as Yanesha gods. Berna’s



was not a process of conversion but one of mimetic recreation. Through his devout simulations, Berna sought to acquire the power of the foreign gods for the benefit of his own people. As was the case with other Yanesha gods (Santos-Granero 1991:141–42), the appropriated images were nourished with manioc beer especially brewed by prepubescent girls. This especial brew was placed next to the images in the altar. It was believed that the gods extracted the vitality of the offered beer while at the same time infusing it with their own breath/strength (*a'loreñets*), which was later shared by all those participating in the temple ceremonies.

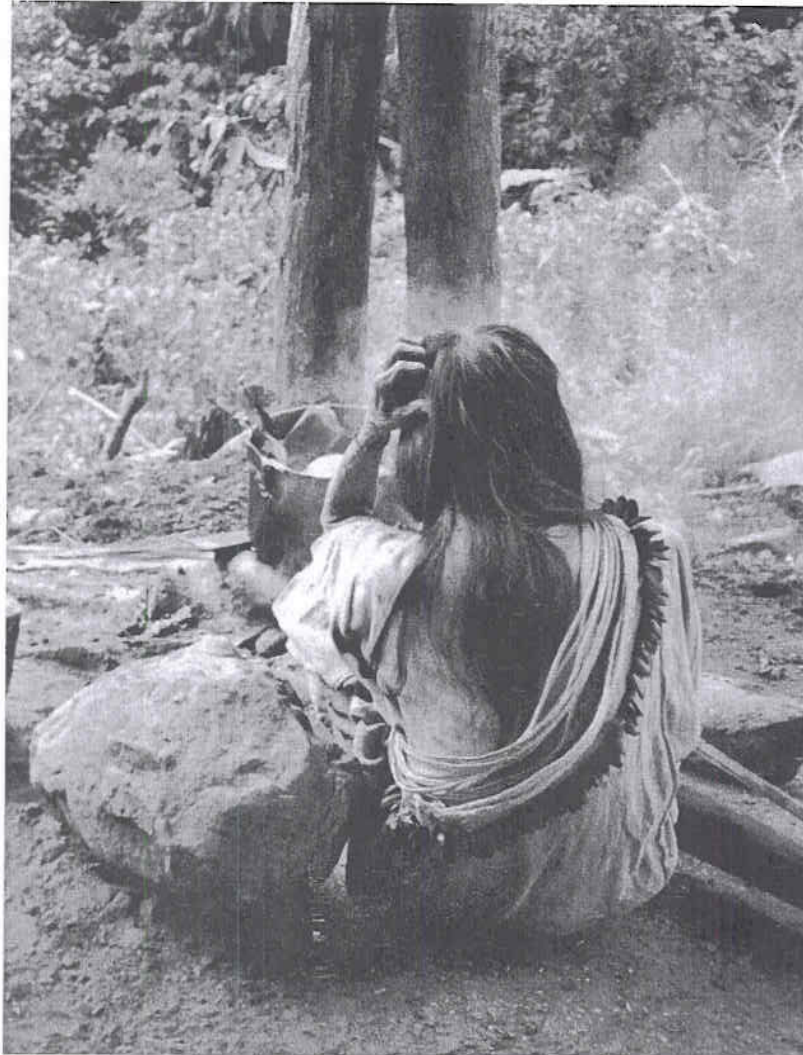
### Vital Connections

We were still a few hundred yards away from Muenaresa's house when we started hearing the racket, a cacophony of yelling adult women, screaming children, and crying infants. When we arrived in the broad clearing that surrounded the house, we were met by a scene of pandemonium. The older children were chasing two large pigs with sticks. The lady of the house shouted abuse at the pigs, at the children, and, particularly, at her eldest daughter, who was on all fours picking things from the dirt floor. A naked toddler lay abandoned on the ground of the impeccably clean patio, crying at the top of her lungs. In the middle of this was Muenaresa's mother, Huepo, sobbing quietly, her hands wrapped around her thin body. When Muenaresa asked what had happened, he was told, amidst shouts and sobs, that the pigs had eaten Huepo's *tse'llamets*, her decorated chest bands. As it happened, since we were in the middle of the rainy season and it had been a sunny day, Huepo had decided to dry in the sun her most cherished ornaments, a bundle of palm-fiber chest bands profusely decorated with fragrant seeds, the teeth and claws of diverse animals, and the bodies of many desiccated colorful birds. She had placed the chest bands on the thatched roof and had gone to the river to fetch water, not before asking her eldest granddaughter to keep an eye on her ornaments. When she came back, she found no one in the house, only the pigs trampling over the remains of her beloved chest bands. That's when she started chasing the pigs away and the whole racket began. Later on, that same day, Huepo fell ill with what seemed to be a cold. She stayed in bed, in a feverish state, for many days, crying intermittently, desolated by her loss.

Tse'llamets are the most important female ornaments among the Yanesha. They consist of numerous flat strips woven from palm fibers or of multiple strands of tiny wild seeds or colored glass beads that are worn across the chest, hanging from the right shoulder (see fig. 4.3). Often, palm fiber chest bands are decorated with seeds, little birds, and animal body parts that women collect in the forest or that are given to them by their husbands, sons, and grandsons. Tse'llamets are also used as baby slings and constitute a sign of womanhood. Prepubescent girls are not allowed to wear them until they have undergone ritual confinement. One of their main chores while secluded is precisely to weave a large number of tse'llamets that they will wear for their coming-out party. Older women, past the age of child bearing, take great pride in their highly ornamented chest bands, which they wear only on special occasions. This is why I thought Huepo was so upset when the pigs ate her chest bands.

Much later, I was to find out that her despair was not due to the loss of beautiful possessions, but because of the loss of something much more vital, namely, a part of herself. The Yanesha believe that things that are in permanent close contact with a person become gradually infused with that person's vitality (*yecamquëm*). Personal ornaments are particularly prone to be ensouled in such a way. The same is true of those objects that, because they are gender or role specific, stand in a metonymic relationship with their owners. A woman's loom, a man's bow, and a shaman's tobacco tube are all objects that through frequent use become infused with the soul of their owners and thus appear as if they are extensions of their bodies (see Erikson, Turner, Miller, and Walker, this volume, for similar notions among the Kayapo, Mamaindê, and Urarina).

The most important among these objects are tunics (fem. *cashë'muets*, masc. *shetamuets*), which in Yanesha thought are equivalent to a person's body. Because of the process of ensoulment, the relationship between bodies and tunics is not metaphorical but rather literal: bodies are tunics, as tunics are bodies (Santos-Granero 2006). This equivalence is linguistically marked by the use of the privative suffix "—vts" or "—ts" in the non-possessed forms of terms referring to body parts (e.g., *oñets* or "head"; *otats* or "hand"), immaterial aspects of the self (e.g., *camuequeñets* or "vitality/soul"; *choyeshë'mats* or "shadow soul"; *noñets* or "words"), and items of personal use (e.g., "cashë'muets" or "tunic"; "tse'llamets" or "chestband"; *serets* or "glass beads") (see Duff-Tripp 1997:31). Thus, the Yanesha and other Amerindian peoples conceive of bodies as including the objects



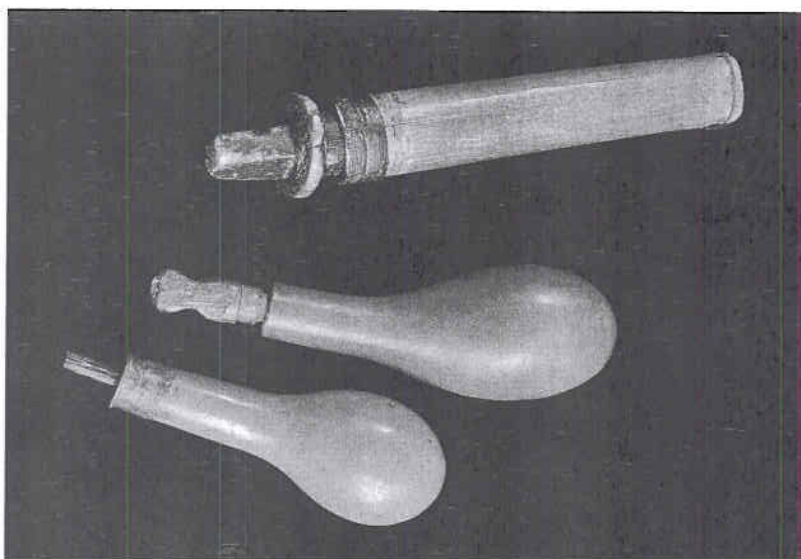
**Figure 4.3.** Huepo wearing a bundle of *tse'llamets* decorated with fragrant seeds. *Photo: Fernando Santos-Granero, 1983.*

more closely linked to a person through frequent use. Such contiguity between bodies and personal possessions is particularly stressed in myths describing certain animal body parts as being former objects, such as beaks that were axes and armors that were straw mats.

Objects that become subjectivized through ensoulment do not have much agentivity, but because they are animated by the vitality of their owners, they become part of their owners and can thus be used to inflict harm on them. One of the most powerful ways of ensorcelling a person is by “working” an evil charm on one of his or her personal possessions. The closer the possession is to the victim, the more difficult it is to counter the sorcerous charm. This is why Huepo was so distressed. And this is why she fell ill that same day. From her point of view, the fact that she became sick after her chest bands had fallen to the ground and were eaten by pigs was not a mere coincidence. It was the result of the sorcerous actions of someone who wished her ill.

For this reason, whenever someone gives away a personal possession, they first de-subjectivize it through ritual cleansing in order to prevent the object from being used to cause them harm. This is what Jeñari did when he gave me his tobacco tube as a present—after much begging on my part, I should add (see fig. 4.4). Tobacco tubes are among a shaman’s most important possessions. They are constantly replenished with tobacco syrup and shamanized by blowing tobacco smoke over them. Before he gave it to me, Jeñari spent a long time in the river scrubbing the inside of the tube so that not even a drop of tobacco was left in it. Only after being thoroughly washed and dried in the sun was the tube ready to be presented as a gift.

For a similar reason, Yanasha destroy or burn all the possessions of a dead person. Because such possessions are infused with the residual subjectivity of their owner, the deceased continues to be attached to them. If they are not destroyed—that is, de-subjectivized—the vitality and the shadow soul of the deceased continue to linger on this earth instead of severing their links with the living and going to the diverse places where they gather after death (see Turner, this volume, for a more detailed discussion of this practice among the Kayapo). This may pose important threats to the living, since dead people always want to take with them some of their relatives so as to have company in the afterworld. By destroying the possessions of the deceased, his or her relatives contribute to accelerate the process of de-facement and re-facement of the deceased’s former self, thus ensuring their own safety (Caiuby Novaes 2006).



**Figure 4.4.** Tobacco tube and lime gourds. *Photo:* Marcos Guerra, 2006.

### Conclusions

Juan Tuesta's assertion that "things are not as they are but as what they are" seems to point to the dichotomy between the "appearance" and "essence" of things. What it ostensibly suggests is that things are not as they look but as they appear to the eyes of those who can see their "true" spiritual dimension, namely, as people. But although most Amerindians would agree with this notion, I do not think that this is what Tuesta had in mind. I would suggest, instead, that what he meant is not that things are what they "really" are, but that they are what their degree of animacy allows them to be. Thus, the emphasis would be not so much on the human essence of all beings but rather on their different capacities for action in the lived world. All beings might have or share a human-shaped soul, but not all human-shaped souls have the same capacities.

This is something Philippe Descola (1996:375) noted when discussing Achuar cosmology: "Contrary to the naïve Platonism sometimes imputed to the Jivaros, in which the true world of essences . . . is opposed to the illusory world of daily existence, it seems to me," he argued, "that the

Achuar structure their world on the basis of the type of exchange that they can establish with all its diverse inhabitants, each of which is invested with a greater or lesser existential reality *according to the kind of perception to which it lends itself and with which it is in turn credited*<sup>p</sup> (my emphasis). Since almost all entities in the Jivaro lived world are endowed with a *wakan* soul, cosmological relations are always intersubjective. Nonetheless, intersubjectivity between the various living beings varies in quality and depth as a consequence of the fact that perceptive skills and the capacity for communication are unequally distributed. Therefore, Achuar cosmology does not discriminate between humans and nonhumans but rather between persons possessing different communication skills.

Descola does not dwell on what causes this differential distribution. Other authors have suggested, however, that the capacity for communication varies in relation to the degree of animacy. In her pioneering discussion on Kalapalo categorization of beings, Ellen B. Basso (1985:65) asserts that the Kalapalo distinguish five classes of beings according to their degree of animacy, to wit, from lower to higher: (1) inanimate objects and body parts, (2) inalienable organs of the body, (3) independent animate beings, (4) human beings, and (5) powerful beings. Each of these classes is set apart by particular forms of communication and the fact that their members can act only upon members of the same class or of classes with a lower degree of animacy.

The Yanéscha—and, I suspect, many other Amerindian peoples—entertain similar ideas. Radical versions of perspectivism, with their emphasis on the uniformity of souls, their assumption that all souls are endowed with similar sensorial capacities, and their stress on the notion that all perspectives have equal value, have tended to downplay this crucial aspect of Amerindian cosmologies. This tendency has been aggravated by an almost exclusive focus on the perspectival relationship between humans and animals, a narrow focus that has been justified on the basis that “the spiritualization of plants, meteorological phenomena or artifacts seems . . . to be secondary or derivative in comparison with the spiritualization of animals” (Viveiros de Castro 1998:472). Even if this were true, the only way of attaining a more comprehensive portrayal of Amerindian perspectivism is by taking into consideration other beings such as plants, meteorological phenomena, and artifacts.

Once we introduce such beings into the equation, it becomes clear that differences in animacy and agentivity—measured in terms of capacity for

goal-oriented thought and action, motion, and feelings (Basso 1985)—are not only crucial to understanding different ways of “being in the world” but also to understanding crucial differences in terms of perspectival capacities. In Yanéscha thought, subjectivized or personified objects have a lesser degree of animacy than any other animate being. Within this broad category of objects, ensouled objects are the ones that have the least agency of all, followed by objects originating through mimesis, objects originating through metamorphosis, and objects originating through self-transformation. Although all these objects are capable of intentionality, their agentivity is always dependent on human intervention. In order to be able to act upon the world, objects must be ritually awakened—the Yanéscha would say “raised,” “revived,” or “resurrected” (*tantaterran*)—through offerings, chants, and prayers (see Chaumeil 2007:269 for similar practices in other Amerindian societies). Thus, the existence of subjectivized objects alternates between agentive and nonagentive phases.

The Yanéscha explain the low degree of animacy and agentivity of objects as the consequence of the objects’ lack of proper souls and fully sentient bodies. Ensouled objects do not have proper souls—they just partake of the vitality of their owners. Mimetic objects are not animated by independent souls; they are magical creations insufflated with vitality stolen from their originals. Objects originating through metamorphosis have powerful souls, but they have been condemned by their creators to a life of sensory deprivation. Finally, objects existing through self-transformation, with their double physical existence, have extremely powerful souls as stars but weaker vitalities in the shape of musical instruments or utensils. For these reasons, objects lack the sensory faculties indispensable to act independently in the world and the kind of perspectival perception characteristic of other beings. Intersubjective relations with objects depend mostly on human initiative. Objects may be far more powerful than the human beings that possess them, but they are subject to the personal whims of their owners, who can choose to stimulate or suppress their potential by activating or deactivating their subjectivities. Thus, while objects are always persons, they are not always active subjects, coming in and out of active subjectivity in accordance with their owners’ will.

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