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Anthropology Book Forum

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2021. *Sacred Matter: Animacy and Authority in the Americas*. Eds. by Steve Kosiba, John Wayne Janusk, and Thomas B.D. Cummins. Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collections, Washington D.C., 474 pg, ISBN 9780884024668

This volume explores objects, ontologies, and authority in indigenous and Pre-Columbian America. Originating as a 2016 Dumbarton Oaks conference, the contributions are by outstanding scholars who combine insights and evidence that deepen our understanding of sacred matter, a broadly relevant theme. In an elegant essay, Kosiba frames the central issues: “How is authority claimed and constituted in social contexts where things and places are persons who can explicitly play social roles, have voices, influence decisions, demand recognition, and instill order? In such settings, how do humans of different social stations, subject positions, or backgrounds [...] perceive or engage with these things in distinctive ways?” (p. 3).

The chapters occupy a continuum between case studies and essays, the latter in the sense of ‘testing’ or ‘assaying’ key concepts and approaches. Cummins proposes “to demonstrate by various different, some radically different, examples the cultural variations and historically contingencies behind a seemingly universal notion of animation or transubstantiation” (p. 170). Drawing on information from Spanish, Andean, and Mesoamerican empires and from other groups such as the Jama-Coaque of Ecuador and the Muisca of Colombia, Cummins argues that a simple dichotomy between “Western’ vs. ‘Indigenous’ is analytically inadequate. His survey of keros, illustrated manuscripts, clay figurines, tombs, and other objects suggests that “ontologies and animism are ever changing categories and that just as those of one culture can be radically different from another, they can have unexpected common ground” (p. 199).

The case studies are fascinating. Based on research among the Kuikuro, Fausto discusses the “intimate articulation between shamanism and political power through ritual” as “expressed through the double image of a tree (the *humiria*) and an animal (the jaguar)” (p. 39). Conklin draws on decades of ethnographic research with the Wari’ of western Rondônia, Brazil, whose traditional funerary practices included ritual cannibalism of loved ones, a practice outlawed since the mid-1950s and replaced by burial. However the Wari’ continue the practice of burning “the deceased person’s home, possessions, and other things associated with their life history and relationships.” In the weeks after death, the scope of Wari’ bereavement moves outward—forestpaths are re-routed, fields the deceased once tilled are burned and uprooted—not because they are tainted or haunted, “but because they resonate with traces of past relations that must be set aside and transformed to clear the way for other, future-oriented, revitalizing relations” (p. 108).

Archaeological studies document significant variations in past cultural practices. For example, MacAnany summarizes Maya ethnographic and ethnohistoric sources to identify concepts of ensoulment and soul loss as reflected in tombs, caches, and other structured archaeological deposits that express the “durability of the soul and how it could be regenerated within the body of a descendent” (p. 99). In northern Yucatan, Mayan ontologies inform Hutson and colleagues’ discussion of Late Pre-Classic Ucanha, where excavations identified a structure “as a mat house, the spatial locus of leadership” not simply a passive or inert display of a leader’s power, but also “the ensouled house” that defines “social boundaries that give the house a role as a protector” (p. 317).

Joyce explores “the animation, feeding, and de-animation” of public buildings during the late Formative period (700 BCE-300 CE) in three regions in Oaxaca, concluding that “animating practices associated with public building varied greatly”—associated with elite buildings in the valley of Oaxaca, engaged with by elites and non-elites in the lower Rio Verde Valley, but apparently absent in the Mixteca (p. 328).

Turning to South America, Curatola Petrocchi considers Inka sacred shrines, emphasizing their auidial qualities where architecture and water management created “sacred sites, wherein the sonic-

aural elements vivified, strengthened, and charged the visual elements with meaning, gave their visitors an intense and direct sensorial experience of the empire's majesty, its mythical past, and its historical memory that was both emotive and cognitive" (p. 291-93). In a brilliant essay, Janusek describes the site of Tiwanaku as "a vibrant city and cyclical, periodic gatherings in 500 – 800 CE," and an "ecoregime" connecting distant peaks, water sources, and sacred spaces (p. 234). Tiwanaku's plazas and temples were occupied by animate stone monoliths, "who did not just stand within particular monumental enclosures; those enclosures were built to provide an appropriate home for specific ancestral monolithic personages" (p. 255).

Weismantel discusses the "lithic-human relationship" in her study of the Lanzón, the pivotal and oldest stelae at Chavín de Huántar, the Central Andean ceremonial center and pilgrimage site. Despite the archaeological debates that swirl around Chavín de Huántar, the Lanzón occupies a rare point of agreement: "this granite prism is the earliest and most significant of all Chavín's monoliths," perhaps worshipped before the rest of the Old Temple was constructed (p. 213). Although its carving is relatively crude compared to later Chavín stelae, it is the Lanzón's placement and presence as a geomorph that elicited fear and respect among people in the volatile Andes, "who appear to have embraced uncertainty at every scale" (p.229).

In a complex and richly illustrated essay, Hamann discusses the resonances of objects, actions, symbols, and meanings revolving about the sacred bundle of Huitzilopochtli which guided the Mexica from Aztlán to the future site of Tenochtitlan. Although the original text has vanished, it was partially record in the Boturini and Aubin codices and discussed in inquisitorial testimonies. "Symmetry and centrality were important compositional features of a number of Mesoamerican manuscripts," but the Huitzilopochtli bundle is animated by being carried from place to place, its story "fundamentally one of movement" (pp. 144, 135). And thus, the Codex Boturini is "not simply a story about a sacred bundle..." Hamann argues, "The Codex Boturini is itself a sacred bundle" (p. 147).

Loren discusses interactions between Native Americans and Franciscans in northern New Spain (i.e., western Louisiana and eastern Texas). "Just as Native Americans sought treatment from [the Franciscan] Father Solis, Spanish and mestizo settlers also visited *curandero/as* and priests,"

suggesting that “the presumed boundary between Native American and Catholic bodily healing and ontologies...were more fluid in every day lived practice,” an “ambivalence found in the intersection of magic, medicine, and religion [that] has left a residue in the archaeological record. Small objects, such as crucifixes, amulets and even eggshells were used in practices of bodily and spiritual healing” (p. 358).

Giraldo provides a distinct perspective on the interaction between places, objects, and peoples among Kogi and Arhuaco religious specialists (*mamas*), based on his archaeological and ethnographic work in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta and his experience accompanying a group of *mamas* on an international tour sponsored by the Colombian government. As the *mamas* conducted rituals in Cambodia, Laos, Ghana, Peru, and Bolivia, Giraldo observed “that divination for the Kogi and Arhuaco is an extremely powerful tool, that at least in theory, allows them to effectively communicate with practically any other-than-human entity anywhere in the world, assuring the commensurability of other indigenous and nonindigenous peoples, places, objects, and practices with their own ontological scheme of things” (p. 413).

Mannheim discusses ontological principles in Southern Quechua, his goal being “to identify interdependencies among social practices, regardless of whether they are social (e.g., a particular kind of kinship system), material (e.g., settlement patterns), linguistic (e.g., the structure of grammatical person), or cognitive (spatial orientation)” (pp. 371-72), considering four specific ranges of practice—properties of the world, frame of reference, agency, and causal structures—“that truly form the world in which Quechua speakers and English speakers live, and they are different worlds, as Sapir proposed” (p. 373). Allen provides an elegant final essay, interspersing insightful comments on different aspects of this volume with ethnographic gems from her extensive experience in the Andes.

In sum, this collection is invaluable for scholars interested in sacred matter(s) in the Americas and beyond.

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