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# How to Deal with ‘Things from Outside’: an Anthropological Perspective

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There is abundant evidence that in the history of Humankind inter-societal communications and transfers of cultural resources have been rule rather than the exception. (Platenkamp 2022: 328)



When objects are transferred from one culture to another, it always involves a transformation of meaning, agency or sometimes even a change in the material.<sup>1</sup> The object is subject to symbolic or material change and this process of change is often ritualized. In principle, there are three possible reactions to the introduction of new things in the receiving culture. People can reject objects as being too strange and possibly dangerous to them, people can accept objects because they are clearly beneficial (e.g. trade goods with a good earning capacity) or people can adapt objects and integrate them in their own economic, political, cultural and religious framework to make them beneficial, to transform them into something that is useful. In this text I will concentrate on the third strategy of dealing with ‘objects from outside’. How can we transform strange, fascinating and potentially dangerous objects from far-away places into something useful, something fertile? What happens during this ritualized transfer of objects from one context to another?

I will start by giving a short description of the main ritual (*eakalea*) of the Etaka, the people of the Indonesian Island of Enggano, but this description can easily be extended with examples from other parts of the world, for instance the ancient Mediterranean or contemporary Europe. Everywhere in the world

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter is an adapted version of Ter Keurs 2018 (originally a lecture given at the University of Bordeaux) and an unpublished lecture given at the University of Bolzano, 15 November 2019.

strange, potentially dangerous and also potentially fertile objects need to be dealt with.

After the Engganese example I will illustrate that similar processes and ritualized entries of 'strange' objects can be observed in Europe. The French King Louis Philippe was very conscious of the importance of neutralizing 'things from outside'. The entry of the Egyptian obelisk in Paris, in 1836, is a clear case of the fertilizing potential of 'strange things from outside'. So is the entry of Napoleon's remains a few years later.

In anthropology there has always been a great deal of attention for ritual practices. To Western researchers many rituals appeared extremely strange and they therefore attracted much attention. It goes beyond the scope of this article to discuss the anthropology of rituals in great detail.<sup>2</sup> However, I will shortly describe one of the models that can be of use to our purpose, inspired by Maurice Bloch's *Prey into Hunter* (1992). Earlier models, such as the ones by Arnold Van Gennep (1909), Willem Rassers (1928) or Victor Turner (1969)<sup>3</sup> differ in detail but do not offer a fundamentally different view on large-scale rituals that are meant to re-vitalize societies. Bloch does not have much explicit attention for material objects. I believe, however, that incorporating objects in Bloch's model offers us an opportunity to comprehend the symbolic meaning and agency of objects in a changing, often ritually sanctioned context.

We can distinguish three phases in large-scale rituals that involve the whole society, including neighbouring villages, and require extensive material resources to be organized:

1. Before the ritual, a society is in a *vital* phase in which regular life continues on a more or less daily-life basis. However, periodically new energy has to be inserted into society to prevent a slow process of degeneration.
2. The insertion of new energy is effected by means of a ritual in which objects – heads of slain persons, valuables, rare objects – are ritually neutralized and transformed into something useful. To do this, society needs the help of the Gods and/or the ancestors and therefore needs to be brought into a *transcendental* state. The supernatural beings descend to the village and occupy it for the duration of the ritual. The village gets a special status to be able to receive the supernatural beings and to organize the rituals needed to please them. Gifts to the Gods and the ancestors are part and parcel of this. During funerary rituals this is the occasion to bring the deceased persons to the realm of the ancestors. In

<sup>2</sup> See for instance Bell 2009, or, for the anthropology of ritual as used in archaeology, Insoll 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Bloch 1992; Van Gennep 1960 [1909]; Rassers 1928; Turner 1969.

many societies the second burial is a clear illustration of these important practices.<sup>4</sup>

The transcendental phase is always concluded by a large-scale offering meal. Neighbouring villages are necessarily invited to this event to revitalize relations with other villages and therefore with potential marriage partners. After the communal meal the villages return to a regular life again. The ancestors return to their living space in the forest or on the mountains.

3. The new *vital* phase, after the period of ritual performances and practices, may seem to be a return to the preceding vital phase but is in fact a renewed vital phase. Society has, to its advantage, added new elements and has given a clear message to the Gods that it wishes to sustain its relationship with the supernatural world, which provides new life in exchange of rare and valuable goods (and large quantities of food).

## 1 Anthropology and 'Things from Outside'

Dealing with 'the outside' often coincides with an uncomfortable feeling. It confronts us with the unknown and it cannot be disregarded easily. We have to do something with the things from outside, also to prevent them from becoming dangerous. People everywhere in the world have to find a way of coping with 'strange' things from elsewhere, they have to give it a place in the formation of their own way of living. It often takes the form of a (ritual) struggle, as with the Engganese example, and to be effective it should be a struggle with a positive outcome, to strengthen the culture that receives the outside. Not being able to do that, has grave consequences for the receiving culture.

Incoming objects play a major role in the ritual revitalization of a society. It is therefore important to look at how objects function in an exchange network. This does not only concern economic relations, in commodity exchange, but has far-reaching implications in the field of symbolic meanings and agency. Since the 1920s anthropologists have been fascinated by the circulation of objects in exchange systems. Bronislaw Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) not only set the standard for modern anthropological fieldwork,

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4 Rassers 1928 described burial practices among the Ngaju of South Kalimantan. During the first burial the body of the deceased is left to dry on an open platform. During the second burial the remains are brought to the world of the spirits and the ancestors, accompanied by spirit masks.

but also showed that the Trobriand (South-East New Guinea) trade in armlets and necklaces was much more than just an economic exchange system. Malinowski set the tone for a discussion that continues until the present day about the changing nature of objects in exchange systems and the person-thing entanglement. Marcel Mauss' brilliant analysis on the gift, *Essai sur le don* (1923/1924), spawned fruitful discussions among anthropologists as well as other social scientists. More recently the discussion on objects in exchange systems was revived by Arjun Appadurai (1986) and Igor Kopytoff (1986), followed by fruitful debates between Marilyn Strathern (1988), Annette Weiner (1976, 1992) and Maurice Godelier (1999), among others.<sup>5</sup>

In these discussions the term agency does not play a significant role. Other aspects of objects and cultural flexibility and change are highlighted, such as human-thing entanglement and the political aspects of exchange. Alfred Gell's theory of objects as social actors with agency, published in 1998, is however a major conceptual advance and in a book about the effect of spolia on receiving societies it cannot be disregarded.<sup>6</sup> Gell starts by summarizing the two dominant approaches in the anthropology of art in the decades before the mid-1990s. On the one hand anthropologists have been looking at the symbolic or religious meanings of (art) objects, on the other hand there is a great deal of literature on the social, political and religious context of art and/or material objects. He continues to argue that by focusing on these two approaches, anthropologists have missed the main point of art objects.<sup>7</sup> According to Gell, we cannot comprehend art and the use of art objects without acknowledging that they were made with a certain purpose in mind. These objects were made to have an effect and are often seen by the people who use them as active and powerful, in short as having agency.

As said, the incorporation of foreign objects is often shaped by performances or ritual acts which may be on a very large scale, involving the whole society. In East-Indonesia these types of large-scale rituals have been studied by generations of Dutch anthropologists, although the role of objects has not always received the attention it deserves. One of the first who addressed the re-vitalizing role of large-scale rituals in Indonesia, in which the whole society is involved, including neighbouring villages, was W.H. Rassers (1928), already

5 Malinowski 1922; Mauss 1923–1924; Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986; Strathern 1988; Weiner 1976 and 1992; Godelier 1999.

6 Gell 1998.

7 Gell uses the word 'art', although many anthropologists are reluctant to use this term. I do not enter into a discussion on the use of 'art' in anthropological literature here. That would be far beyond the scope of this chapter.

mentioned above. He focused on Central-Borneo (now Kalimantan) and compared several differently looking rituals (pertaining to harvest, marriage or funeral) from various groups and concluded that these feasts ultimately had the same functions: to 'renew' life and to re-establish social relations with surrounding groups. The masks that perform during the most important parts of the ritual represent bush spirits, aggressive elements that threaten society. People realize that the bush spirits can potentially be dangerous, but in a mock fight they slowly allow them to enter the village. During the fight, the masks slowly lose their aggressive nature and are finally able to bring the dead to the world beyond, to stimulate the growth of the crops and, in general, to exercise their ability to bring new life to the village. So in the end these dangerous elements from outside bring new energy and re-vitalize the group.

A more recent example is a study of the *po'ora* (*porka*) ritual of Marsela and Luang in the South-Eastern Moluccan Islands.<sup>8</sup> Without going into too much detail, we can here include some important observations that are useful for our argument. During the *po'ora* feasts the men bring in goods from outside, while the women dance in a circle with one opening to receive the goods, or 'to cool them off'.

All goods which the bridegroom/warrior contributes come from outside: money, cigarettes, fishes, hunted heads, and the two bride-price goods gold and *bastas* [imported cloths from India, PtK]. As the uncultivated land in the island, on which the koli palms grow, is designated as outside, the *sopi*, a product of the koli palm, may also be classified as outside.<sup>9</sup>

Men's contribution to fertility is seen as hot, while women have to contribute an atmosphere of coolness. The ultimate aim of the 'great feast' is coolness; hotness is not an aim in itself, for without coolness it is useless. Coolness dominates hotness, and not the other way around.<sup>10</sup> Coolness neutralizes the potential dangers from outside. Similar principles can be observed in other parts of Indonesia, such as Kalimantan and Sumatra.<sup>11</sup>

8 Van Dijk and De Jonge 1990.

9 Van Dijk and De Jonge 1990: 19.

10 Ibid.

11 Rassers 1928; Schärer 1963.



FIGURE 2.1 *Bukung* mask of the Ngaju, South Kalimantan (National Museum of World Cultures, Leiden, RV 789–36, with permission). These masks are seen as bush spirits that invade the village to take the recently deceased to the realm of the ancestors.

## 2 Enggano and the Slain Enemy

On Enggano Island (west of Sumatra) the ‘great feast’, called *eakalea*, can be understood in similar terms as those employed for the Moluccan Islands.<sup>12</sup> Here again, we have to refrain from describing the ritual in detail,<sup>13</sup> but the general outline and the basic structure are clear. On Enggano, as in many other cultures, people of neighbouring villages are invited to join the feast because they are potential marriage partners, and there is a central role for potentially dangerous things which are brought in from outside. These mainly consist of the hunters’ prey, usually wild pigs living in the uncultivated forest, but also pieces of tin (imported from Sumatra) or pieces of sits (valuable trade items of cloths, also coming from outside Enggano).

The hunters’ prey is brought in from outside the village, from the bush. Men enhanced their prestige by means of the hunting activities, but the main part of the prey, the head, was brought to the women. The village square was, for this occasion, called ‘the place where the head is cut off’. The head of the slain enemy was ritually brought into the world of the women, and this event was also clearly depicted in material culture; some of the old Engganese beehive houses were indeed supported by the image of the slain enemy. Only by bringing together male prestige and female fertility, could life continue. [...] society emerged from the ritual with renewed strength. Human, plant and animal life could flourish again.<sup>14</sup>

While the women of the village are dancing, they are elaborately adorned with heavy hip belts made of imported beads. Their headdresses contain a carved image of the slain enemy, often covered with pieces of tin. At a certain moment in the ritual the women place young coconuts in front of the houses, representing new life.

The ritualized symbolism outlined above, with the examples from the Moluccan Islands and Enggano, can serve as a model for a better understanding of objects from outside which are brought in to renew society. The strong agency of at least some of the objects from outside (which often concerns life

12 For an overall view on this phenomenon in East Indonesia, see Barraud and Platenkamp 1989 and 1990.

13 See for more extensive descriptions and a reinterpretation of old sources Ter Keurs 2002, and 2006: 162–168.

14 Ter Keurs 2006: 160.





FIGURE 2.2  
Headdress (*epaku*) for women, Enggano Island  
(National Museum of World Cultures, Leiden, RV  
712-1, with permission). *Epaku* are worn during  
the 'great feast'. The figure on the wooden cylinder  
is a slain enemy. The headdress is decorated with  
tin, imported from Sumatra.

that is killed, such as hunted heads or wild animals from the forest, and therefore are potentially dangerous) has to be cooled off to become useful to society. Only after this process of 'cooling', the potential dangers of the objects can be neutralized. And as a result they become useful, in combination with what the receiving society has to offer. Apparently ritual practices are crucially important to provide objects coming from outside with a renewed, adapted agency and I suggest that this is also the case in other cultures around the world. It is with this perspective that we will now turn to examples from Europe.

### 3 Europe and 'Things from Outside'

Rituals as described above can also be observed in European cultures. Mid-nineteenth century France offers some good examples of the re-vitalizing force of bringing in potentially dangerous things from outside. When Louis Philippe (1773–1850) became King of the French in 1830 he was in an awkward position. He became King in 1830 in a country where the Revolution, and its violence, of 1789 was still fresh in people's minds. He knew that he had to strike a balance between the old idea of Kingship as absolute power and the more modern idea of ruling with the support of the people. He therefore chose to call himself 'King of the French', not 'King of France'. Louis Philippe must have been very conscious of the sensitivity of the position he occupied. Therefore, he also

needed to find symbolic ways of securing his position and strengthening his relationship with 'his people'.

One way in which he solved this problem was by accepting in 1836 an Egyptian obelisk to be erected on what is now called Place de la Concorde. The spectacular entry of a 'strange' object from a largely unknown, but fascinating culture would create an opportunity to organize a large feast (call it a ritual) to support the King's status and prestige. This way he also solved another problem related to the history of the square itself. The name of this square, located at the end of the former royal garden, Jardin des Tuileries, had always been contested. It had changed from 'Place Louis xv', referring to the royal past of the *ancien régime*, to 'Place de la Révolution', where the guillotine had been erected and many members of noble families (including the King and Queen) were decapitated. These contradictions in the square's functions and meanings must have been challenging for the new King Louis Philippe. The glorious entry and erection of the Egyptian obelisk in Paris in 1836 solved the square's complicated position in French society and enhanced the King's position.

The whole story of the transport of the obelisk shows how great the effort was to bring this piece of strange stone (with 'strange' signs on it: the hieroglyphs) into the center of Paris, to a place that was laden with dangerous symbolism. As with the large-scale rituals in Indonesia, the whole project was



FIGURE 2.3 François Dubois, *Érection de l'obélisque de Louqsor sur la place de la Concorde* (1836) (Musée Carnavalet, Paris)  
WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

a conspicuous collecting and using of resources. It took five years before the obelisk (a gift from the Egyptian ruler Mohammed Ali to France) completed its voyage from its original place in Luxor to the center of Paris. A special boat had to be built to bring the gift from Luxor to the Mediterranean coast in the north. It was brought to France and then a team of engineers had to work out the problem of getting it from the coast to Paris. This was not just a small project, one of many, of transporting an object to its new owner. It was much more than that. France's prestige depended on it, as well as the prestige of Louis Philippe. The enormous amount of resources needed to bring this project to a good end is comparable to the resources needed to organize the large-scale Indonesian rituals described above. The arrival of the obelisk from Egypt was part of a ritual acceptance of a 'strange thing from far-away' and became a great opportunity to use that 'thing from outside' for 'public-relation' purposes.

It is estimated that around 200,000 people were present when the obelisk was erected at the Place de la Concorde. Louis Philippe was there as well, but did not show himself at first. Only when the erection of the obelisk was successful and the people started cheering, the King showed himself. France, and the King, had successfully tamed that large piece of stone with the 'unknown, magical signs' from far-away and from a distant past. In the process France's prestige, and the King's, was enhanced and revitalized.<sup>15</sup>

The Place de la Concorde also changed, not only in its material outlook, but also in its meaning. Nowadays visitors of the square are not aware of the violent history of the place. The complex history of the French Revolution's terror, with all its dangers for the stability of French society, has been neutralized.

A second example of the dangerous entry of 'hot' objects from outside into French society was the return of Napoleon's remains in 1840, four years after the erection of the Concorde obelisk. Emperor Napoleon had been exiled to the island St. Helena after he had been defeated at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815. He died in exile in 1821 and seemed, at first sight, to be no longer a danger for the fragile monarchies of Charles X and Louis Philippe. However, reality was more complex. The support for Napoleon, particularly among frustrated old officers of the *Grande Armée*, could develop into a threat to the throne. Some people, also young people who were longing for the greatness of the empire of the past, even believed that Napoleon had never died and that he would sooner or later return to France to revitalize its former importance as

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15 This section is based on the historical data provided by Homet 2002; Solé 2004; Demarcq and Niderlinder 2014. For a summary of the events around the entry of the obelisk in Paris, see Zamojski 2014: 467–468. For the agency of Aegyptiaca, like the obelisk, in more general terms see Versluys 2020.

a leading European nation. Therefore, it was deemed necessary to incorporate Napoleon's potentially dangerous remains into French society, to accept them and neutralize them at the same time.<sup>16</sup> Adolphe Thiers (Président du Conseil) and Louis Philippe to this end orchestrated a 'controlled' return of Napoleon's remains.

The ritual entry of Napoleon's remains in Paris in 1840 was carefully arranged. The boat containing the remains entered Paris by the Seine from the west. The ceremony was carried out by old officers from the Napoleonic army. Ordinary people felt that they didn't have enough occasion to honor their Emperor and that the whole ceremony was too much dominated by the political elite. This is a clear sign of the fear of the authorities for what Napoleon's remains could still evoke.<sup>17</sup>

A special grave was prepared at Les Invalides, the place where wounded veterans of the *Grande Armée* were nursed. The few surviving *Maréchals* of Napoleon's army, among them Soult and Grouchy, welcomed their former Emperor. The veterans were pleased that their hero had returned to them and that he was now buried with full military honors. King Louis Philippe had hoped that he could profit from Napoleon's historical shadow by incorporating his remains in contemporary French society and that the threat of a new revolt against the King and the elite would be neutralized in this way. The ritual entry of Napoleon's remains in Paris is a clear example of an attempt to incorporate a dangerous element in society, by neutralizing it, 'cooling it off' and making it fertile. However, the intended stabilizing effect of the whole enterprise was not successful. Parts of the population of Paris felt that the people had not had enough occasion to honor Napoleon. So, the threat for a new revolt did not diminish after the events of 1840. Instead, repression continued. Louis Philippe would remain King until 1848 when another revolution forced him to step down.

#### 4 Concluding Remarks

In this article I have explored how people can deal with objects that come from outside. I hope to have shown that the processes we can observe are structurally similar everywhere in the world and that it is actually very universal to try, somehow, to cope with strange (and therefore seen as aggressive) things from an unknown origin. Even when the origin of the object is known

<sup>16</sup> Boisson 1973; Martineau 2002.

<sup>17</sup> Victor Hugo described the event in 'Retour de L'Empereur' (Hugo 1906 [1883]).

there are many aspects of the thing that are not known and that add to the strangeness of it. This strangeness has to be dealt with. It can be rejected and be thrown away, or it can be adapted (materially or our interpretation of it) and be made useful. The latter practice is often ritualized, since we can only accept something new if it is also accepted by the world of the ancestors, the spirits or the Gods.

When we deal with objects from outside we can distinguish several types of ritual surrounding them, communal and personal, large-scale and small-scale, at community or individual level, but in all cases the purpose of the ritualized acts is to revitalize and to re-balance. A new equilibrium makes it possible to continue living, in harmony with the natural, social, cultural and religious environment. It would be interesting to do more research on how these practices of adaption and renewal are incorporated in secularized European societies.<sup>18</sup>

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18 See Miller 1998 for a discussion of how religious virtues have been replaced by more worldly, not necessarily more logical, virtues in secularized societies.

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