

## CHAPTER ONE

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# On Living Objects and the Anthropology of Thought

*When we were living in Berlin, Kafka often went for a walk in Stieglitz Park. I sometimes accompanied him. One day, we came upon a little girl who was crying and seemed to have lost all hope. As we spoke with her, Franz asked the reason for her grief. We learned that she had lost her doll. On the spot, he invented an entirely plausible story to explain the disappearance. "Your doll is just taking a little trip. I know because she sent me a letter." The little girl looked at him suspiciously. "Do you have it with you?" she asked him. "No, I left it at home, but I'll bring it tomorrow." Suddenly curious, the little girl almost forgot her grief. Franz went home immediately to write the letter.*

*He set to work with as much seriousness as if it were a matter of writing an actual literary work. He entered the same state of nervous tension that would overcome him whenever he sat down at his desk, even if only to write a letter or postcard. . . .*

*This make-believe lasted at least three weeks. Franz dreaded the moment when he would have to bring it all to a conclusion.*

*Such a conclusion would have to be an authentic one, creating a new order to take the place of the disorder triggered by the loss of the toy. He pondered long and hard before finally deciding to have the doll get married. He first described the young man, the engagement party, the wedding preparations, and then, in great detail, the newlyweds' house. The doll concluded her letter by telling the little girl, "I have traveled a great deal. I now have a house and a husband. You, too, will realize that we have to give up ever seeing each other again." (Diamant 1998: 228–29)*

This story, related by Kafka's partner, Dora Diamant, exemplifies a certain type of presence an object can have, one that is perhaps universal, when an artifact is transformed into a person. Once lost, the doll ceases to be inanimate and becomes a girl. She comes to life. She speaks. She cries. She consoles. She writes letters. The fascination with what Diamant calls Kafka's "instinctive impulse" to attribute life to the doll is immediate. In this series of letters (unfortunately, probably lost), he undoubtedly used literature—or, rather, the act of writing in itself—as a sort of magic. According to Diamant, Kafka's intention was to enter the inner universe of the little girl to help her move forward and thus create an order to replace the disorder caused by the doll's disappearance. Beyond this, however, we need more to understand the magical effect of Kafka's letters. What reality, what exercise of thought is involved in claiming that this doll met a young prince in Stieglitz Park, took a long trip with him, became engaged, and had a happy marriage? Under what conditions is an object, clearly inanimate in the eyes of all the protagonists of this story (the storyteller, the witness, and even the little girl), capable of thinking, imagining, or speaking?

To understand the nature of this remarkable form of thought, the first step should be to reflect on the effects of narration on space and time. Thanks to the story that Kafka's letters gradually reveal, a shared space of thought emerges. Within this space, a complex relationship is established between the writer, the little girl, the doll, and the witness, Diamant. The first effect is clear: because of this new relationship, the lost doll *does not disappear*. More precisely, her disappearance from sight no longer means she vanished for no reason. Through the letters Kafka reads to the little girl every day, the doll remains present. She stays with the child for as long as the story lasts. Through Kafka's voice, the doll gives advice to the little girl, recounts her travels, expresses desires, shares thoughts, and promises to write more letters. Through such means, the little girl is able to reach an agreement with the doll and gradually separate from her with less pain. Over a certain period of time and within a certain space, the object has thus become a person. How should this space and this time be described? How shall we conceive of the self of the one who narrates, the self of the child (so bound up with the object), and the self of the absent doll that returns to narrate its own story through Kafka?

In innumerable social contexts of different cultures, people attribute the status of living beings to inanimate objects. In situations like play or ritual, objects

may be endowed with a range of human characteristics, such as perception, thought, action, or speech. Puppets, dolls, and ritual statuettes cease to be merely *addressees* and begin to *address us*. We see life in them. What type of thought animates the object in these situations, making it both alive and memorable? The aim of this book is to formulate some answers, albeit partial and provisional, to this question, through the study of a number of ethnographical cases, from non-Western masks and ritual statuettes to paintings and sculptures in the Western tradition. This task, however, needs to be founded, as any anthropological enterprise, on more than empirical analyses; it also requires a new approach to the question of the anthropological study of thought. My exploration of the kind of life that might be mentally attributed to inanimate beings is intended to be an initial experiment in this domain. In this chapter, then, I will outline the argument of the book and, in more general terms, the theoretical strategy I have adopted to construct it. But let me first pay a well-deserved tribute to the work of Alfred Gell.

In *Art and Agency* (1998), Gell made the point that the museum artifacts that we label “art” are not merely instances of a universal instinct underlying artistic creativity. Besides being the products of the particular aesthetic of the societies in which they were conceived, many of these objects were also originally treated as living beings, notably within sequences of ritual actions. Through the process that Gell calls an “abduction of subjectivity,” these artifacts are endowed with their own “agency.” As such, they become the means of expressing specific networks of relationships among members of society. Whether it is a question of performing a sacrifice, marking out a symbolic space, or correctly accomplishing a rite of passage, “living” artifacts play a crucial role.

Gell’s approach has been highly influential, and his work is still invaluable for the anthropology of art. However, twenty years after the publication of his book, we can look at his argument with fresh eyes and pose some new questions. Here, I will raise two points in particular. The first concerns the relationship between agency and aesthetics. On this topic, Gell famously wrote that “the anthropology of art cannot be the study of aesthetic principles of this or that culture, but of the mobilization of aesthetic principles (or something like them) in the course of social interaction” (1998, 5). According to him, “a purely cultural, aesthetic, ‘appreciative’ approach to art objects is an anthropological dead end” (1998, 5). If the anthropology of art can be pursued, it has to develop an “imitative strategy” of the other branches of

social anthropology by becoming a “theory about social relationships, and not anything else” (1998, 5).

Gell’s proposal has proven successful and productive. Yet we can argue that the question of aesthetics is not entirely resolved by the proposal of simply neglecting it. Even if we admit that a merely aesthetic appreciation would be unhelpful to understand the life of ritual objects in Melanesian or Amerindian cultures, the influence that Western conceptions of art, and of modern primitivism in particular, still holds on our way of looking at them is left unexplored in Gell’s book. In the ensuing chapters, I will try to show that a critical examination of modern primitivism is necessary in order to free our gaze from Western conceptions and to approach the analysis of artifacts in a new light, looking at *both* their social effectiveness *and* the kind of aesthetics they mobilize.

My second point concerns the context and the network of social relationships in which agency may be attributed to an artifact. Gell refers to a kind of “spontaneous anthropomorphism” that we constantly experience in everyday life. His favorite example is his old Toyota, a “reliable and considerate” object that “does not just reflect the owner’s personhood; it has a personhood as a car” (1998, 18). He notes how common it is for us to speak to objects as if they were human, at some level almost expecting them to respond, even though logically we know better. This kind of everyday experience led Gell to elaborate a theory of how agency and subjectivity are attributed to things. His claim is that artifacts become part of our social existence precisely because we so easily treat them as human. “Because anthropomorphism is a form of ‘animism’ which I actually and habitually practice,” writes Gell, “there is every reason to make mention of it as a template for imagining forms of animism that I do not happen to share, such as the worship of idols” (1998, 19). As a consequence, his theory tends to conceptualize the presence of an “animated being” as the result of a direct replacement: a certain object corresponds to a certain person and vice versa. Through this perspective, for instance, the celebrant of a ritual and the object that takes on the celebrant’s functions maintain a relationship of absolute equivalence. One has exactly the same value and meaning as the other. In ritual action (and in the universe of truth that it generates), the object seems to act like a shadow or a mirror image of the human being who replaces it.

Admittedly, this kind of anthropomorphism is very common in everyday life. But it is also highly unstable. It is a *fragile* state of mind, as it is constantly subjected to critical examination. Moreover, anthropomorphism does not invariably take the diffuse, everyday, and relatively superficial form discussed by

Gell. In other situations, our relationship to artifacts assumes more stable forms. This is notably the case in ritual action: the progressive construction of a truth regime different from the one we follow in our day-to-day existence creates a context in which our anthropomorphic thinking crystallizes and gives rise to enduring beliefs. Does the concept of anthropomorphism used by Gell enable us to account for the complex, stable, and counterintuitive identities embodied by inanimate objects in contexts such as ritual action or play? To understand these cases—and the kind of “suspension of disbelief” they imply—we need to look closer at the mental operations underlying this kind of elaborated anthropomorphism. My hypothesis is that in such situations, the object ceases to entertain a dual relationship with the person or “supernatural being” it represents. Within a ritual context, it becomes more complex than a mirror image or a “double.” It resembles more a crystal, where a plural identity, constituted by fragments of different identities, is gradually constructed. The investigations presented in this book will show that this complex relational structure may account for the attachment of a stable belief to the living artifact. I will try to show that if we decipher the complexity of the bond of belief created between objects and persons, the very idea of a “living object” appears in a completely different light.

The story of Kafka and the doll offers a luminous example of this complexity. What does the doll represent? Whose image is it? By following Kafka’s game, we gradually realize that it assumes a changing identity, at once plural and provisional. In one letter after another, the doll is a girl, a close friend, then a fiancée and the future wife of a young prince. But there is more involved in the make-believe: the doll’s presence is imagined in the universe described by the narration: long journeys to wondrous, far-off countries, fabulous palaces, and so on. Moreover, the narration is not just a story; it is also an act. It translates the presence of a narrator, not simply the characters Kafka talks about. Beyond appearances, the doll is thus equally close to the image and the voice of this thin, inspired young man who reads his letters aloud—or even to the silent presence of Diamant, who captured the memory of this curious episode.

Through the tools of comparative anthropology, I will offer an analysis of this type of complexity, which concerns the presence as well as the image of an object, while seeking to identify the space of thought that engenders it. Although this will involve constructing an anthropological theory of anthropomorphism, I wish to do more in the pages that follow. In fact, the existence of anthropomorphic thought is not at all surprising. The traces of the exercise of

this mode of thought are evident throughout our daily experience, even if we may not notice them because of their very banality.

In other places, times, or situations, anthropomorphic thought undergoes a profound change. On certain occasions, it intensifies, becoming more serious, sometimes solemn and indisputable. The attitude that attributes life to an artifact in such cases is no longer revocable or provisional. Anthropomorphism thus appears to be a “serious game” with rules that people may follow or transgress. Such occasions call to mind the domain of religion, yet they can also occur without any religious belief being involved, such as when the picture of a recently deceased husband comes “alive” for a while and becomes a conversation partner with a widow.

These situations, which I will discuss mainly in ritual contexts, are also illustrated in Ernst Gombrich’s memorable example in his *Meditations on a Hobby Horse* (1971). The broomstick that a child can “ride” (an action that, as we will see later, Gombrich rightly links to the artistic act) is a horse—in fact, it is the horse that makes the child a knight, just as it makes his friend a princess of the Middle Ages—precisely because anthropomorphic thought makes this rudimentary object the final term in a chain of associations. Like Kafka’s doll, the broomstick points to a complex exercise of thought, which the image can only partially translate.

Here, I will focus my analyses on situations in which the establishment of a belief links an object and a person in a persistent, complex, and to a certain extent, orderly manner. These situations are not always “rituals” in the strict sense of the term. Other situations exist where games of substitution and partial identification may be established between humans and objects, or even between humans and humans. I thus propose to describe such situations as *quasi-rituals*. Without corresponding to the usual conditions prevailing when ritual action is exercised, these situations can nonetheless be described through the relational theory that Michael Houseman and I formulated for ritual action twenty years ago (Houseman and Severi 1998). In this work, we argued that a rite is determined more by its relational form than by its meaning or function. By “form,” we meant a particular relational configuration that confers a distinctive ontological dimension on ritual interaction. This dimension, which we viewed as a “serious fiction,” to borrow Gregory Bateson’s phrase ([1972] 1999, 35–40), implies more than the traditional anthropological principle that the world evoked within a ritual must be interpreted according to a symbolic register. It implies further that the identity of the subjects of ritual action is defined through the

condensation of what would be seen in ordinary life as contradictory modes of relationship.

As an example of this kind of *quasi-ritual* situation, which likewise involves the condensation of different modes of relationships, I will propose an analysis in an ensuing chapter of the Homeric funerary games based on a reading of the *Iliad*. Later in the book, I will go a step further by considering instances of Western art as generating specific relational situations in which artifacts may reveal agency and even a certain kind of life. This approach to what we call “art” experimentally reverses the perspective of modern primitivism. Instead of seeing “works of art” in artifacts endowed with agency outside the West, I will analyze certain Western works of art according to their own logic as object-persons. My final claim will be that studying situations where an object is thought to come alive enables us to deepen and extend the scope of our understanding not only of ritual action and the act of play but also of art, both Western and non-Western.

Let me now briefly define the strategy I have chosen to develop my argument. To do so, I will first examine in what ways my approach differs from the two main currents in contemporary anthropology that aim to deal with thought and mental operations: the ontological and cognitive approaches. I will next outline the approach I develop in the analyses presented in this book. Let us start with an experiment in ontological thought.

## KŪKAI'S VISION

At the turn of the ninth century, a young Japanese scholar named Kūkai (Kōbō Daishi, 774–835) met an ascetic Buddhist monk, who introduced him to an esoteric text of the tantric tradition. This text stated that by reciting the mantra it contained one million times in the proper way, “the meanings of everything that had been heard will be thoroughly understood, retained in the mind, and never lost or forgotten” (Kūkai 2010, 4). Kūkai believed that any word attributed to the Buddha was (or had to be) literally true. From that day forward, he devoted himself without rest to the practice of reciting the mantra. “Wandering in deep mountains and secluded valleys” (Kūkai 2010, 5), he never stopped chanting the mantra. One day, he had a vision. In the valley where he was reciting, he suddenly realized that trees, rocks, and birds loudly resounded with the sound of his whispered mantra. Everything he perceived was speaking his own words.

This experience was not due simply to the attainment of heightened powers of memory and vision (also promised by the mantra). What Kūkai understood from the message conveyed to him by his “sudden awakening” was that

nature itself is vibration, sound, and language. Every phenomenon, in all nature, is . . . a manifestation of a primordial language carved into the fabric of space. . . . Long before human language ever evolved, the entire universe was . . . a text written in this primordial language. (Takagi, in Kūkai 2010, 5)

Later, in his treatise devoted to *The Meaning of Sound, Letter, and Reality*, Kūkai commented on the meaning of his vision in more speculative terms:

The moment that the inner breath and the outer air began to move, vibration inevitably arises. This is called *sound*. . . Sound arises and is never meaningless; it is always the name of a thing. This is called *letter*. Names evoke the essence. This is called *reality*. Distinguishing the three—sound, letter, and reality—is called *meaning*. (Kūkai 2010, 84)

According to Kūkai, then, language and reality coincide. In order to understand a meaningful statement, one has to understand that words actually work as an acoustic image of the world. They do not represent it; they *are* the world.

How are we to understand this statement? One possibility is to reconstruct its historical context. Buddhism often presents the practice of experiencing visions as an “undetermined, spontaneous, absolute” (Faure, 1993, 158). Many scholars have shown that this kind of vision was linked to a specific discursive practice, an “art of speaking” that required a long initiation. Moreover, we know that Kūkai had studied Daoism in China, and it has been noted that his vision of the “speaking valley” reflects a passage of one of the great books of Daoism, the *Zhuangzi*:

A colorless and soundless wind blows through the infinite reaches of the cosmos. . . . When this wind blows in the deep forests of the Earth, the trees immediately begin to rustle, and sounds arise everywhere. In that ancient forest, there are huge trees measuring a hundred arms lengths around. In their trunks and branches are infinite holes of different shapes. When the wind strikes those holes they each produce different sounds: some roar like torrents dashing against the rocks, some murmur like the shallows, some rumble like thunder in the sky, some

hiss like flying arrows, and others sound of wailing, anger, sadness, or happiness.  
(Kūkai 2010, 85)

Kūkai is thus not alone in assimilating language with reality. What appears at first sight to be a spontaneous vision of an enchanted valley is actually an image deeply rooted in a particular conception of the world, one that originated in the Chinese philosophy of the fifth century. From this point of view (sometimes called a “lateral” comparison, in this case, between China and Japan), we can say that Kūkai’s vision reflects a scholarly tradition and a specific school of thought.

Another way to evaluate a cosmology of this kind is to “frontally” (Candea 2016) compare it to Western cosmology. European or American authors of all sorts have traditionally stated that, in the Western perspective, signs are opposed to objects, not confused with them. Signs are arbitrary, conventional, and in some measure abstract. They do not “resemble” objects nor do they convey their acoustic image. Furthermore, in contrast to what Kūkai writes, Western cultures hold that sounds can be perfectly meaningless. The distinction between inanimate matter and language is paralleled by another crucial one, that between subject and object. Western thought is, we are often told, “dualistic.” Eastern doctrines, on the contrary, tend to posit a kind of synthesis of the subject and the object, incarnated, in Kūkai’s case, by the idea of a “speaking landscape.” Such a vision is associated with a “religious” or metaphysical vision of the world, whereby language (and the mind behind it) are not opposed to each other but, rather, are part of a single being.

Recently, it has become usual to oppose Eastern Monistic spiritualism to Western Cartesian dualism. Is this opposition really well founded? We will have to look more closely to Kūkai’s vision and its connections with Buddhism to fully answer this question. Before doing so, however, we may also wonder whether the *image of ourselves* that this kind of comparison implies is correct, whether from a theoretical or a historical point of view. Among the philosophers of Western antiquity, we find a number of nondualist thinkers. Epicurus, for instance, taught that both reality and the human mind are materially composed of the same atoms. His theories do not fit comfortably into the pattern in Western society that Philippe Descola ([2005] 2013, 172–200) describes as “naturalism,” which implies the existence of, on the one hand, a continuity between human and nonhumans in terms of the physical matter they are composed of, and on the other, a discontinuity between physical matter and the mental faculties that are exclusively human. Epicurus saw continuity and a common nature in the

structures of both matter and human mental activities. In Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura*, one of the richest sources for understanding Epicurism, all phenomena belonging to nature are said to be composed of an infinite but fixed and immortal set of "atoms." Thought processes, including inference and imagination, are not fundamentally different from other "natural" phenomena; they are simply generated by different combinations of atoms. Furthermore, human bodies and minds are not different from animal bodies and minds. Death is not the end of a "soul" or its travel to another world; it is just a transformation of atoms guided by the laws of a Mind, which is common to all creatures. Lucretius describes, for instance, how horses feel, think, and dream like human beings. And, for him, since atoms combine in the same way the letters of an alphabet combine to generate words, the organization of human language is the best model for understanding the material structure of the universe.

This vision of a fundamental continuity between the "object" (matter) and the "subject" (mind) was far from being confined to Greek materialism. Since Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura* and other ancient texts were rediscovered, the materialism of antiquity has indeed permeated an entire tradition of Western materialistic thought, from Giordano Bruno (who remarkably wrote that "if God is not the same as nature, it is to be conceived of as the nature of nature"), to Baruch Spinoza, to Denis Diderot, and down to contemporary debates in the cognitive sciences. Although the competing paradigm of naturalism has always had advocates such as René Descartes, who distinguished the *res extensa* (the Matter) from the *res cogitans* (the Subject), the long tradition of materialism, which considers these two domains to be coinciding, has had equally vigorous proponents.

Where is the supposedly monolithic "Western dualism" that is so often opposed to an equally monolithic "Eastern monism"? This kind of comparison, no matter how it is framed, whether sophisticated or simplistic, inevitably leads down the wrong path, for both theoretical and ethnographical reasons. As for theory, I have argued elsewhere (Severi 2013, 2014) that anthropologists usually do not adequately understand the concept of ontology. Many of our colleagues (e.g., Viveiros de Castro 1998; Descola [2005] 2013) tend to call any discourse about the origins and nature of the world an "ontology." However, ever since Parmenides, the term *ontology* has not referred to the various material constituents of the universe (fire, water, air, etc.) and their different ways to combine. Parmenides's ontological argument is about "being itself." It aims to construct an ontology as a science of abstract principles—founded on the

analysis of predicates of being (such as necessity versus contingency, possibility versus impossibility, subsistence versus potentiality, and the like)—not as a discourse about the origins of what physically exists. Nor does Parmenides seek to classify the different beings inhabiting the universe. He intends, on the contrary, to identify an abstract relationship between *nous* and *physis* and to discover the conditions under which the world is thinkable. This is why a classification of different beings into categories based on, for example, the distinctions of animate/inanimate, human/animal, male/female (which are often considered “ontological” by anthropologists) technically does not make for an “ontology.” It is better defined instead as a “natural philosophy *without* ontology.”

From a technical point of view, the negative (or indeterminate) results of this kind of comparison appear as an effect of the way “ontology” is usually constructed as an ethnographic object. The first problem is the exclusive focus on the content of “cosmology” as a notion, accompanied by a lack of analysis about the ways it comes to be shared and by whom. If the “stuff a cosmology is made of” is shared knowledge, how is this knowledge shared or transmitted? We may hope to understand this process only if we adopt a perspective in which the analysis of the forms of knowledge transmission is given priority over the analysis of content. In this respect, Kūkai’s vision no longer appears as the inverted *analogon* of an abstract notion of “Western naturalism.” Rather, it is the result of ritual action implying a certain form of thought-enactment (“contemplation”), a certain form of language use, typically nonpropositional (“the repetition thousands of times of a certain sequence of words”), and an exercise in techniques of memory aimed at defining an exceptional form of subjectivity. From this perspective, the relationship of these practices to the other ritual tradition Kūkai also followed (the meditation technique aimed at transforming him in a way to “become the Bodhisattva immediately in his body”) is clearly relevant to understanding his vision. Notably, the only other treatise that we have by Kūkai is precisely about meditation. In other words, the kind of variation in the realm of thought that I am attempting to define here is not only characterized by a symbolic content; it also implies forms of enacting thought, which emerge through specific forms of language use and ritual action. It is only through the study of these conditions that we may comprehend the many ways in which “cosmological knowledge” is shared, transmitted, and transformed.

My third objection to the ontological approach concerns the use of the verb *to be*. From a philosophical point of view, since at least Alfred Ayer (1936, 52), the ambiguity of this verb has been criticized. As Ayer writes,

If we were guided merely by the form of the sign, we should assume that the “is,” which occurs in the sentence “He is the author of that book,” was the same symbol as the symbol “is,” which appears in the statement, “The cat is a mammal.” But when we come to translate<sup>1</sup> the sentences, we find that the first is equivalent to “He, and no one else, wrote that book,” and the second to “The class of the mammals contains the class of cats.” And this shows that each “is” is an ambiguous symbol, which must not be confused with the other, nor with the ambiguous symbols of existence, a class membership, and identity, and entailments, which are also constituted by signs of the form “is.” (Ayer 1936, 52)

This way of generating ambiguity has heavy consequences in the analysis of ethnography. If we want to avoid them, we should recognize that things do not “exist” in human societies in an undifferentiated way. To understand how an “ontology” applies to a specific society, we have to reconstruct the grammar of the verb “to be” on a case-by-case basis.

In the anthropological literature, an eloquent illustration of this point can be found in the discussion E. E. Evans-Pritchard devotes to the grammar of the verb “to be” among the Nuer. He starts by arguing that a specific form of the use of the verb “to be” is crucial for understanding sacrifice:

When a cucumber is used as a sacrificial victim, Nuer speak of it as an ox. In doing so, they are asserting something rather more than that it takes the place of an ox. They do not say, of course, that cucumbers are oxen, and in speaking of a particular cucumber as an ox in a sacrificial situation, they are only indicating that it may be thought of as an ox in that particular situation; and they act accordingly by performing the sacrificial rite as closely as possible to what happens when the victim is an ox. The resemblance is conceptual, not perceptual. (Evans-Pritchard 1956, 128)

Once he establishes this point concerning the existence of conceptual analogies, Evans-Pritchard takes a more general approach to this question by distinguishing among several forms of existence revealed by the use of the verb

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1. When Ayer uses the concept of “translation” here, he is referring to Bertrand Russell’s “theory of definite descriptions” (Russell and Whitehead 1910), according to which “We define a symbol in use, not by saying that it is synonymous with some other symbols, but by showing how the sentences in which it significantly occurs can be translated into equivalent sentences” (Ayer 1936, 49).

“to be.” First, he remarks that the Nuer use the verb in one sense, such as “the crocodile is an animal, not a spirit,” which only means that such a reptile exists as a beast. The Nuer are not immersed in the mystical, nonlogical, “primitive mentality” described by Lucien Lévy-Bruhl ([1922] 1978), nor do they see spirits or essences everywhere. The proof given here by Evans-Pritchard is simple: even when the Nuer say that “a crocodile is Spirit,” they would constantly and firmly deny that “a spirit is a crocodile.” Evans-Pritchard next introduces a subtle distinction between “being Spirit” and “being a spirit.” “Being Spirit” can sometimes function just as the name of a natural phenomenon, such as lightning or any natural sprite, which involves a sort of “refraction of Spirit” (Evans-Pritchard 1956, 138). The “is” appearing in this statement, however, “is not one of identity” (1956, 138), since Spirit is, for the Nuer, quite independent of any natural phenomenon. However, the use of “is” designating a stable and general identity is not found in the statement “X is a spirit” either: this expression simply refers to an individual being that, in certain cases, might assume the “symbolic” role of representing a specific spirit. In other cases, this statement refers to a different kind of situation, the totemic relationship between an “animal spirit” with the members of the clan it designates. In this specific relationship, where a single animal might assume the role of “spirit” only for members of a particular clan, the indication “to be a snake or a crocodile” comes closer to the description of a personality. In none of these cases, however, is the verb “to be” a tool for indicating stable or unconditional identities. From the point of view we might call “ontological,” this means that these variations in the grammar of the verb “to be” reflect the fact that the Nuer do not consider Spirit as something that exists in a general and undifferentiated way. Evans-Pritchard explains this in the following way:

There are gradations of the conceptions of Spirit from pure unattached Spirit to Spirit associated with human; animal and lifeless objects are more and more closely bound to what it is associated with the farther down the scale one goes. So when Nuer say of something that it is Spirit, we have to consider not only what “is” means, but also what “Spirit” means. (Evans-Pritchard 1956, 139)

We could add that this “graduated” character is also typical of what we might call “matter” or “reality.” Spirit and matter do not constitute the terms of an opposition; both of them exist only in degrees. One obvious consequence of this point is that “patterns of existence” are not the same for all beings in the Nuer

universe. Nonhumans do not “exist” in the same way humans do; the same goes for cucumbers, oxen, and other sacrificial victims.

These analyses of Evans-Pritchard, relevant to Nuer ontology, are followed by his famous discussion of the relationships between twins and birds. The focus of the argument is on the logic of relationships underlying the use of the verb “to be.” Here, as we have already seen, the form subject X “is” predicate Y (e.g., twins are birds, or twins are the same person) hides the fact that the relationship is not dual; it presupposes a third term, “God,” to whom both are related. In this case, writes Evans-Pritchard, “The formula does not express a dyadic relationship between twins and birds, but a triadic relationship of twins, birds, and God. In respect to God, twins and birds have a similar character” (Evans-Pritchard 1956, 132).

For the Nuer, constructing a progressive series of predicates in these forms of existence is a way of establishing an ordered set of relationships among graduated instances of beings, be they “material” or “spiritual.” It is clear that adopting this relational approach (in which, as in sacrificial actions, relations take priority over the description of the empirical appearance of beings) is a way to identify a rich, detailed sequence of intermediary steps between “true” (material) and “untrue” (spiritual) things. In other words, the concepts of truth and falsity do not disappear in this context, since both of them are present: a crocodile is a beast, not Spirit; a vulture is not Spirit is the sense that rain or an earthquake is; a twin is not a bird in terms of their appearance; and a cucumber is not an ox, unless it becomes an ox by convention. But they play different roles according to the different linguistic forms in the grammar of the verb “to be” and the different contexts of enunciation in which they are expressed. This is the reason why, instead of trying to establish whether they obey some sort of general rationality, we must use the utmost exactitude to grasp the limits and scope of the conceptual universe they express.

This carefully graduated and contextual interpretation of reality need not be deciphered as a proposition or an ensemble of propositions forming a “conception” of the world. Nor does Evans-Pritchard’s proposal to consider this way of thinking as the product of the Nuer’s poetic sense or verbal art seem much more useful. Elsewhere (Hanks and Severi 2014), Hanks and I have argued that, instead of looking for a category where this kind of discourse would belong, it is far more valuable to follow the process of translation to which this “experience on an imaginative level of thought” (Evans-Pritchard 1956, 142) is constantly subjected in the culture where it is used. In Claude Lévi-Strauss’s

language, we could say that this kind of conceptualization constantly mobilizes sensory data in terms of other sensory data, without invoking the question of rationality (in the sense this term has in linguistics). Furthermore, in this case, instead of seeing the possibility of translation as a theoretical difficulty for defining thought (as it has traditionally been viewed), we could, on the contrary, consider the ethnography of translation as an opportunity to observe the dynamics of thought processes and to study how they operate by adapting to constraints and by exploiting possibilities of the means of expression they use in different contexts.

Finally, let us consider the case of negation from this point of view. As noted earlier, when anthropologists use the concept of ontology, they often describe various “forms of existence.” However, the concept of “existence,” which is the foundation of the idea of “ontology,” cannot be formulated without referring to its contrary, the concept of “nonexistence.” It is unimaginable that a culture, while mentioning the “existence” of something, could spare itself the distinction between “existent” and “nonexistent” instances of reality. For Aristotle, the properties pertaining to all existent beings are only four: the existence of a being can be necessary or contingent, possible or impossible. However, it should be noted that these four “ontological properties” represent four possible mediations between being and nonbeing. In fact, it is quite possible to reformulate the terms used to qualify the existence of a being in terms of nonbeing. If something exists necessarily, it cannot be nonexistent; if something exists in a contingent way, it can become nonexistent by accident. If an object has only a possible existence, it can equally (to the same extent) become nonexistent. To say that the existence of an object is impossible is to state that it could never exist. What is crucial for social anthropology is that these classic relationships between being and nonbeing do not rule out a further possibility: situations in which the relationship between being and nonbeing assume a paradoxical form where “Being” implies “Nonbeing.” Anthropologists know these paradoxical definitions well, since they often characterize the relationship societies establish with the dead, the spirits, or entities like the “speaking trees” or the “rocks expressing fear or sadness” that appear in Kūkai’s vision. To designate these imaginary situations, in which the relationship with reality assumes the form of a paradoxical ontology (“existent only if nonexistent” or “existing by negating the feature of existent things”), human societies have invented an array of special forms of communication, verbal and nonverbal alike. The study of these forms of “serious fiction” (which bear relationships with other, more ordinary forms of reality) is

essential for understanding the coexistence of different “forms of thought” in a single society.

In conclusion, let me point out that the “ontological” perspective generates two blind spots. On one side, there is a naïve (nonanalytical) conception of the concept of “existence” and on the other, a refusal to admit the existence of a specific logic governing serious fiction as a parallel form of reality. In both cases, there is a refusal to recognize that social life is composed of different layers of reality governed by different logics.

## LEVELS OF COGNITION

The refusal to apprehend plural perspectives of analysis also characterizes the field of cognitive anthropology. In this case, however, the problem concerns the rigidity of the conceptual model, not a mistaken conception of the ontological background. Cognitive anthropologists explicitly aim to study, as do I, the ways that mental processes propagate in a society (e.g., Sperber 1985; Sperber and Wilson 1986; Boyer 1988, 1992, 1993, 2002; Whitehouse 2004; Bloch 2012; Morin 2011). It seems natural, therefore, to ask how their approach might be compared with the one I am defending here. I will therefore first define the kind of cognition I am focusing on and then formulate a number of critiques to the main line of research in cognitive anthropology.

We can start by acknowledging that, in social life, not all individual fantasies become shared knowledge. Dreams, for instance, which might be seen as extremely “counterintuitive” and thus memorable, usually last only a brief period of time in individual memory. Furthermore, their representational content is famously difficult to share with others. Anthropology has not much to say about individual experiences of this kind. Its primary scope is the exploration of the many ways knowledge is shared. Furthermore, we know that a large amount of human shared cognition is basic and indifferent to cultural variation, simply because it is independent of any process of communication. A good example is what psychologists call “naïve physics” (Hayes 1985). At a certain age (Bailargeon 1995), all human children acquire the right expectations concerning a ball thrown upward. They instinctively “think” that the ball will come down. Usually, their daily experience confirms this rule. It is remarkable, however, that, from a logical point of view, this does not mean that this kind of knowledge is independent of truth: it still has to be confirmed to become fully true. As far

as we know, knowledge belonging to this kind of cognition does not vary from one culture to another. It is a mistake to think that this level is irrelevant for the study of social cognition, but it is also irrefutable that this kind of cognition only describes a form of competence that belongs to the individual. The performances of social interactions, as well as their propagation in a society, only indirectly depend on this kind of basic cognition, which might be part of a general endowment of the human species but is not technically definable as a social phenomenon. From the point of view of a general psychology of human beings, then, the exploration of this kind of cognition might be quite interesting, but from the point of view of the forms of propagation of knowledge in a given society, it simply never strikes deeply enough. I would therefore argue that it is a mistake to conflate this kind of cognition with other kinds of cultural representations, which are also basic and shared but heavily dependent on the modalities of cultural communication, thus varying from one culture to another.

In my view, cognitive anthropology constantly mistakes one level for the other. This is one of the reasons for the rigidity of the method and the poverty of results that characterize this field of anthropology today. It is obviously impossible in such a short introduction to examine this question in detail, but let me briefly examine analyses proposed by Dan Sperber (1985, 1986), since they are shared by many other cognitive anthropologists and still reflect the mainstream perspective in this field. Sperber has often claimed to be the author of two influential and controversial theories: one concerns the identification of relevance (that is, intentional meaning) within an expanded and revised Gricean model of conversation (Grice 1989); the second concerns the definition of culture as a process of an “epidemic” propagation of representations. The natural development of this approach to social cognition—which one might consider the task of his followers—would be to go one step further, leading to the identification of a logical link between the two theories. This link would enable the unified theory to predict where and when a certain way of producing relevance in communication would generate a specific sort of social propagation of representations. However, this seems to be an impossible task for contemporary cognitive anthropology. Two reasons may account for this theoretical failure. The first is that Paul Grice’s work offers an abstract model for understanding the role of intentions and a speaker’s implicit meanings in situations of idealized conversation. However (or therefore), it is, quite intuitively, a poor tool for understanding other contexts of cultural communication where, as in Kūkai’s vision, language is used in a nonpropositional way, or where, as in ancient Greek funerary rituals,

the faculty of speaking is attributed to an inanimate artifact (Chapter Five), or where, yet again, as in many rituals, knowledge is expressed through action. In many cases, the use of this model simply leads to inaccurate or inappropriate descriptions of ethnography. To understand the ever-changing and usually unexpected forms of propagating representations that we find in ethnography, we obviously need a far wider conception of language use and communication. The second reason for cognitive anthropology's failure lies in the rather outdated concept of epidemics that Sperber uses in his famous paper on "cultural epidemiology." In that essay (1985), he describes the propagation of representations in a society as a process analogous to the propagation of a viral illness, when an ill body "infects" a previously healthy one. Contemporary epidemiology, however, long ago ceased to define epidemics in these terms. Epidemics are no longer defined as the physical contact of viruses of an illness that pass from a body to another body. The field of epidemiology has increasingly become the study of the reproduction of *the conditions* generating illnesses rather than their propagation. Today, epidemiologists currently speak of the epidemiology of obesity, asthma, or lung cancer (Doll and Hill 1950; Bonita, Beaglehole, and Kjellström 2006)—all illnesses where no contact between viruses or other microorganisms generate any symptoms. The same conceptual revision should be applied for the epidemiology of ideas. The cultural study of cognition should be based, thus, not on a typology of representations (such as intuitive, counterintuitive, apparently irrational, etc.) but, rather, on the conditions influencing the generation of specific forms of communicative interactions. If so, this inquiry should no longer be based on the content of cultural representations, which supposedly makes them "successful or unsuccessful," but instead on the analysis of the pragmatic forms of their propagation. The research that I have conducted on the propagation of the Native American messianic movement known as the "Ghost Dance" (between approximately 1880 and 1920) in the United States shows, for instance, that the propagation of this new "religion" was not based on the content of the representations themselves (whether categorized as counterintuitive, intense, salient, etc.) but on the *form of communicative interaction* that characterized the new rituals, which combined, in a paradoxical way, Christian prayers with traditional dances celebrating the ancestors (Severi [2007] 2015, 265–90).<sup>2</sup>

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2. In Chapter Three of the present book, I give another example of using this approach when analyzing the form of ritual enunciation in oral traditions among the Fang of West Africa.

In short, the knowledge of human social cognition need not avoid, as is unfortunately often the case, the intricacies of ethnography. It should, to the contrary, be rooted in a detailed study of the forms of the transmission of knowledge. A crucial point that I share with cognitive anthropology, however, is that the focus of analysis shifts from reconstructing “conceptions of the world” to the study of the conditions of enunciation of shared knowledge in different contexts. In this perspective, to “study culture” becomes a way to explore the pragmatic conditions of cultural communication, verbal or otherwise, ritualized or ordinary. It is certainly from this perspective that, in this book, I analyze the communicative agency and forms of interaction that we find attributed to artifacts.

## ANTHROPOLOGY AND PRAGMATICS

On the links between anthropology and pragmatics, the contribution of linguistic anthropology has been crucial. Thanks to the work of authors such as Dell Hymes (1981), Michael Silverstein (1976), Denis Tedlock (1983), Keith Basso (1996), Alan Rumsey (2002, 2003), William Hanks (2005, 2006), Francesca Merlan and Alan Rumsey (2017), Alessandro Duranti (2015), and Webb Keane (1997, 2011, 2015), anthropology has firmly integrated the study of the pragmatic conditions of speech acts, through which the identities of speakers are constructed, into its conceptual toolkit. These authors have demonstrated that studying the conditions of interlocution can enrich our understanding of the meaning of traditional discourse and help us situate myths and other narrative forms in specific oral genres and, more generally, shed new light on the uses of traditional knowledge. This pragmatic approach enables anthropologists to move beyond the mere deciphering of indigenous speech acts and endeavor, instead, to distinguish various forms of social communication and the modalities through which tradition functions.

However, as mentioned earlier, research in the field of pragmatics has forked into two distinct branches. On the cognitive side, the analysis of extremely simple (or fictitious) communicative acts leads to sophisticated but hardly applicable theoretical models (Grice 1989; Sperber and Wilson 1986). On the linguistic side, the detailed identification of complex sociolinguistic phenomena, using contextually specific explanatory tools, has prevailed in more theoretical concerns (Labov 1972). To this day, specialists in pragmatics tend to focus either

on the wider criteria of generalized pragmatics, applicable to all communicative acts, or on the localized, specific variations that affect particular instances of linguistic performance. The unfortunate effects of this bifurcation in research strategies are clear: the degree of abstraction that Grice and his followers opt for makes their models unsuitable for analyzing data from the field, while the study of specific cases raised by other authors has rarely led to wider, more generalizable conclusions from an anthropological perspective. In its relationship with social anthropology, linguistic pragmatics has seemed either too abstract and based on fictitious examples, or else empirically grounded but too circumstantial and heterogeneous. This divergence is particularly striking in the study of ritual communication, a context where the “agency” attributed to artifacts is very frequently involved. Whereas a series of solid anthropological works (Bateson [1936] 1958; Barth 1975, 1987; Rappaport 1979, 2000; Kapferer 1977, 1979, 1983; Staal 1979, 1983, 1989; Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994; Bloch 1986, 1991) has sought to identify the constitutive traits of ritual action and to distinguish it from everyday action, linguists (even though they have produced precise descriptions of many different situations of social communication) have thus far not attempted to explore the special pragmatics of ritual speech. Were this to become a topic of research, their studies could converge in an approach illuminating the range of phenomena involved in this type of communication.

Anthropologists, for their part, have been slow to grasp and incorporate descriptive categories from pragmatics, such as situation, setting, context, indexicality, and implicature, into their analyses. They have made little attempt to delve deeper into the study of the ritual use of language, limiting themselves to highlighting a few superficial aspects of ritual language (repetition, semantic poverty, use of fixed formulas, etc.) without linking them to other aspects of ritual behavior. Some of them have indeed applied John Austin’s classic work on speech acts ([1962] 1975) to the disparate elements of ritual speech and action (Tambiah 1985; Bloch 1974), but as Donald Gardner (1983) points out, these approaches are either rigorous but empirically useless or else approximative and theoretically negligible.

For linguists, pragmatics is still defined as the study of everything that is explicitly formulated through linguistic means under the conditions of a given speech context. Although they recognize the existence and efficacy of other contextual indicators that are not expressed in linguistic terms, they almost invariably treat them as either residual or negligible. This linguistic definition of the field of analysis, which only takes into account the “grammaticalized” elements

(Levinson 1983, 89), ignores a whole range of other phenomena that we need to take into account for understanding communication in ritual contexts.

This point is analyzed in detail in several chapters of this book (see Chapters Four and Five). Here I wish to raise only two points. The first concerns the way in which a ritual identity is established in contrast with ordinary life. Many pragmatists have highlighted the fact that, in ordinary speech, the identity of the speaker is an important element of social indexicality and thus helps determine the meaning of utterances. By contrast, in a ritual context, many of the usual conditions of ordinary communication are suspended, such as the ones identified by Erving Goffman—“shared experience, the occupation of the same space at the same time, and a form of reciprocity through mutual perception” (1963, 22; 1972)—and those later added by Hanks, namely, “mutual understanding among parties, and a framework of relevance” (2006, 118). The meaning of the utterance can only be grasped if we understand how the speaker is defined in a preformatted, often counterintuitive communicational game. As in a game of chess, we must first know the rules governing the game and the uses of all the pieces in order to understand why one piece made a certain move. Likewise, in ritual communication, we must first know what the components of a speaker’s complex identity are in order to understand the framework and thus the context of speech acts. In logical terms, this means that the rules governing a speaker’s identity cease to be normative (as in everyday speech) and become constitutive when they are applied to an entirely new game of interaction.<sup>3</sup>

My second point concerns the role of images and actions in ritual communication. In many cases, the images and actions are no more to be seen as a heterogeneous or residual element in relation to the speech act. On the contrary, speech and image reciprocally entail one another in the definition of the speaker and thus of the indexical field. Speech acts that occur in ritual contexts possess a specific form of complexity that is defined less by their semantic content

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3. This is how John Searle (1969) explains the distinction (originally from Kant [1781] 1999) between “constitutive” and “regulative” (normative) rules: “Constitutive rules . . . create or define new forms of behavior. The rules of football or chess, for example, do not merely regulate playing football or chess, but as it were they create the very possibility of playing such games. . . . Regulative rules regulate a pre-existing activity, an activity whose existence is logically independent of the rules. Constitutive rules constitute (and also regulate) an activity the existence of which is logically dependent on the rule” (1969, 33–34). Note that the special use of speech governed by constitutive rules contributes to the memorability of a set of representations within a ritual tradition (see Severi 2003, [2007] 2015).

than by the definition of the specific “conditions of utterance,” including where and when the act occurs and the nature of the speaker. To be anthropologically relevant, this context must be defined not only in linguistic terms but also with regard to other forms of communication, notably visual or gestural. To bridge the two approaches of pragmatics and anthropology, a model is needed that can account for this complexity.

## ETHNOGRAPHY AND THOUGHT

Let us turn to the issue of thought. From Lévy-Bruhl’s considerations of “pre-logical mentality” ([1922] 1978) up to Sperber’s arguments on apparently irrational beliefs (1982), a large part of the anthropological literature devoted to thought does not really concern the study of thought as a general human activity but, rather, the opposition between rationality and irrationality (Severi 2014). In this perspective, anthropologists usually compare an abstract definition of “rationality” with an empirical counterpart, mostly founded on the analysis of some forms of categorization and theories of causality. It is obvious, however, that there is much more to human thought than categorization or propositional rationality. Ideas about perception and space, language, and communication, right or wrong moral values, for instance, are constantly present in ethnography. It would be hard to qualify them as “rational” or “nonrational” (or even “symbolic”); following at least Austin ([1962] 1975), concepts of this kind would be better qualified as “appropriate” or “inappropriate,” or as “felicitous” or “infelicitous,” within a certain context, rather than as rational or nonrational.

In sum, when approaching the idea of an anthropology of thought, there is a preliminary choice to make. Either one chooses what we may call a Piagetian model of thought-as-rationality, seen in its various manifestations but defined only through the opposition between rational or nonrational (e.g., Piaget [1923] 2001, [1926] 2007); or one refers to a more extensive, and more realistic, definition of thought. One of the classic authors who have worked in this direction (and whom we could, in this respect, oppose to Piaget) is Lev Vygotsky, the great Russian psychologist (Vygotsky 1978). Not unaware of the problems posed by cultural differences, Vygotsky elaborated a multifaceted conception of the exercise of thought, which includes not only rational inference but also metalinguistic, metacommunicational, aesthetic, and narrative thought. In this book, I have chosen this Vygotskian option, and I try to develop it in a new

direction. From a methodological point of view, the approach to thought I am taking here is resolutely ethnographic. Instead of predefining a kind of thought and looking for it in social life, I consider specific interactions and forms of communication and then try to understand the kind of thought they mobilize. This perspective may allow us to take further steps toward the definition of a new approach in the anthropology of thought. Roman Jakobson (1959) remarked once that when we pass from one language (or, more precisely, one grammar) to another, the variation between the two concerns what speakers *must* say in order to express a meaning rather than what they *may* say. I have argued that this kind of variation might become useful in the study of linguistic variation, but also in the domain of thought. I would claim first that variation in a necessary but far from sufficient level is not merely an empirical fact (as Jakobson probably thought), with no meaning in itself. To illustrate this point, I referred to the distinction currently used in logic between the *power* of symbolic systems (the possibility of identifying a limited number of features that are valid for a large number of cases) and their *expressivity* (the possibility of identifying a large number of features belonging to a limited number of cases) (Mangione 1964, 52–53). Any case-centered inquiry (such as fieldwork-based ethnography) needs to be in some measure expressive, while any comparative or statistical analysis needs to be reasonably powerful. With this distinction in mind, I have noted that a consequence of Jakobson’s perspective on linguistic variation is that all human natural languages potentially have the same logical power, but they always differ in degrees of expressivity. This means that the grammatical differences between languages can be considered as specific forms of a general logical property of all symbolic systems (“degrees of expressivity”), not simply as “episodic” or contingent phenomena. Second, I have proposed that if this form of variation is considered as the variation of an abstract property, we may then extend this observation from language to the domain of thought. In short, we might state that language-games generate thought-games. Accordingly, I formulated the hypothesis that different “forms of thought” *only* concern what people *must* conceptualize in a certain context. Through this perspective, variation in the realm of thought might not indicate “kinds of thought” typical of different kind of societies; rather, the representations and operations that a specific kind of context might *require* people to think, without limiting what it may *allow* them to think. I have argued that this kind of variation is not limited to grammar rules. It also concerns practices linked to many forms of translation, in particular, to intersemiotic translation, which involves the passage from

verbal to nonverbal ways for expressing meaning. The main intent of the investigations gathered in this book is to make a further step in this direction and to show that not only language-games but also interactions with images generate thought-games.

In my recent research, I have been looking at the type of thought (and context of social action) that is related to the social use and interpretation of images in the process of transmitting knowledge. As a first step, I analyzed iconographies used in techniques of memorization (Severi [2007] 2015). In studying these techniques, I sought to identify their *universe*, a concept I defined as the family of mental operations (classifying, inferring, and imagining) involved in these techniques. In this book, I now look at the attribution of subjectivity and agency to artifacts with the same perspective. I wish to demonstrate that endowing an artifact or image with “life” is another way of establishing a universe of thought, one that mobilizes a multiplex form of shared imagination.

These thought-games define the universe where certain inanimate objects are given life. The task of this book, as an initial experiment in the anthropology of thought, is to explore some of their many ways of capturing our imagination.