Scattered Things: Virtue Ethics and Objectness in Indigenous Amazonia

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Abstract

This article seeks to extend the enduring focus on the body and bodily substance in Amazonia, which have historically eclipsed other forms of relatedness and ethical practices. Among the Venezuelan Sanema, for instance, morality is enacted predominantly through manufactured items rather than solely corporeal expressions of relatedness. While objects of all forms are receiving increased recognition in the region, they are often explored within a non-dualist frame that foregrounds inalienability, ownership and subjectification. Yet, the Sanema ethnography reveals that dissolving dualisms in this way elides the existence of important categories such as objects. Focusing on how ethical practices are enacted through partible beads and diesel-powered generators in particular, it becomes clear how alienable goods among the Sanema are valued precisely for their ‘objectness’ rather than their personified qualities.

Keywords: Morality, materiality, Amazonia, kinship, material semiotics.

Introduction

Family life and expressions of care were not quite what I expected among the Amazonian Sanema. At first, I could not quite put my finger on why, until one day it hit me. After returning from a trip to the city, I showed my host brother Santiago the selection of action films that I had brought back for community residents to watch on his DVD player. Santiago became immediately animated by the prospect of an evening’s entertainment, but his excitement soon fizzled to disappointment when he despondently stated that the problem was the generator—a
new machine donated within the last year by the municipal government—as it had run out of petrol. Being acutely familiar with the all-too-common proclamation of deficient fuel supplies, I cheerfully responded that I had brought some back with me, gesturing to the jerry can in the corner of the room. My anticipatory contribution of petrol would, however, not resolve our yearning for a Jean-Claude Van Damme movie marathon because, although I was supplying the fuel and the movies, and Santiago had the DVD player, he informed me that the community generator could not function on these components alone. He started to count off on his fingers a list of all the generator parts and who currently had them in their possession. His brother Eloy had the correct type of engine oil, his brother-in-law Mauricio owned the only circuit breaker, his niece owned the plug sockets, and his other bother-in-law owned the generator’s only spark plug. The generator was literally scattered about the community.

Then Santiago told me that some of the people who had generator parts in their care might not take too kindly to his request to use them due to a quarrel he was having with one of his brothers, which was causing factions within the community. It was becoming rapidly evident that the underlying resentment and active avoidance between some people meant that the generator could not be consolidated into its whole state, and could thus not facilitate the community cheerfulness (Sa. pi mònaja) that an evening’s movie watching so often promoted. I refused to give in as easily as Santiago, however, and decided to ask for the parts myself, since indirect requests were a common way around such conflicts. As I circled the community asking permission to borrow the parts, I began to realise that using the generator was not a matter of simply turning it on. Not only had I been unaware the its multitude removable components—petrol, oil, circuit breakers, plug sockets, spark plugs, starter cords, screws, fan belts—but I had also been oblivious to the intricate web of negotiations occurring behind the scenes of each movie-viewing session. What struck me most profoundly was that expressions of care, and ways to maintain community cohesion, were not centred on the body—as was
portrayed in the literature—but rather on non-corporeal materiality, and on newly introduced manufactured items at that.

This was not the only context in which manufactured goods became central to moral evaluations and practices in everyday life, yet much of the literature on indigenous peoples of Amazonia had until recently presented them as ‘ephemeral or ascetic beings, unburdened by material desires’ (Brightman 2010: 151) or as damaged by the socially destabilising effects of manufactured goods (see Hugh-Jones 1992: 51; Whitehead 2000). Granted, such depictions are now largely dismissed as scholars begin to acknowledge the centrality of both hand-crafted artefacts and imported merchandise in Amazonian cosmologies and imaginaries (Ewart 2002; Fisher 2000; Gordon 2006; Santos-Granero 2009b). Yet, alongside an analytical preference for crafted items, prevailing narratives of inalienability and subjectification (things made to become subjects) have tended to eclipse any detailed analyses of object-like things or objectification (reifying ideas or transforming subjects into objects).

In this article I develop a concept of ‘objectness’ that allows for a more detailed comprehension of emerging new materialities in Amazonia and their role in facilitating virtue ethics alongside corporeal practices. I will do this by focusing on two manufactured items in particular—the diesel-powered generator and glass beads—that provide a lens through which to explore moral life in Amazonia. The purpose of this endeavour is twofold: to consider previously underexplored new materialities within the broader spectrum of materially-oriented social worlds, but also to reconsider the scholarly fetishism for non-dualism that in Amazonia is predominantly subject-oriented. What this has meant is that within Amazonian scholarship, dualisms are dismantled only in one direction, as it were: all entities become subjects, thus relegating the category of objects into near inconsequence. This paper re-introduces the object into schemas of life and sociality in Amazonia, though not to radically reorient materiality in
Amazonia per se, but rather to broaden the scope of material things and how they shape morality and relatedness in the region.

**Morality materialised**

The Sanema are the northernmost branch of the Yanomami language family, an indigenous people whose communities span the forested border between Southern Venezuela and Northern Brazil. I conducted fieldwork in a community that I call Maduaña, situated relatively close to Venezuelan national society accessed via a nearby non-indigenous town that links a river to the transnational highway. Before entering the field in 2009, I predicted that morality would crisscross notions of contentment, family and intimacy as it had been presented so frequently in the literature on Amazonian peoples. Perhaps one of the most well-known approaches to everyday ethics emerged from the work of Joanna Overing and her students, who used Amazonia as a model site for studying the intimate link between rationality (beliefs, knowledge and actions) and systems of morality, affect and cosmology (Overing 1985; see also Overing and Passes 2000). This enquiry developed into what has sometimes been described as a ‘moral economy of intimacy’ model of Amerindian sociality, in which virtue-centred ethics took centre stage but also departed from previously Durkheimian coercive approaches to morality.

Integral to this notion of Amazonian moral life is a corporeal and sensual dimension to virtuous action, an approach first proposed by Seeger, Da Matta and Viveiros de Castro (1979), in which the body and its substance are pivotal to subjective and dynamic realities. A great many scholars have found inspiration in this corporeal view of selfhood, stressing that social activities in Amazonia become inscribed in the representations, processes and reproduction of bodies (see for example Londoño Sulkin 2012; McCallum 1996; Passes 2000; Santos-Granero 2009a; Taylor 1996; Turner 1980; Vilaça 2002). The body, by this formulation, does not exist *a priori*, but is continually created through the sharing of food, acts of care, and mutually
beneficial practices of hunting, gardening and cooking that evoke a deep-rooted sense of gratification (see e.g. Gow 1991). Among the Cashinahua, for instance, a state of being is inseparable from a state of body because food, thoughts, songs, words and physical space are all shared, but also shape the physical body and determine the well-being of society (Lagrou 2000: 160). Turner famously suggested that Amerindian social activities thus become the basis of what he terms ‘bodiliness’, a corporeal social praxis that transcends individual bodies but instead integrates ‘the body and social relations as parts of a single continuum of material activity’ (1995: 168). This steadfast attention to the corporeal dimension of morality continues to be presented as pivotal within the contemporary context, in which bodily representations permeate narratives of identity politics, indigeneity, and political representation (see Conklin 1997; Jackson 1997).

Despite this corporeal axis of social life in Amazonia, there are clearly other areas of life in which morality traverses and emerges from domains beyond the body. Given also that forest inhabitants now encounter novel materiality far more frequently than when ‘bodiliness’ theory was first propounded, it seems appropriate to extend the field of materially-mediated morality in the rapidly changing modern world. Theoretically speaking, though, as soon as we get a handle on objects in Amazonia, they fade from our analytical lens because studies of materiality in this regional context have been dominated by schemas of non-dualist animism in which culture absorbs nature and objects become subjects. This is because theories of animism propound that humanity is the all-encompassing schema into which all things—material and otherwise—ultimately become subsumed. Descola, for instance, describes animism as the ‘attribution by humans to nonhumans of an interiority identical to their own’ (2013: 129). This interiority is defined as intentionality, subjectivity, reflexivity and the aptitude to dream, enabling both human and non-human beings to establish relationships with one another (Descola 1992:114). This shared interiority relates predominantly to entities of the
surrounding forest habitat such as animals and plants, but also some stones, rivers, the sun and the wind, confirmed by my Sanema hosts, who name certain trees, geological features and climate phenomena as persons. But this interiority is not a generic vitality of living matter; it is a specifically human interiority, an idea perhaps best propounded in the theory of perspectivism that asserts the universality of culture and the particularity of nature. In this model, all animals are human underneath, with the corporeal form merely existing as an envelope to the universally human soul. As Viveiros de Castro notes, ‘For Amazonian people the original common condition of both humans and nonhumans is not animality but, rather, humanity’ (2004: 465).

Nevertheless, it is not just pre-existing entities or sentient beings of the forest realm that present a form of animist subjectivity. Viveiros de Castro (2004) has noted that while Euro-American epistemologies create meaning through objectification, Amerindians prioritise subjectification and personification in order to create knowledge. He notes that ‘reflexive selfhood, not material objectivity, is the potential common ground of being’ in lowland South America (2004: 467) so that objects ‘must either be “expanded” to a full-fledged subject—a spirit; an animal in its human, reflexive form—or else understood as related to a subject’ (2004: 470). Much of this process of subjectification emerges through acts of creation which in turn produce insoluble links between the begetter and their handiwork; a connection encapsulated with the foundational ethos of ownership that is a prerequisite to existence itself (Fausto 2008, see also Costa 2017). One can ‘own’ songs, gardens and houses, but they can also ‘own’ children (through fabrication of bodies as described above) and abducted persons who were ‘brought into existence’ by their makers (Santos-Granero 2009d: 168-9; see also Fausto 1999). Most entities of significance are seen to have an owner—from animals to curves in the river—all of which are cared for and nourished by paternal figures or tutelary ‘spirit masters’ (Fausto 2008). It is easy to see how the schema of ownership, and the power inherent in this dyadic
association, can introduce a form of vitality into items that are created or produced. Santos-
Granero notes that it is precisely these generative actions that cause crafted artefacts in
Amazonia to become “‘ensouled” or infused with the soul substance of their owners’, resulting
in their ‘agentivity’ (2009c: 12). Subjectifying becomes such an axiomatic approach in
Amazonia that Descola (1994) suggests it might in fact subvert the category of objects
altogether.

What is missing from the crafted and subjectified approach to matter, however, are the
large proportion of material things that indigenous peoples use and engage with in the
contemporary context that are not handcrafted or organic forest matter, but externally procured
and thus alienated manufactured items: from machinery, to clothes, to mobile phones to
furniture. The enthusiasm with which indigenous peoples procure and engage with these items
demands that we take a closer look at their meaning within social worlds. With this in mind,
recasting the frame of the social to grant more weight to the materiality of their world is a
logical step.

Scholarship on material semiotics, for one, can be considered fruitful for this endeavour
because it celebrates the materiality of our worlds, but in so doing also forces us to invert the
dualisms commonly employed in Amazonia, namely the enveloping category of humanity.
These material-oriented approaches to social life recognise how the clusters of actors that make
up our worlds play both a material and semiotic role; in other words, relations exist as much
between heterogenous things as they do between heterogenous concepts (Law 2007). In this
case, we are encouraged to break down modern dualisms grounded in a radical separation
between humans and matter, in the process undercutting the inherent anthropocentrism that
incorporates all beings and entities under the banner of, or in opposition to, humanity. Matter
is the all-encompassing frame here: humans are matter like everything else and partake in the
broader web of material relations that make up our world. What this post-human approach
offers is greater attention to how the social holds together beyond mere human action and intention, and in so doing offering an alternative approach to life in Amazonia beyond nurtured bodies or subjectified artefacts. In this article, I stop short of Jane Bennett’s (2010) ‘flat ontology’ approach to new materialism because the suggestion that all agency be treated equally, or more precisely, that human characteristics can be extended to the rest of the material world somewhat indiscriminately (see a critique in Kohn 2013: 91-2) contravenes much of what the Sanema themselves state: that some things are more alive than others. I shall unpack these ideas further in the following sections.

While a material semiotics approach to matter might replicate similarly idealistic non-binaries (it has been widely argued that they merely reinstate them, see e.g. Whittle and Spicer 2008), attention to new forms of materiality and their significance not only broadens the scope of what is considered constitutive of material and social worlds in Amazonia, but can also extend studies of morality that were previously dedicated solely to the corporal dimension of materiality. Unlike subjectified hand-crafted items, I shall demonstrate that the properties and opaque origins of industrialised goods make them efficacious for moral conceptualisations and their realisations because they facilitate virtuous practices in similar ways to other long-standing items (specifically meat), but are valued precisely because neither animism nor humanity alone index their bearing on social life. In this way, manufactured items in Amazonia create human social life, rather than simply human social life defining the value of materiality. An important facet of this endeavour is to draw attention to the limitations in deconstructing binaries in only one direction (in this case humanising or subjectifying all things) to the exclusion of other important categories, because such an inquiry often presents ontologies as circumscribed and static. As I shall demonstrate in this article, eliminating objects from Amazonian ways of thinking and acting in the world leaves behind an epistemological chasm that needs to be better theorised.
**Good things make good people**

For the Sanema, the procurement of exterior items does not only augment exterior relationships, as has been described in other cases (see e.g. Hugh-Jones 1992; Killick 2008), but also maintains internal ones too. Sentiments of compassion (Sa. *otetaö*) in kinship relations are central to the appropriation of these items. Earlier I noted that the primacy of substance sharing in Amazonia often eclipses other forms of kin-making, and although it is true that Sanema men do often boast of making their children grow with the meat they hunt, or articulate kinship through phrases such as ‘I ate with them, they were like my parents’, such utterances were the only indicator that relatedness was established through the sharing of substance. The gifting of manufactured items, on the other hand, was frequently and emphatically enunciated in daily life as a moral obligation to sustain kinship.

Material items were discussed by my Sanema hosts using the term *matitö*, which can be glossed as ‘things’ (Sp. *cosas*) but was most often translated into Spanish with the phrase ‘good things’ (Sp. *cosas buenas*). *Matitö* predominantly comprise manufactured goods such as beads, clothing, plastic bowls, fishhooks, pots, machetes, chainsaws, outboard motors and so on, and indeed their man-made origins were often referenced. My host brother Marco described *matitö* as ‘things made by men, made by criollos (non-indigenous peoples) in factories (Sp. *fábricas’). The Sanema word for ‘good’—*toita*—is highly significant in the translation of *matitö*, because it ties up concepts of ‘beauty’ and ‘perfection’ in the material world, ‘proper’ and ‘correct’ behaviour among people, and social dynamics of ‘contentment’ and the good life. Desire for these *matitö* was a prevailing narrative in Sanema everyday life, often articulated as the reasons why they offered labour for their neighbouring Carib-speaking Ye’kwana, why they hauled petrol on their backs to the gold mines upstream, why they harvested crops for long hours on non-indigenous farms, and why they participated in state projects. They did so
because acquiring these items as a form of payment, or buying items with cash earned from these activities demonstrates commitment to the well-being of kin for whom such labour was undertaken (see similar cases in Alès 2000: 135; Allard 2010: 26; Gow 2000).

Among the Sanema, the generous (Sa. ödö ipö) bestowal of things is what defines true humanity, and failure to obtain gifts often resulted in an anguish in some cases akin to illness. The term ‘suffer’—pebalo—also means ‘to be without’ or ‘to be poor’, indicating an emotional distress that accompanies a deficiency in material possessions. Whereas in the past such suffering may have predominantly been associated with a dearth in sustenance such as meat, now it is becoming progressively bound up with desire for manufactured goods. To make kin happy, one regularly shares (Sa. tota jötöpo) or gives gifts, and the delight elicited is palpable in the whooped response of ‘aitaköööö!’ (greeeeeaaat!). On trips to town, people often returned with merchandise for family members—clothing and lollipops for their children, yards of cloth and pots for the women of the family, and shotgun cartridges for the men. When asked why they bring these gifts, most simply say that ‘because they are my family, I give them good things’.

Children, in particular, had their material desires met where possible. Marco, who regularly proclaimed to be pebalo (poor), would often spend whatever money he had on frivolous gifts for his children when in the criollo town, rather than on necessary foodstuffs or petrol essential for the trip back to Maduaña. On one occasion he returned to the town encampment with five plastic glittery pens, each with a feather ball suspended from a spring at the end. He chuckled with delight while showing them to me, announcing proudly that he had bought them for his children. Moments later he complained that he had no money left for rice (see Ewart 2002: 45 for a similar example among the Panará). These sorts of purchases might not seem superficial or ill-considered when recalling that failure to provide for material desires
indicates inadequate care that in severe cases can result in sickness because suffering causes bodies to become vulnerable to spirit attack.

Employing goods as a measure of relatedness or care does, however, cause frictions. On a number of occasions, I heard instances of people defining ‘others’ as those to whom you should not give gifts, as when Marco reproached his brother for sharing with non-kin: ‘why did you give him your camera? He is not your brother, is he?’ One might also demand kin to return gifts when they quarrel, as when a man snapped at his father to return a pair of gifted wellington boots in the midst of a heated argument. Similarly, problems that emerge from sororal polygyny, I was told, were not a result of divided affections, but rather of divided resources. I once asked a woman, whose co-wife was her younger sister, if she was ever jealous, to which she replied: ‘when they go to the city together and he buys her clothes or a pot then, yes, I am sad’. Although manufactured items might seem in this case to supersede corporal practices in virtue ethics, there is much continued articulation between the two, as many artefactual encounters are modelled on food sharing practices. Nevertheless, there are important differences that pertain to their distinct schematic classifications. The valued materiality of manufactured items differentiates them from corporeal forms or internally produced artefacts, particularly in their enduring and durable properties. Besides these atypical characteristics, however, there is another feature that sets them apart from internally produced artefacts and that informs perceptions of their materiality: their obscured origins.

**Creation, origin and emergence**

As mentioned earlier, processes of emergence and creation are integral to notions of value in its broadest sense among native Amazonians. Inalienable artefacts such as woven baskets, carved flutes, feather headdresses, dugout canoes and thatched houses are the result of painstaking process of design, workmanship and creative action that bring to light why such
items might be subjectified, ‘ensouled’ or made ‘vibrant’ through labour. While internally fabricated artefacts have apparent or rationalised origins in this way, the source of manufactured items is distinctly opaque, resulting in a unique placement within Amazonian cosmological regimes of creation and subjectivity.

A number of contributors to Santos-Granero’s volume on the *Occult Life of Things* (2009b) confront these ideas, although most conclude that the archetypal Amazonian process of subjectification is generally applied to manufactured goods. Philippe Erikson, for example, notes that industrial goods among the Matis, which seem not to have an inalienable owner, sit in a ‘neutral’ realm of their own, and in having no ‘imprint’ of their masters, are freely shared. Nevertheless, he also suggests that goods are also treated like pets, as they too enter a process of ‘domestication’ before they can become fully integrated into the community, indicating that they might not remain entirely de-subjectified (2009: 179; see also Walker 2013b: 58). In some cases, externally fabricated merchandise can also acquire their own spirit-owners. Walker (2012) observes that despite the opaque origin and fabrication of trade goods, the Urarina believe them to be the possessions of a spirit being known as ‘the Burner’ (Moconajaera), an enigmatic ‘owner’ who restores a valued inalienability and the implicit social relationships that define that modality. These cases are consistent with the trope that in Amazonian objects are subjectified as a matter of course, that artefacts must become inalienable in order to be legible. Yet, as I have already mentioned, the process of breaking down the subject/object dualism in Amazonian scholarship has engendered a cosmos of subjects, leaving no space for objects to be just objects.

Despite this apparently widespread reversion to inalienability in Amazonia, the subjectification of objects did not seem to occur among the Sanema. Even objects that were hand-crafted, though increasingly uncommon, were not attributed any form of vitality that would suggest they were anything beyond inert objects. One might imagine that items owned
by people might become ‘ensouled’ through a lifetime of intimate handling and use, indicated by the burning of personal items upon death. I have been told by my Sanema friends, however, that only the hammock is burned with the deceased, while all other items are appropriated by kin because they were considered ‘too valuable’ to destroy. Equally, the degree to which objects might be treated as living beings such as pets or under the authorship of a powerful spirit master was never suggested. I once even asked a Sanema friend outright if one of his store-bought possessions were alive in any way and, portraying amused confusion at my blatant ignorance, stated that matitö ‘do not think anything, they do not have a heart’ because they have no warmth, breath and movement at the centre of the body (the location of the heart—pila kocho möpö). Warmth and movement were characteristics of ‘living’ or animate things such as peccaries and birds, as well as healthy humans. Another of my research collaborators stated that ‘matitö do not have spirits because they are made by men’, indicating that manufactured items—indeed, items fabricated by humans more broadly—do not have ‘spirit masters’ or ‘owners’ that generally impart animist agency (see Walker 2012; Viveiros de Castro 2004: 471). These comments suggest that items that have been described by scholars as subjectified or ‘agentive’ might need to be more intricately unpacked or situated within a holistic epistemological field.

Earlier it was noted that animism is attributed to a diverse set of entities to include rocks, river rapids and the wind, illustrating how subjects and objects are subtly differentiated; not, however, according to the empirical distinction between living organisms and inert matter (see Ingold 2011: 94), but rather to particular and diverse estimations of what constitutes life. Comments by my Sanema interlocutors, however, indicate that goods could not be alive because they present no animist characteristics, suggesting a perceived distinction between ‘autonomous’ and ‘made’ materialities that so-called moderns allegedly encapsulate but that scholars are at pains to deconstruct, particularly in indigenous contexts. There was something
else going on here. After some probing, I started to understand that for the Sanema, vitality and animist agency are associated not just with intention, warmth, movement, or fabrication in the present, but also origins within mythological time. Indeed, it was in mythological narratives of origin and generativity that were recounted in passing discussion that the significance of creation and emergence become most evident.

The corpus of Sanema myths reveal that all beings that today have spirits—humans, jaguars, peccaries, ceiba trees, strong wind and raging rapids to name but a few—share the same primordial origins. During mythical time, all such beings formed an undifferentiated, yet continually transforming, whole of shared life. This all changed at the dawn of modern time when the sky fell and created a world of permanent differentiation and stabilization among all living beings that appear in the world to this day (Wilbert and Simoneau 1990: 42-43). One could say that the whole became many subdivided parts. I have only seen manufactured items appear in one Sanema myth (see Colchester 1981: 37) that specifically addresses the arrival of modern goods. Besides this, they are largely absent and do not constitute characters in their own right (i.e. there is no ‘bead-man’ or ‘generator-man’). Indeed, no items fabricated by humans appear at all as protagonists in Sanema mythology, and thus might explain why they are not attributed vitality in present day. Of course, mythology is a dynamic and dialectical phenomenon, making it difficult to interpret the appearance of certain phenomenon precisely. However, Gow has noted that mythology connects the known to the unknowable (Gow 2001: 77), underscoring the idea that animist vitality itself is contingent, somewhat incomprehensible and in a constant state of potentiality.

The emergence of manufactured items in the contemporary context is equally ambiguous. My Sanema hosts regularly discussed the origins of industrialised materiality within living memory and through the tales of their forefathers. Trade goods serve as the dominant marker of the material poverty of bygone times (Sa. *sudu upa*), but also as indicators
of alterity; that is, notions of the self in relation to enigmatic others. The origins of these items were always seen to be external to Sanema material and social worlds. The first known source was the neighbouring indigenous peoples—the Ye’kwana—who had direct access through a longer history of missionary contact (see Penfield 2017). Later, the Sanema obtained them directly from their own evangelical missionary allies, who started to arrive in their territory from the 1980s onwards. One Sanema man described the arrival of the first missionary as the arrival of ‘good things’ in which ‘he gave us pots, machetes and hammocks to make the community grow’. Since the late 1990s, the perceived source of goods shifted to something far more distant and far more abstract: the state. The extant socialist political regime of Bolivarianism, spearheaded by the late President Hugo Chavez, was defined by an endless flood of material gifts funded by the nation’s oil wealth (see Penfield 2018).

The emergence, origins and creation of manufactured items is a complex field of knowledge for the Sanema: manufactured items are not mythological heroes and thus possess no spirit, their sources are opaque, but they emerge from powerful unknown—yet increasingly proximal—worlds. As we have seen, however, they are highly significant in contemporary relations of care and collective wellbeing. It is important to note that the Sanema did recognise that matitö were fabricated through human action at some stage, but this fact did not seem to be of deeper significance and was rarely queried, perhaps in part because their source was so disconnected from their daily lives and narratives. What they focused most attention and energy on was the value that emerged from their material properties, rather than the human action that preceded or produced those properties. Intersecting with features of durability and beauty are properties that facilitate dividing and sharing, actions that among the Sanema define the imbrication of social and material worlds.

**Dividing and sharing**
It goes without saying that sharing is a life-giving activity in many small-scale societies. As was indicated earlier, in Amazonia, sharing is not just a means to sustain life, but a way of defining and establishing relatedness through shared substance. But sharing (Sa. köpalo) is a complex and delicate process. When game animals are slain, intricate assessments are made regarding the cut of meat to be offered to which family member. The first evaluation comes after returning home from the kill, during which time cuts of meat will be ferried to in-laws, parents and siblings in adjacent households (see also Gow 1989; Siskind 1973: 86-7; Walker 2013a: 108-114). After being cooked within those households, discussions ensue as to who will receive the prize cuts or the much-desired organs such as the liver or the brain. Lizot notes that sharing among the Yanomami is inherently a matter of dividing up larger items, and that the verb ‘to share’ also means ‘to break’ or ‘to pick’ (1994: 237, n. 24). In this way, the archetypal kin action of sharing can be seen as a matter of dividing wholes into parts. As other scholars who work in similar contexts are well aware, many conflicts surface and play out through this process of dividing up and sharing of meat, similar to the conflicts associated with goods sharing noted above.

The ability of some manufactured items to facilitate similar practices of dividing and sharing revels their resemblance to meat and consequently to consubstantial processes; it is clear that contemporary activities reflect former practices and values, even if the material mediator is distinct. Indeed, this similitude to their game counterpart is central to their desirability. In addition to the partible generator described at the start of this article, another unmistakably similar item is the highly valued glass beads (Sa. masò lökö) worn by almost all residents of Maduaña.5 The material qualities of beads⎯their vibrant colour, durability, glossy sheen and tiny size⎯were regularly referred to when describing their beauty and desirability. But it was their tiny size that was most often referred to as women howled with delight upon seeing or receiving them, exclaiming in a high-pitched voice ‘Oooooooosowai!’ (sooooo
tiny!) as they lightly touched the beads with their fingertips. More importantly, their size was the quality that facilitated their all-important divisibility; while they were utilised as aggregated adornments—usually as large twisted bead collars strung around necks or bands wound around the legs—these could also be infinitely split, scattered and segmented.

Procured by men through trade or labour, beads were processed and owned by women, who build up their bead supply over a lifetime; they often start out with thin collars that gradually develop into large thick and heavy layers over the years. The arrival of each new child, however, will prompt women to pick apart the collars and divide them into smaller ones for her offspring, an ongoing process of unpicking and re-stringing that mirrors the growing and shifting relationships within the family unit that can be repeated over and over again. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Yanomami word for beads—topê—is also related to the term topêmou which means ‘to offer or give’. Above all, the unique and infinitesimal partibility of beads enables them to overcome a ‘fixity’ inherent in other objects, thus allowing for the ‘making and remaking of intersubjective relations’ (Ewart 2012: 177; see also Graeber 1996: 13-4) over and beyond a lifetime.

There is clearly a parallel between the partibility of beads and that of the community generator. One notable thing about this machine that plays into the materialised morality discussed above was the fact that it facilitated a sense of belonging to and responsibility towards a wider group. Amicable relationships were required for the generator to come together, but furthermore, wider community contentment also relied on cooperative relatedness, as everyone in Maduaña required a functioning generator to charge their torches, watch movies, listen to music and light their houses at night. What I found particularly interesting about this machine was that, in theory, it was intended to be a community item, donated by the municipal government for collective management. Yet its communal use was undermined by the fact that it became a collection of privately-owned components rather than
a mutually shared item. Indeed, Santiago did not seem to put much effort into owning all the necessary parts of the generator himself so that he had exclusive control over it, I imagine because this would be vehemently rejected by residents. Each actor within the network seemed to be intentionally maintaining control over their unique part in order to impose a dispersible quality onto the machine, which in turn distributed control and promoted unity. Put another way, the existing arrangements meant that the generator was incomplete without the cooperation and good will of kin, and its partitioning allowed kin to regularly and actively coalesce. True to the material semiotics agenda, material webs here link people, information, and energy in ways that shape ethical relations.

Beyond the promotion of care through acts of dividing and sharing, the properties of beads and generators are metonymic with what kinship itself represents: parts that make up a whole. The term ‘whole’ that I am using here refers to multiplicities of identical components. Kinfolk among the Sanema are seen to constitute a group made up of parts of the same ‘kind’, intimated in the Sanema word for family—*ipa aité*—which literally means ‘my others’, but is generally translated as ‘my people’ or ‘my similars’ (see Penfield 2019: 151). This is consonant with what other Amazonianists have described as a ‘multiplication of identical entities’ (Gow 2000: 49) or a ‘collectivity of singular similarities’ (Overing 2003: 312; see also Sahlins 2011). Materiality—and that includes materiality beyond the body—is central to actions associated with these multiplicities of kinship and virtue ethics among the Sanema (see a contrast to Strathern’s theory of partible personhood in Penfield 2019).

Returning to the partitioning of meat and its similitude with the partibility and sharing of some manufactured items, there are some important differences which serve to elucidate the notably high value of inert objects in this context. Like the beads and the generator, meat from large game is subdivided and distributed to facilitate kin unity. Yet, this action can also put people at risk because game animals, who are intentional subjects themselves, are the primary
agents of illness. Given that animals are ‘humans beneath their animal clothing’, great care
must be taken when dealing with them, and more so when consuming them, as doing so is
commensurate with cannibalism. As such, processes of desubjectification need to be
undertaken, predominantly through cooking, but also shamanising and ritualised commensality
(see e.g. Costa 2012; Fausto 2007), in order to evade the vengeful response that inevitably
follows the assassination of sentient beings.

Meat that is partitioned from large game is a highly dangerous comestible due to the
potency of their vengeful souls. When it comes to food prohibitions, Sanema individuals often
refer to the size of the animal they are forbidden to eat because larger animals are always
shared, while small items—small fish and birds in particular—are eaten whole by a single
person. Eating small animals alone rather that sharing partitioned animals is an important facet
of the disconnection of the self during liminal or vulnerable phases of life such as menstruation,
puberty rites, pregnancy and the first two years of a child’s life (see also Fausto 2007). During
menarche (Sa. jokolomo), for instance, girls enter a period of confinement in which they are
‘surrounded’ (Sa. jokolomônase)—hence separated—in a small leaf shelter for a period of a
week. Similarly, men who have committed homicidal acts must temporarily separate
themselves from kin—a practice known as ‘blood guilt’ (Sa. kanene)—by living apart for a
time. Sharing food, and thus sharing substance, with kin during such perilous times was
described by my hosts as ‘extremely dangerous’. Physical and social disconnection both
diminishes risk to vulnerable people (such as girls commencing menarche) but also protects
the kin of polluted individuals (such as assassins). In this case, partibility becomes a hazard
both in indexing the dangerous intentionality of the large being from which sections of meat
originate, but also because sharing substance with others can be as hazardous as it can be
beneficial (see also Teixeira-Pinto 2004: 231). With this in mind, I will consider in the
following and final section how the numerous factors associated with manufactured goods—
durability, partibility, opacity and alienability—converge into make ‘objectness’ so powerful in this context, and why such an approach might bring into sharper focus the importance of new materiality in Sanema social worlds.

**Conclusion: the value of ‘objectness’**

Most perspectives on materiality in Amazonia advance a view that direct and intimate creative action, and the subjectifying at its heart, are at the core of an Amazonian worldview, so much so that objects in and of themselves recede into insignificance. To some degree one could argue that beads and generators are continually fabricated by the Sanema much like crafted artefacts because they are perpetually transformed and reformed. Indeed, this continual process of becoming is precisely what bestows them with elevated value, but not because they are subjectified, but rather because this process promotes moral actions of kin cooperation. In other words, their partible properties allowed kin to express and enact collective contentment (Sa. pi mōnaja). Yet, these externally produced items remain inert objects by the Sanema’s own proclamations.

One might argue that what contributes to the elevated value of goods is the fact that their source is opaque, and thus their animism brought into question, and in turn their risk to community wellbeing minimised (except perhaps petrol, see Penfield 2019). In other words, trade goods cannot take vengeance in response to their consumption and partitioning as would animist beings, namely game meat. Manufactured items, then, facilitate virtuous practices in the same way as meat (and have better ‘qualities’ than internally produced items), but possess none of the same potentially dangerous subjectivity. In this way, it is clear that while contemporary practices are founded on corporeal subjecthood, they nevertheless depart from it materially and ideologically. As such, it was evident in Sanema daily life that ‘bodiliness’ (Turner 1995) did not form the core of ethical narratives so much as ‘objectness’; that is, the
unique inert material affordances—in particular lasting visible representations of care—offered by novel materialities. Rather than being ‘incompletely interpreted subjects’ as Viveiros de Castro (2004: 470) described Amazonian objects, we should perhaps see new materiality as ‘willingly objectified things’.

The cases offered in this article have shown that not only can kin be fabricated as though they were artefacts (Santos-Granero 2009d: 168-169), but that they can equally be fabricated through artefacts. By this I mean that kinship is produced not only through the sharing of substance, but also through the gifting and sharing of goods. As Bird-David describes among the Nayaka of India, when kin use the same objects, those objects ‘become a sign of their closeness’ and even in some ways ‘aggregate separate selves’ (1990: 193). So too among the Sanema are objects given and shared to reaffirm kinship, but furthermore, partible items like generators and beads can precisely ‘aggregate separate selves’ through the assemblage of their scattered parts. Certainly, not all manufactured items are divisible in quite the same way as beads and generators (although many are: paperwork, petrol, clothing, technology and machinery in particular), but these two items serve to demonstrate that industrialised goods need not exist in only one of two camps: either acquiring the ‘imprint of their masters’ (and thus inalienable possessions) or becoming ‘incompletely interpreted subjects’ (Viveiros de Castro 2004: 470) with consequently no bearing on social life. Beads and generators show us that objects can be objects, but also highly significant for social and moral life.

This is where approaches to material semiotics gain traction in this unlikely context. We have seen that novel materiality in the region—manufactured items with opaque origins—are not seen to be animist entities because they did not exist as mythological beings, have no spirit masters, and emit no warmth or movement. But these considerations do not preclude a catalytic capacity when forming a component of human social relationships. As stated earlier, approaches to material semiotics reveal that human exceptionalism defines subjectification,
agency, and even animism, while the Sanema case suggests that sociality emerges from novel materiality rather than determines it. In other words, materiality and its value are not contingent on the animist framework—which itself is defined by humanity—nor on existing human networks that bring it to life (see Viveiros de Castro 2004: 470). Indeed, it is the inverse: manufactured items and their material affordances bring human social relationships to life. In this way, being alert to the use of externally procured manufactured items such as generators and beads might enable us to call into question the purported primacy of subjectified—and ergo animated—artefacts in Amazonia.

Notwithstanding the advantage of enabling an interrogation of animate objects, renewed attention to materiality in Amazonia might also challenge ongoing efforts to unseat so-called epistemological dualisms where instead multifarious categorisations present as the norm. The intention in this endeavour is not to revive Lévi-Strauss’s cosmological dichotomies (1964), but rather to pinpoint the pitfalls of monism as the sole alternative (see Viveiros de Castro 2004: 482). The Sanema’s intricate classification of materiality according to origin, fabrication and signs of ‘life’ is indicative of a sophisticated and ever transforming ontological field within a modern and rapidly changing world (see Bessire and Bond 2014). Blaser (2013) argues that ontological realities should not be understood as existing ‘out there’, but as multiple and continually enacted. Tellingly, he cites Mol’s material semiotics approach to atherosclerosis diagnosis (2002) when emphasising these forms of ontological multiplicity (2013: 552), foregrounding (intentionally or otherwise), as he does so, the centrality of materiality in these multiple ontological enactments. In the Sanema case, it is precisely these hybrid ontological settings that leave space for ‘objectness’ to exist alongside subjectivity.

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References


**Notes:**

1 In translation, Sa. refers to Sanema terms and Sp. refers to Spanish terms.
2 My fieldwork was conducted between 2009 and 2011 in both Bolivar and Amazonas states of southern Venezuela at a time of relative political and economic stability, in part because oil prices were high during this period. All place names and personal names have been changed to protect the identities of the people involved.
3 I will not cover handcrafted artefacts in great detail in this article because, besides being sparse, were not discussed with much detail or enthusiasm among the Sanema.
4 Different scholars describe estimation of animist vitality is various ways, from possession of spirit masters, to the symbolic and practical roles that certain animist entities play (Viveiros de Castro 2004: 470), to systems of signs that characterise living selves (Kohn 2013).
5 These modern glass beads and their form of use were adopted from the neighbouring Ye’kwana indigenous peoples.
6 It is for this reason that there was a preference for Czech seed beads that measure 1.4-1.6mm in diameter.