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Anouk Cohen, Cyril Isnart

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Material Religion in France. A Short Genealogy

Anouk Cohen and Cyril Isnart

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If the growing English-speaking literature that has arisen in recent decades aims at “materializing” or more precisely “re-materializing” the study of religious facts, in France, the dynamism of this approach has been remarkable through numerous publications over the past five years (Albert and Kedzierska-Manzon [2016](#); Cohen and Mottier [2016](#); Dittmar et al. [2018](#); Capone et al. [2019](#); Cohen et al. [2017](#); Kerestetzi [2018](#); Isnart and Cerezales [2020](#)). This renewal of interest in France comes from an ancient curiosity for religious things, flourishing from multiple theoretical perspectives and institutional contexts.

This “In Conversation” section intends to give some direction and examples to aid understanding of French studies on material religion. This introduction briefly describes the early presence of materiality in religious studies, especially in the Durkheimian legacy, museum practices, Levi-Strauss’ works and his followers, the ontological turn and medieval history. The three following contributions illustrate some of the theoretical trends that frame and enrich the field today.

The Sacred: The Durkheimian School and Material Religion

Common readings of the Durkheimian theory of the sacred, put forth in the classic *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Durkheim (1913) 2001), emphasize the immaterial and social interpretation of religion. Community, or ritual effervescence, are products and effects of an invisible and coercive, but efficient, force that inhabits objects and rituals and that binds people to one another. Just like the origin of any social group, Australian totemic religion became the model of the “sacred,” an intangible system, floating somewhere above and around human beings. However, many of the studies emanating from the Durkheimian school have demonstrated the centrality of the incarnation and the life of the so-called magical force in some specific material pieces; first, the very body of the people, and then also discourses, objects, and practices which form what we now call lived religion (Hall 1997; Orsi 2002).

Marcel Mauss’ famous essay on *The Gift* (Mauss 1923–1924 2015) details the Potlatch and Kula rituals, in which performances are strictly defined and achievable through the manipulation of objects that carry a magical force. In another context, Robert Hertz’s analysis of a Catholic cult in the Italian Alps (Hertz 1913 2009) includes material elements in the explanation: images of the saint, medals, stone, relics, or the architecture of the chapel are just as important as the narratives of the saint’s life. This classic disciplinary heritage has been broadened, particularly in Africanist studies, to include “god-

objects" (*dieux-objets*) by Marc Augé or "god-things" (*choses-dieux*) by Jean Bazin. The "god-object" rehabilitated by Marc Augé from the *vodu* world (1998) questions more strongly the symbolic dimension, taking into account its power of reification as much as that of social mediation, this power being supported by the body. Bazin (1986) for his part re-questions the ontological dimension of these material things, hence highlighting the importance of returning to the phenomenological description separate from overinterpretations and theological glosses (see here the studies of Cohen on Korans in Morocco).

Fetishes: Ethnography and Museums

It is not by chance that during the twentieth century, the ethnographic exploration of world cultures was accommodated mainly in sociology, anthropology, folklore and religious science publications—and also in museums. Ethnographers collected and documented myths, rituals, and objects during their fieldwork activities, and theologians, missionaries and historians of religion often recorded material testimonies of the "primitive" religions they were studying.

The fact that the notion of the *fetishe*, i.e. material representation of a supernatural power, has been guiding anthropology and religious studies since the late eighteenth century, certainly resulted in ethnographic museums being early depositories of

material religion. The ethnographic museum in Paris, *Musée de l'Homme*, was founded as a laboratory-museum, combining research, conservation, scientific and heritage duties (Blanckaert 2015), but not without colonial pretensions (Conklin 2013). Marcel Mauss enlisted here some of his students, like Marcel Griaule and Michel Leiris, who oversaw fieldwork missions in Africa to collect material elements to furnish the museum galleries (Bondaz 2011). For instance, the career of Griaule was devoted to the Dogon culture, and his publications on their cult with masks are reflected in the museum collections (Griaule 1938). For its part, until the beginning of the twenty-first century, the *Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires*, created by Georges-Henri Rivière, was devoted to the French society from the Middle Ages to the contemporary era (Segalen 2005). Based on the principle of scientific investigation-collection (*enquête-colle*ction), and inheriting from the previous European folkloristic studies, religion, beliefs and magical knowledge entered the collection, from ex-votos or relics (see here Girard's contribution) to the entire office of a Parisian medium.

Symbols: After Levi-Strauss Came the Anthropologie du Symbolique

At the same time, in France, as elsewhere, anthropology has often put the symbolic dimension first, that is to say, the beliefs before the

knowledge, the rituals before the productive techniques. As Albert and Kedzier-ska-Manzon (2016) remind us, Lévi-Strauss was the first to question the precedence of symbolism. Rather than trying to understand the meaning of the objects or substances used in a ritual, he inscribes them in a network of meanings which support recognition of its suitability for the function assigned to it or of the plausibility of its action (Figure 1).

In France, these hypotheses were advantageously adapted in the 1980s to the study of Christian culture, in its popular or official versions. Why, for example, did a timbale of silver metal use to be offered to a new-born baby for its baptism? It is because the sound it makes when you hit it compares to that of church bells, and the ringing of bells at baptism was believed to give the baby a voice and to open his ears (Charuty 1985). During the same period, several Africanists—including Griaule and de Heusch—also drew their inspiration from the work of Lévi-Strauss, focusing on the analysis of cultural objects.

Griaule's daughter's work on Dogon mythology remains the best example of a hermeneutic approach of myths based on the technology of weaving (Calame-Griaule 1965). These authors demonstrate a renewal of analytical perspectives, as suggested by the choice to articulate their themes around the notion of "fetish," which has long been debated and which has recently re-emerged (Kedzierska-Manzon 2016).

Non-Humans: The Divine and Its Agency What comes to the fore in these controversies concerning the choice of vocabulary for naming ritual objects and/or substances is the recognition of the importance of the object as such and of the attitude of people towards it. Jean-Pierre Vernant (1965) focused on this question in his work on the notion of “presen- tification of the divine.” He shows that the link between statue and supernatural entity aims to discard the model of representation, which supposes the exteriority of the divine to be in relation to the object. So, if the symbolist (or semantic) perspective fails to account for the effectiveness of objects, where does it come from? From a sociological perspective, strategies can be developed that allow objects or sub- stances to manifest power. Distancing them- selves from the intellectual tradition which they consider dependent on the ontological dualism proper to the modern West, a growing number of authors propose a revision of the existing common analytical categories, such as Nature-Culture, Object-Subject, Female-Male, Body-Spirit, Form-Essence. Instead of consider- ing anthropology as the study of the different ways of representing a supposedly unique world, these authors consider it as a means of exploring the characterized reality, on the contrary, by plurality (Descola 2005).

One of the ways to question the subject/ object duality is to use the concept of “agency.” Bruno Latour, supporting “the French side” in

debates around agency and opting also for relational vision of it (Latour 1991, 2006), introduces the concept of technical mediation. The techniques, he says, are less “inter- mediaries” than “active modalities” (2006: 9). The logic of establishment therefore takes precedence over that of construction (Latour 2006, 2012). To say, for example, of a divinity that it is “established,” allows us to put the emphasis on “the discovery,” on the “total invention” which proceeds the faithful who “welcome, collect, prepare, explore, invent [...] the form” of this entity (2006: 9).

Imago: History and Religious Materiality Following Luca and al (2019, 16–17), historians are the first to point out that mediations are not necessarily material or sensitive. As Paul Veyne (1983) explains in *Did the Greeks Believe Their Myths?*, precise descriptions of the world and of the gods as well as the way in which they were named were essential to give substance to beliefs: they took shape in the imagination. Thus, during the Middle Ages, image mediation was deployed in what Jean-Claude Schmitt (1996 and in this section) called “a culture of the *imago*,” characterized by its theological-anthropological dimension (creation of man from the image of God, which in fact is the first image). All of these images come in both discursive and material forms, linked to mental representations, such as imagination, dreams and even memory. The *imago* has the capacity to construct a meaning according to its own grammar, far beyond a simple illustration of

texts, by the formation of object images capable of presenting the divine and the sacred in practices and manipulations that co-construct belief. However, because of the fear of idolatry, religious literature has attempted to regulate the production of these images and their uses, without, however, hindering their inventiveness and the practices associated with them. We could attribute to them the function that Jean-Claude Schmitt confers to classifying images; “images that transform doctrine into images without which there is no belief” (Schmitt 1989). This is why we can speak of performative images in the sense of “what images do and what they do to those who produce them, watch them, and consume them” (Dierkens, Bartholeyns, and Golsenne 2009, 59).

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