

MAIZE AS MATERIAL CULTURE?
AMAZONIAN THEORIES OF PERSONS AND THINGS

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Introduction: the ‘nature’ of materials in anthropological analyses

As a significant sub-discipline within anthropology, material culture studies have been at the forefront of ground-breaking theories regarding the relationships between people and things. A whole genre of object biographies have been produced, based on Kopytoff’s (1986) article on the ‘social life of things’ (cf. Saunders 1999, Thomas 1999, Harrison 2003). Daniel Miller’s (1987) interpretation of Hegel’s dialectical materialism led to a serious discussion of how people and objects mutually reinforce and create each other. While Kopytoff’s theory has been widely criticized for its passive, semiotic approach (Thomas 1999, Holtorf 2002), Miller’s notion of ‘materiality’ (1987, 2010) moved away from the meanings of objects to focus on how they act within the field of social relations. As more anthropologists and archaeologists engage with material culture studies, however, the assumptions on which this sub-field have been based are being called into question. Rival’s edited volume (1998) includes ethnographic accounts attempting to reconcile the symbolic and material aspects of person–thing relationships. Ingold (2007b) adopts a more radical view, bypassing a discussion of symbolism and critiquing ‘materiality’ for being an abstract category. His phenomenological approach calls for an analysis of the material substance and affects/effects of things. Instead of analysing the ‘thinginess’ of things, as is the case in materiality studies, Ingold advocates an exploration of how things are ‘thingly’; that is, how they emerge in the world of both people and things (Ingold 2007b: 9). In this sense, things are not essential, unchanging entities but are instead contingent (Holtorf 2002) on time, space, and their relationships with other emergent things and people.

This brief summary of material culture studies reveals that the basic relationships under analysis, those between people and things, are by their very nature complex and unfold over time. As anthropologists, how are we to make sense of this ‘mess’ (cf. Hicks 2010: 71) of things and people? In this article, I will argue that a better understanding of people–thing relationships must begin from an expanded

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notion of ‘material culture.’ Within material culture analyses, the materials most commonly investigated are manufactured objects. Miller (2010) studies cell phones and saris, Latour (1993b, 2000) researches trains and keys, and many other authors have analysed everything from knapped bottle glass artefacts (Harrison 2003), to potsherds (Holtorf 2002), to rubbish (Shanks 2004). Although Ingold (2000, 2006, 2007a, 2007b) has produced theoretical writings on non-manufactured materials such as trees and the weather, he has yet to write an ethnographic account of such materials in the lives of particular people. While the relationship between people and manufactured objects is undoubtedly important, in certain communities other materials also take on a central role. This article will focus on indigenous Amazonian encounters with things, including artefacts, animals, spirits and plants. Human–plant relationships will be given a particular emphasis, as these engagements are understudied and not usually included in the domain of ‘material culture studies’ (an important exception is Rival ed. 1998). It will be shown how a more complete theoretical understanding of the relationship between people and all sorts of things can be found in the rich ethnographies of Amazonia.

Within material culture studies, the overarching theories of Latour (1993a, 2005) and Ingold (2008) have been particularly influential. In Latour’s actor network theory (ANT), people and things, or humans and non-humans, are best understood as actors within networks. Every actor-thing, whether human or non-human, is of equal importance and is distributed along the symmetrical and horizontal network. In this sense, it is impossible to speak of distinct ‘subjects’ and ‘objects,’ since these human and non-human actor-things together form ‘monstrous hybrids’ (Latour 1993b: 375-376). Instead of analysing what has traditionally been known as ‘society,’ Latour calls for an analysis of these hybrids, which can be done by tracing the movements of actor-things along the network (Latour 2005). While Latour raises some important issues regarding the objects of social science analyses, ANT fails to seriously take into account the importance of embodied relationships among people and things. Latour’s (2000) fieldwork on the Berlin key network in pre-unification West Berlin apartment buildings provides a snapshot of particular relationships among ‘mediators’ that are seen as abstract nodes in an even more abstract chain of events. Who are these West Berliners using such unusual keys? We are told how the key is operated in a technical sense, but the embodied skill required to utilize such keys is overlooked. In

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this way, Latour ignores the centrality of embodied relationships and skills that emerge within networks of people and things.

Embodied behaviour and skill acquisition are central to Ingold's (2000, 2008) theory of the 'meshwork.' He playfully critiques Latour's ANT by creating his own acronym, SPIDER: 'Skilled Practice Involves Developmentally Embodied Responsiveness' (Ingold 2008: 215). In this theory, the meshwork is likened to a spider's web that extends through time and space. In contrast to the network, which is a horizontal chain of associations (Latour 2000), the meshwork is a three-dimensional matrix that enmeshes all sorts of persons and things. Relationships among persons and things emerge along the threads of the meshwork and are themselves material (Ingold 2007a: 81; 2008: 210). Ingold likens this process to the weaving of a spider's web, which emerges from the movement of the spider's body and then connects spider and fly, albeit in a predatory way¹ (Ingold 2008: 211). In this way, the persons and things in the meshwork become connected through embodied processes of growth and movement. Persons and things are contingent, however, and their attributes and characteristics will undoubtedly change as they interact with each other in this tangled web of existence (cf. Ingold 2000, Holtorf 2002). This is in stark contrast to the hybrids of Latour's network, which are composites yet retain the essential, fixed qualities of each entity involved (Latour 1993a, 2005). By incorporating embodied movement and growth, and by emphasizing the contingency of persons and things, Ingold's meshwork is made more analytically useful than Latour's network. Unfortunately, Ingold tends to focus on theoretical issues at the expense of ethnographic analysis. This article will attempt to bridge this gap by examining the meshwork in light of Amazonian ethnographies. Using a broadened understanding of material culture, the article will outline how Amazonian ethnography can provide insights into and even reinvent material culture studies.

Material culture in Amazonia: linking persons and things

Before the creation of 'material culture studies' as a distinct sub-discipline in the 1980s, the study of material culture had largely been relegated to the basement storage of ethnographic museums (cf. Belk 1995, O'Hanlon 2000). In the 1920s and

¹ Predatory relationships among people and things, which are common in Amazonia, will be explored later in this article. It is unclear whether Ingold purposefully utilizes a predatory creature for his theoretical discussion of person-thing relationships.

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1930s, the advent of extended fieldwork and the monograph as the pinnacle of anthropological scholarship rendered the analysis of artefacts secondary to the investigation of an ephemeral culture or society. Ethnographic accounts of Amazonia began around this time and focused on kinship organization and myth largely at the expense of material objects (cf. Nimuendajú 1939, 1946). Amazonian material culture, narrowly defined as man-made artefacts such as pottery and weavings, was said to be 'primitive' and lacking in cultural significance (cf. Meggers and Evans 1973). Archaeological accounts reinforced this notion with findings that material culture did not play an important role in prehistoric Amazonian societies (Roosevelt 1980). As part of the structural turn in anthropology as a whole, Amazonian anthropologists focused on the semiotic structural aspects of indigenous societies, namely socio-political organization, myth, and ritual (cf. Lévi-Strauss 1966, 1970; Rivière 1969; da Matta 1973; Maybury-Lewis 1967, 1979). Material objects had no place in these analyses and were seen to be purely functional or supportive of more 'complex' ritual activity.

However, from the late 1970s to the late 1990s, anthropology in general began to move away from structuralism and explore other ways of analysing social phenomena. Material culture studies developed as a counter to structuralism and revealed the activity of objects in society and social history (cf. Belk 1995, Hancock 1998, Thomas 1999, Gosden and Marshall 1999). In Amazonian ethnographies, the focus shifted from kinship structures to gender, embodiment and personhood, all of which were found to be inextricably linked to material things. For many Amazonian communities, material objects are central components of constructing both persons and society. Jewellery, body paint, musical instruments and weapons serve as markers and creators of social identity and status (cf. Turner 1995, S. Hugh-Jones 1979, Rival 1996). In the last decade or so, anthropologists from each sub-field have been attempting to reinvent material culture and Amazonian studies respectively. Researchers of material culture are searching for new objects of enquiry and new ways to engage with such objects, while Amazonianists are investigating the myriad ways indigenous communities conceive of 'persons' and 'bodies.' Despite distinct differences, there are similarities between the two sub-disciplines that have not yet been thoroughly explored. A recent edited volume on Amazonian material culture (Santos-Granero 2009b) shows that creating a dialogue between these seemingly disparate areas of research has the potential to enrich both sub-fields. This article is an

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attempt to create a space for such a dialogue by building upon recent scholarship in both Amazonian and material culture studies.

Amazonian theories of personhood and thing-hood are fluid and largely interchangeable (Santos-Granero 2009a: 3). Humans and non-humans are constantly changing and being constructed throughout their life courses, and each type of being has the potential to transform bodily into another type of being. Known as perspectivism, this philosophy is founded on the notion that all beings—including animals, plants, spirits, and artefacts—have a point of view that is located in the body (Fausto 2008: 348). All beings possess a similar type of ‘spirit’ or ‘soul’, but it is the body that differentiates beings from one another (Viveiros de Castro 1998: 471). An embodied perspective is linked to the notion that all beings perceive themselves as a part of ‘human’ culture (ibid.: 470). Thus, while people view the jaguar as eating raw meat, from his perspective he is eating manioc bread, a type of food typically associated with human culture. As a theoretical model, perspectivism has mainly focused on the predator–prey relationship among beings with different bodies (Århem 1996). Humans usually see themselves as predators and animals as prey, while animals, especially large ones such as the jaguar, see the situation in reverse. Predator–prey relationships are seen as the basis for Amazonian hunting and shamanic activities because both involve taking on one of these perspectives and potentially moving between the two (Fausto 2007a, 2007b, Rival 2005). Predation is fundamentally about the incorporation of another being’s point of view through ‘mastery,’ which is a fluid, ambiguous process (Fausto 2008: 332-3, 340). Although the shaman can acquire mastery over the jaguar’s point of view, this dominion is ambivalent and easily reversible. There is also an ambivalence surrounding the specific type of master–mastered relationship, since a master (predator) can be protective or oppressive to his prey.

While human–animal engagements of mastery have been widely documented in Amazonia (cf. Viveiros de Castro 1992, Kohn 2007, Fausto 2007a), the entanglements among humans and artefacts have only recently received attention. Viveiros de Castro (1998: 471-2) has argued that the perspectives of large predatory animals are most important within perspectivism, but recent ethnographic accounts show how human–artefact relationships are no less important. Objects are central to many Amazonian myths and often form the basis of both human and animal bodies (Santos-Granero 2009a: 5). The embodied engagements of people and artefacts also

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extend beyond myth into present-day lived realities. For the Urarina of the Peruvian Amazon, baby hammocks are seen as an extension of the mother's body, and the infant's body is said to fuse with his or her hammock through a process of 'ensoulment' whereby the hammock forms part of the child's personhood (Walker 2009: 84-5). In this way, the hammock is not only a mediator between mother and child, but actively creates a bodily connection with and between the two (ibid.: 89). Some artefacts actively create and nurture personhood, while others act upon humans in a predatory way. The Urarina stone bowls or *egaando* are purely predatory until they have been successfully controlled by shamans. Through an extended process of ritual seclusion, a shaman can 'tame' the *egaando* into an obedient servant who teaches healing techniques to its master (ibid.: 94). It is dangerous to engage with an *egaando*, however, because there is always the possibility it will not submit to shamanic treatment and will attack the shaman and his family instead.

Dangerous relationships with things are also seen in the Wauja community of the Upper Xingu, Brazil. The *apapaatai* are monsters who have the capacity to make people ill by stealing parts of their souls (Barcelos Neto 2009: 130). In order to heal the sick person, the *apapaatai* must be controlled through ritual action. Originally spirits, the monsters are created as masks, flutes, and other objects and are then fed human food in order to remove their monstrous predatory abilities (ibid.: 131-2). Through commensality, a fundamentally embodied encounter between the monster-artefacts and humans, the Wauja are able to 'de-animalize' (ibid.: 134) and gain mastery over the *apapaatai*. Especially durable artefacts such as flutes are considered more than *apapaatai* and more than human, being 'hyper-retentive of personhood' (ibid.: 148). Wauja families nurture these supra-human artefacts by feeding them cooked human food for years after the ritual in which they were created occurred. In this case, nurturing is inextricably linked to mastery, a dual relationship that is common in Amazonia (Fausto 2008: 350). Cashinahua men and women have a similar relationship with the *ayahuasca* vine and designs respectively (Lagrou 2009: 200). While men engage with the *ayahuasca* vine through visions, women interact with designs through weaving and body painting. By creating these designs, Cashinahua women simultaneously materialize and control the *yuxin* spirit beings, who are said to speak and act through designs (ibid.: 201). Once materialized, designs have the capacity to act in the world (ibid.: 198), albeit under the control of the women who create the designs on human bodies and in weavings. Not all Cashinahua

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artefacts are considered to be manifestations of spirit beings' capacities. Ritual carved wooden stools are thought to be the children of their makers in that each one is unique and has its own goals and destiny (ibid.: 209).

Based on the above examples, it is clear that there are myriad ways of being both an object and a person in Amazonia. Persons and objects are simultaneously things and embodied social relationships (Santos-Granero 2009a: 3-6). Some objects are considered nurturing and constitutive of persons, while others will predatorily attack humans unless subjugated by master-owners. There are even artefacts that are seen as more human than humans and must therefore be nurtured by human communities. However, even nurturing parent-child relationships include an element of mastery or ownership of another being. In all of these relationships, the master becomes a 'magnified person' consisting of the 'multiple singularities' of those whom he is mastering (Fausto 2008: 341). Thus, Amazonian engagements among people and things are hierarchical in that one being is attempting to gain mastery over another by accessing and incorporating the Other's perspective. Additionally, every Amazonian society conceives of some beings as more active or important in human-non-human entanglements than other beings. Large predatory animals such as the jaguar are central to many Amazonian societies, as are certain artefacts such as tools and musical instruments. For the Yanéscha community of the Peruvian Amazon, different things are engaged with in varying ways depending on their perspectival perceptual abilities. Depending on their life histories and current contextual situations, beings have different degrees of 'animacy and agentivity—measured in terms of goal-oriented thought and action, motion, and feelings' (Santos-Granero 2009a: 124-5). Analysing the complex and diverse Amazonian notions of 'life' is outside the scope of this article (but see Rival n.d.). Suffice it to say that Amazonian societies conceive of non-humans as having varying levels of perspectival access. Therefore, any analysis of Amazonian material culture must begin with an understanding of the diversity of perspectival encounters.

Amazonian cultivated plants: human-manioc and human-maize engagements

Perspectival engagements among persons and things are not uniform, partly because not all persons and things are considered to have equal perspectival perceptual abilities, and partly because these relationships are fluid and change over time. In Amazonia, persons and things are constructed and composite entities. That is, every

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being is considered to be a ‘bundle of affects and capacities’ (Fausto 2007b) formed by relationships engaged in throughout the life course. Due to a variety of factors, some persons and things form a more intimate composite entanglement than others. The reasons behind emphasising particular relationships over others are still being investigated, but may deal with the intimacy of daily encounters (Santos-Granero 2009a), the ceremonial significance of certain relationships (Viveiros de Castro 1992), or the degree of power and mastery associated with specific engagements among persons and things (Fausto 2007a, 2007b). Fausto (2008: 348) claims that perspectival encounters of mastery can involve all types of beings, including humans, animals, plants, spirits and artefacts. Human–animal and human–spirit relationships have been thoroughly explored, and human–artefact relationships are currently being analysed by a wide variety of Amazonianist scholars. However, human–plant engagements remain an understudied area of research (cf. Rival 2010), despite their combined practical, symbolic, aesthetic and perspectival importance in many Amazonian societies.

A wide variety of plants are cultivated in Amazonian communities, such as yam, sweet potato, peanut, maize and manioc. Many of these cultivars are accessed perspectivally through the use of generative concepts and are often likened to persons or even to the children of their gardeners. However, unlike human–animal and some human–artefact encounters, human–plant relationships tend to be based on a form of mastery that does not include a predatory component. While human–animal relationships tend to emphasise affinal adoption and seduction (cf. Kohn 2005, 2007, Viveiros de Castro 1992), human–plant relationships are usually based on consanguinal ties between, for example, a mother and her child (cf. Taylor 2001, Rival 2001). Fausto (2008: 350) notes that motherhood is a distinct form of mastery, and what distinguishes it from other forms appears to be the non-predatory incorporation of other beings.

Non-predatory mastery has been documented between people and manioc in the north and northwest Amazon, although the particular ways men and women are likened to and engage with manioc varies greatly among societies (cf. Heckler 2004, Rival 2001, Taylor 2001, Descola 1997). For the Makushi of Guyana, growing manioc is linked to concepts of ‘sexual reproduction, the generative process, consanguinity, and identity’ (Rival 2001: 58). In this society, there are three overarching types of manioc. Plants grown in the wild that reproduce themselves

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through seedlings are seen as ‘sterile’ and male, while ‘fertile’ female manioc grown in gardens from stem cuttings reproduces itself and its ‘children’ in the form of new stems (ibid.: 71-4). Spontaneous seedlings or *tepuru pîye* are seen to have potential fertility and are therefore allowed inside the garden space when stem cuttings have become less productive (ibid.: 71). Thus, for the Makushi manioc has a generative potential that can either be male or female, or even somewhere in between, as is the case with *tepuru pîye*. The Tukanoan-speaking Barasana of Colombia conceive of manioc tubers as ‘children’ and women as ‘food mothers,’ and manioc gardens are the site of human conception and birth (S. Hugh-Jones 1979: 167; C. Hugh-Jones 1979: 115). Cultivating manioc plants is therefore linked specifically to native conceptualizations of motherhood and nurturing.

A similar correspondence between manioc gardening and mothering can be seen in the Achuar community of the Ecuadorian Amazon. In this society, the master spirit of manioc, Nunkui, is conceived of as both the ‘mother’ and ‘owner’ of manioc plants, and women are linked to their gardens through creative, regenerative symbolism (Taylor 2001: 51-3; Descola 1997). Nurturing motherhood is part of the woman–manioc relationship, but there is also an element of danger in this engagement. As with some artefacts in Urarina and Wauja societies, for the Achuar manioc plants are potentially dangerous beings who will suck the blood of young children unless controlled by Achuar women through ritual singing (Descola 1997: 93, 98). Therefore, accessing the manioc plant’s perspective simultaneously involves a consanguineal mother–child bond between a woman and her manioc plants and mastery over the plant’s lethal potential. Motherhood and mastery are also part of human–manioc entanglements in the Piaroa society of Venezuela. Cultivating manioc involves harnessing powerful and potentially dangerous productive forces. Only Piaroa women, with their maternal abilities, have the particular strength needed to harness manioc’s regenerative capabilities (Heckler 2004: 243, 248). Once again, actively controlling and mastering the manioc plants is an integral part of gaining access to the manioc plant’s point of view.

While human–manioc relationships have received some attention in the ethnographic literature, other human–plant engagements have not been given serious analytical attention (an exception is Ewart 2000 on Panará relationships with peanuts). Maize in particular is a significant yet understudied cultivar for many societies, including some Tupi-Guaraní and most Gê-speaking societies in central

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Brazil. As with manioc, human–maize engagements are also often predicated on consanguineal relations of parenthood and are linked to generative concepts. The Araweté are unique among Tupi-Guaraní-speaking groups for cultivating maize over manioc as a staple food crop. Maize is consumed mainly as beer during ceremonial events in which men play a central role. Women are in charge of making the beer, and the process of fermentation is likened to female gestation because both take place through female transformative activities (Viveiros de Castro 1992: 129). Beer is also placed in opposition to semen, and is sometimes known as the ‘female semen’ (ibid.: 131). Through the ceremonial process of making beer, then, certain aspects of maize become associated with the Araweté notion of femaleness as opposed to maleness. In this way, maize in its fermented state becomes a material manifestation of female personhood. While processing beer is how Araweté women in particular engage with maize, both women and men relate with the plant through gardening activities.

Linking garden crops, and especially maize, to conceptions of personhood and regeneration is a general trend among Gê societies. For the Suyá, there exists a general ‘physical bond between people and crops which is similar to that between parent and child’ (Seeger 1981: 105). As an important ceremonial and food crop, maize is likely to be a particular focus of Suyá–plant engagements. This embodied parental bond with cultivars exists for both men and women. The garden owner and her husband must undergo food restrictions until harvest time in order to protect the crops from harm, a practice that is also undertaken by the parents of new-born babies. Additionally, people who tend the crops (presumably women) will chant near them in the hope of encouraging their growth (ibid.: 104-5). In this way, both Suyá men and women engage with garden crops, especially maize, through relationships of perspectival mastery and ownership. The Apinayé also have a ‘personal sentimental bond’ with their plants (Nimuendajú 1946: 60). As with the Suyá, women conceive of garden crops as ‘children’ and give them human names (Nimuendajú 1939: 90). Certain men have a particularly intimate relationship with cultivated plants. While the woman of each family claims the garden plot as her own, the Apinayé install two men, one from each moiety, to ensure the safety of all the gardens and their crops at the beginning of the planting season (ibid.: 89). During the trekking season, the two men stay behind in the garden area and watch over their ‘children,’ singing and performing magical acts that will encourage plant growth (ibid.: 89-90). Cultivated crops, with maize being one of the main cultivars, also receive other ritual treatments

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similar to those performed on children during the naming and formal friend rituals. Certain adults within a moiety sponsor human children to receive names and moiety-based friends, and specific men of either moiety also sponsor annual new garden ceremonies and special maize harvest ceremonies (da Matta 1973: 284-7; 1982: 68). Through these parallel rituals, both Apinayé and maize children are being perspectively mastered and controlled by Apinayé adults.

In Panará society, it appears that only peanuts are directly analogous to children and the creation of personhood (Elizabeth Ewart, personal communication; Schwartzman 1988: 180; Heelas 1979). Maize is perceived as generative without being specifically linked to personhood *per se*. Gardens in general are also said to ‘articulate generative concepts’ (Heelas 1979: 272). For example, a Panará man should observe food taboos while some crops in his household’s plot are growing. Monkey or armadillo tail must be avoided because both foods would cause the maize crop to ‘grow like tails’ and therefore be inedible (*ibid.*: 252). Food restrictions indicate a link between a man and his crops, but in this case the specific link between a Panará person and maize is based on a generalised notion of regeneration. For some Gê societies such as the Xavante and the Kayapó, engaging with maize is a way to materially manifest individual and societal regeneration and growth. In Xavante society, a portion of the maize harvest is kept solely for ceremonial purposes and combined with hunted game into maize pies, which ‘form the basis of all ceremonial prestations’ (Maybury-Lewis 1967: 42) in the communal naming, male initiation and marriage rituals.² Maize pies are essential to the culmination of important communal life stages, and in this way are integral to individual growth and societal regeneration. While the Kayapó do not consume maize pies, the crop is central to many ceremonial activities. When someone important in the community dies, a ‘death ceremony’ is performed during the maize harvest using a maize crop grown in a separate mono-cropped garden (Hecht and Posey 1989: 182). A ritual also accompanies the initiation of the maize growing season (Posey and Plenderleith 2002: 4). It may be that the maize death ceremony is in conceptual opposition to the life-giving power of the maize growing ceremony, although this cannot be known for sure without further

² For a more in-depth discussion of the importance of these rituals in Xavante society, see Maybury-Lewis 1967). A more thorough explanation of the centrality of maize pies in Gê societies can be found in T. Miller 2010).

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research. Suffice it to say that these ceremonies show the importance of the plant in the maintenance of Kayapó society.

These examples show the myriad ways in which humans and maize become entangled in Amazonia. The plant can be treated as if it were a person, as with the Suyá and Apinayé, and it can be a material manifestation of individual and/or societal growth, as can be seen in the Araweté, Panará, Xavante and Kayapó communities. Although the relationships among people and maize vary among all of these societies, attempting perspectively to access and master the plant does appear to be a common theme. Similar to manioc in the north-west Amazon, most of these Tupi-Guaraní and Gê societies attribute some kind of ‘soul’ to maize and conceive of it as being controlled by a master spirit. In Kayapó society, all beings possess a ‘soul’ or ‘energy’ known as *karon*, and socially significant animals and plants each have a master spirit who must be appeased through ritual performances. Through these ceremonies, humans control the master spirits and their plants and animals, ensuring a continued ecological, cosmological and societal ‘balance’ (Posey and Plenderleith 2002: 79). As mediatory ‘balancing agents’ (ibid.: 35), maize and its *karon* must be engaged with and mastered through ceremonial performances. According to Kayapó myth, the supernatural being in control of maize is either Mouse or Rat, depending on the version employed. Mouse/Rat assists the people in perceiving maize as food, because prior to his arrival it was seen as inedible and the people were eating rotten wood (Wilburt 1978: 223, 227). Thus, the Kayapó are able to engage perspectively with maize only with the assistance of Mouse/Rat, the mythical master or ‘owner’ of maize. The Suyá maize origin myth is similar, with Mouse showing a mother and her son the maize plants growing near the bathing hole (Seeger 2004: 26-7). Once again, the Suyá had been eating rotten wood even though maize was growing in their village because they were unable to perceive the plant as a food crop. Only by accessing the perspective of Mouse, the master spirit of maize, were the Suyá able to interact with the maize itself. Mouse is also conceived of as the ‘owner’ of maize in the Panará myth, and he shares his knowledge of the ‘beautiful’ maize to an old Panará woman (Ewart 2000: 151). While Mouse, the owner of maize, is conceptually second to Agouti, the owner of peanuts (ibid.: 153), the relationship among Mouse, maize and humans is still central to Panará society.

In Apinayé society, all beings have a soul known as *me-galõ* that leaves the body after death (Nimuendajú 1939: 140). This may help explain why maize is treated

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as if it were a person. However, the Apinayé were also not able to engage perspectively with maize prior to its introduction by the mythical Star-Woman. In both of the recorded Apinayé maize origin myths, Star-Woman is responsible for showing maize and its techniques of cultivation to the community. While one version has Star-Woman showing maize growing from a tree to her mother-in-law, the second myth portrays her bringing the cultivar down from the sky (Wilburt 1978: 213-14). Whether maize is interpreted as ‘heaven-sent’ or an earthly product, it is clear that Star-Woman has dominion over the plant and shares her masterful perspective of maize with the Apinayé people. For the Araweté community, the masters of maize are *azang* spirits that control its growth (Viveiros de Castro 1992: 263). The Araweté do not perceive a need to engage in direct perspectival relationships with these spirits, choosing instead to focus on encounters with the gods, or *mai*, during the mild and strong beer festivals. Maize still plays a central role in this engagement, serving as the mediator between shamans and the supernatural *mai*. Unfortunately, specific human–maize perspectival entanglements do not appear in the literature on the Xavante (cf. Maybury-Lewis 1967: 48), although future research would most likely reveal similar human–maize relationships. In many Gê and some Tupi-Guaraní societies, however, maize is an integral part of a variety of master–mastered relationships that together comprise the Amazonian perspectival world view (cf. Fausto 2008). While the plant may not always be directly mastered by humans, the triadic relationship between humans, maize and master spirits is central to the material culture of these societies and must not be overlooked.

Some archaeologists and anthropologists have criticized the placing of cultivated plants in the category of ‘material culture’ due to their status as purely ‘functional’ entities solely required for nutritional intake (cf. Roosevelt 1980). There has also been a tendency to overlook Amazonian cultivation practices due to the apparent ‘inefficiency’ with which semi-nomadic communities tend their gardens (Maybury-Lewis 1967: 47). However, it is clear from the above ethnographies that manioc and maize are important socio-culturally emphasised cultivars in various Amazonian societies. While the cultivation of maize and manioc may not appear significant at first glance, a more thorough analysis reveals that the plants are central to many aspects of integrated Amazonian ecologies, cosmologies and societies. In addition, these cultivars are integral to Amazonian material culture, or person–thing engagements. A thorough analysis of material culture in Amazonia and other parts of

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the world must include an investigation of plants as well as artefacts, designs, supernaturals and animals. Maize has a particular significance in Amazonian material culture, and its analysis can lead to insights into material culture studies in Amazonia and beyond.

The meshwork applied: implications for Amazonian and material culture studies

If we understand material culture studies as centred on the relationships among persons and things, then this sub-discipline must take into account any item that is considered either a ‘person’ or a ‘thing’ within the society under investigation. In the Amazonian case, beings can alternate between ‘persons’ and ‘things’, and they can fall under both categories simultaneously. As has been shown in certain Amazonian indigenous societies, cultivated plants have a particularly ambiguous status as alternatively persons and things, subjects and objects, masters and mastered beings. The analysis can be taken a step further, however, by investigating what sort of process is taking place within human–plant relationships. Are these encounters between composite entities acting within a network, as Latour (1993a) suggests? Although there are beings such as the *apapaatai* that are considered both ‘monstrous’ and ‘hybrid’ (Barcelos-Neto 2009: 133-4), they are not equivalent to Latour’s (1993b) ‘monstrous hybrids’ due to their emergent and embodied characteristics. The *apapaatai*, like other artefacts, animals and plants, are in a continual process of becoming and of re-negotiating their statuses in the web of Amazonian relational experiences. These beings are not simply one part human, one part non-human (cf. Latour 1993a), but rather include complex mixes of humanity, monstrousness, subjectivity and objectivity.

Based on the ethnographic analysis undertaken above, it can be argued that actor network theory does not apply to Amazonian lived realities of embodied engagements among various processual, emergent beings. Instead, it appears that Amazonian person–thing relationships can be understood as part of an overarching meshwork that extends through time and space (Ingold 2008). While Ingold keeps his discussion of the meshwork at a theoretical level, his theory does seem to correspond closely to the Amazonian ethnographic material. In order to understand this correspondence more fully, a brief sketch of a potential Amazonian meshwork must be outlined, with a particular focus on human–plant encounters. According to Ingold’s theory, all sorts of beings live out their life courses ‘along the lines of the meshwork’

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(Ingold 2008: 212). In this sense, the meshwork is an experiential web that encompasses all types of human–non-human entanglements. At this macro-level, then, the meshwork is simply the realm of human experience that could be applied to any society or community. Outlining the differences (and similarities) among various groups of people-and-things appears to be difficult within this overarching meshwork, and Ingold has been criticized for focusing on the biological and often ‘asocial’ aspects of person–thing relationships at the expense of the social and material ones (Knappett 2007: 21; D. Miller 2007: 27). The meshwork does account for the complexity of and differences among non-human life forms, in contrast to the symmetrical network of equally agentic humans and non-humans (Ingold 2008: 214; Latour 2000). However, the distinctions among non-humans are framed as biological, and the socio-cultural differentiation and valuation of non-humans and humans is overlooked.

This hole in the overarching meshwork theory can be patched through an analysis of a uniquely Amazonian meshwork. Within this web of experience, all beings are enmeshed through everyday encounters that are fundamentally embodied. While the biological diversity of Amazonian beings is clearly apparent, there is also a perspectival diversity of viewpoints and subsequent value judgments. That is, certain perspectival encounters are valued over others by both persons and things. Some Amazonian people prefer to engage with maize and its master spirits, while others become entangled with manioc and its supernatural accomplices. It can be argued that maize and manioc also actively choose and value their experiences with people. For the Cashinahua, maize plants ‘want to turn into people,’ and humans oblige them by singing them songs and giving the plants proper names (Lagrou 2007: 82).³ Although Ingold (2008: 214-15; 2000) focuses on the perceptive attention of certain beings and not others, his theory would be greatly enhanced by an ethnographic analysis of how perceptual experiences are valued in specific contexts. Additionally, Ingold’s notion of a hierarchy of more and less skilled, attentive beings could be expanded to include other types of hierarchical relationships. For as we have seen in the Amazonian context, person–thing relationships are embedded within a series of perspectival master–mastered hierarchies. Thus, the Amazonian meshwork would incorporate how

³ Animals have also been known actively to seek out encounters with humans; see Vilaça 2009) on jaguar seduction of Wari’ people.

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persons and things perceive and make value judgements about each other, recognizing the fluidity of these perceptual experiences.

An Amazonian meshwork would be processual, emphasizing the growth and movement involved in person–thing encounters. For example, the relationship between a person and maize develops and changes over time as each being's life process unfolds. For the Panará, a child may be likened to a young maize plant that is still growing in the earth, while an adult Xavante man engages more with cooked, processed maize pies than with the plant itself (cf. Schwartzman 1988, Maybury-Lewis 1967). In Apinayé society, maize is particularly engaged with while it is growing, while the Kayapó and Suyá tend to encounter the crop perspectively when it is harvested (cf. Nimuendajú 1939, Posey and Plenderleith 2002, Seeger 2004). The Cashinahua continue to engage with maize even after it is eaten. Maize lives inside the human male body until the man's semen, made of maize itself, creates a child inside the mother's womb (Lagrou 2007: 82-3). This last example displays the centrality of embodiment within the Amazonian meshwork. Some encounters, such as those between the Cashinahua man and the maize he consumes, are so enmeshed that it is impossible to distinguish between the 'person' and the 'thing'. Indeed, the Amazonian meshwork would not create distinct categories of 'persons' or 'things', instead recognizing that fusion and fission among various beings is not only possible but often desirable in Amazonian societies. The Araweté warrior who kills his opponent is fused with part of the opponent for eternity (Viveiros de Castro 1992), while shamanic curing involves the fission of the ill person and the spirits who are making him ill. The Cashinahua example also sheds light on the importance of commensality within these fusion and fission relationships. Eating with someone or eating someone can create varying relationships of fusion or of separation, depending on the society and contextual situation. Eating meals together is often seen as constitutive of sociality and personhood (cf. Overing and Passes 2000, Gow 1991), while eating the ashes of the dead is a way for some communities such as the Wari' to distance themselves from their dead kin (Conklin 2001). Although the importance of consumption within human–maize relationships has not yet been thoroughly explored, the centrality of the body in these engagements cannot be ignored. Consuming maize is undoubtedly an act of mastery over the plant, but it may also materially express an intimacy between person and cultivar, as is shown in Cashinahua society.

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This analytical exercise reveals an Amazonian meshwork that incorporates the complex processes of embodiment, consumption, growth and movement involved in person–thing encounters. In this way, the theoretical Amazonian meshwork, and particularly its emphasis on human–plant entanglements, brings new insights into the realm of material culture studies. Amazonian material culture is profoundly complex, with persons and things constantly changing and trading places in the perspectival hierarchy. A person can become like a stalk of maize, that same plant can turn into a person, and the two beings can bond together or break apart through shared embodied practices such as eating, singing or planting. While the perspectival aspect of person–thing encounters appears to be unique to the Amazonian context, the contingency of both persons and things can provide insights into other areas of the world and to material culture studies in general. In fact, some archaeologists such as Holtorf (2002) and Hicks (2010) have already been advocating investigating the contingent, processual nature of things on a broader scale. The Amazonian meshwork can also help shed light on the embodiment of persons and things in other contexts, as explored by Conneller (2004) in archaeological person–antler relations. Finally, applying the meshwork in Amazonia shows the necessity of including value judgments within material culture analyses. If we begin from the starting point that person–thing relationships are perceptually (if not perspectivally) experienced, then it follows that such experiences will be ascribed varying values by both the persons and the things involved. While not all things may be seen as having perceptual capabilities, those that are perceived in this way must be taken seriously.

In Amazonia, cultivated plants and especially maize are seen as having varying levels of perceptual capabilities, although this has not yet received sufficient analytical attention. This article has attempted to fill the gap in the Amazonian literature on human–plant encounters. I have attempted to outline some preliminary ways in which Amazonian material culture could incorporate cultivated plants and maize in a more thorough manner. Material culture studies in general would also benefit from this addition, given that the current ethnographic literature includes even fewer accounts of human–plant engagements than the Amazonian material. Plants are a particularly important and unique part of human society, as simultaneously ‘artefacts’ of past societies (Brush 2004), material markers of current socio-cultural processes and living organisms in their own right. Material culture studies, whether in Amazonia or elsewhere, cannot overlook the centrality of plants in person–thing

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relationships. A serious analysis of cultivated plants as alternatively ‘persons’ and ‘things’ will undoubtedly enrich both material culture and Amazonian studies.

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