

## **Comparativism in Anthropology: Big Questions and Scaled Comparison – an illusive dream?**

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*“There is no other method in social anthropology than observation, classification and comparison in one form or another” (Evans-Pritchard 1966: 31).*

Anthropology has been in permanent crisis about the comparative method since its inception, due to the unique combination of generalizing versus particularizing dimensions at the core of the social anthropological study. Although the comparative method was firmly wedded to the birth of anthropology as a generalizing science from within the Durkheimian project of *année sociologique*, where it was thought to provide the means of formulating and testing hypotheses and generalisations that were valid cross-culturally, questions over the appropriateness of the comparative method, itself grounded in scientific and essentially statistical practice, never ceased to trouble its practitioners.<sup>i</sup>

The reason for the problem with comparativism in anthropology is the subjective quality of social phenomena whose description, captured on the basis of participant observation, requires so called facts to exist only within a frame of reference that will ultimately need to be self-reflexive. Studying phenomena that are not external to man and that do not exist independently of the cultural meanings which people use to account for them the social sciences have been seen for long to require different methods to the natural sciences.<sup>ii</sup> Rejecting the statistical method at the heart of comparativism, anthropologists moved away from unpacking generalization and turned to critically reflecting on description, by directing attention away from the question of what to do with what we know about societies and cultures so as to learn more about society and culture in general and redirecting attention to the question of how to make explicit how the researcher has come to know what he claims to know about a particular society and culture.

Studies in anthropology produced during the era of thick description proliferated quickly in quantity at the same time as quality grew increasingly incommensurable. As a result of the surge of ethnographic studies, comparison soon became a methodological impossibility as the descriptions of phenomena were now so fine tuned and complex,

rendering societies and cultures in previously unimagined detail with the effect that microscopic description could no longer coexist with the macroscopic perspective demanded by the comparative method. Those who resisted the general drift to abstain from generalization all together advocated an intensive comparison on a geographically or culturally limited scale, thereby becoming embroiled in disagreements about the correct scale of comparison and the relation between the chosen scale and any generalizable conclusion.<sup>iii</sup>

The validity and practicality of the comparative perspective was last raised as an issue in the discipline of anthropology during the late 1980's.<sup>iv</sup> By then the heyday of anthropology's vision of itself as intrinsically *the* comparative discipline among dedicated to the study human institutions had given way to fresh and this time fatal doubt. This doubt was extended firstly to the question about how to recognize and define units of comparison and secondly, to the question of the very possibility of arriving at generalisations on the back the comparative method.

The context within which comparativism ceased to be a defining paradigm of the discipline as a whole, being replaced by loose 'styles of comparison' and an increasing relaxation of a comparative perspective in the framing of theory and method, was defined on the one hand by a combination of a new post-colonial landscape of research, requiring anthropologists to engage with the specificity of emergent cultural identities, and on other the other hand by a shift from interpretation of social facts as quasi objective things in their own right to their conceptualization as constructions. Loosing the status as objective data, the comparison of variables could no longer serve generalization, resulting in an increasingly involuted and self-reflexive conception of methodology that paved the way for the retreat of the discipline from cross-cultural generalisations to questions over how one could achieve an adequate and undistorted description of cultures and societies. By the 1990's anthropology had become an interpretative discipline addressing cultural diversity but now from a point of view that was both historiographical and relativist rather than striving toward generalizable science.

To assume that comparativism had been eclipsed for good, however, would be a mistake and the reason for this lies within anthropology's increasing self awareness as a major contributor to the study of the nature of being human alongside old and new disciplines. Just when the fate of the comparative perspective appeared to be sealed within anthropology, developments outside of the discipline, notably in neuroscience and specifically in the study of consciousness, sparked a renewed interest in big questions, calling for large scaled comparison directed at meeting the theoretical challenge to ideas of what it

means to be human and the nature of civilization.<sup>v</sup> It is with the resulting and relatively recent appraisal of the epistemology and ontology of the nature of being human that comparativism returns to anthropology as a respectable art, this time, however, projecting different tooling and dedicated to different ends. The point this paper is trying to make is that although the retreat from comparativism was from today's perspective temporary, the reasons for the retreat were never questioned to the detriment of a fresh appraisal of a comparative perspective that is fit for the practicing of anthropology in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

A consequence of the silence surrounding comparativism even after its rejection had been overcome has been a general evacuation of comparison and big questions. The void into which comparison fell was perhaps most acutely felt by anthropologists working in the vicinity of ethnographic museums, either directly on artifact collections or on issues surrounding modalities of representation and display in an increasingly refracted, multi vocal context. Governed by a postcolonial attitude of a rejection of the mainstream, anthropology no longer managed to produce contributions for popular consumption, especially not for museums, with the exception of reflexive projects that focused on the publication of indigenous voices and of a new history that was usually regionally conceived.<sup>vi</sup>

Spiraling into a descent of description for its own sake, ethnography, especially museum ethnography, became increasingly severed from mainstream anthropology, reducing its exhibitions and monographs to an irrelevance for understanding issues facing mankind. At the same time, anthropologists working on artifact collections followed approaches borrowed from art history by regarding collections as no more than illustration of the distinctiveness of traits and styles, abandoning the potential of the artifacts' inter-artifactual relations for a theoretical appraisal that could move beyond a discussion of art in context to an illumination of comparative questions around the comparison of schema of practice and cognition.<sup>vii</sup> The appraisal of artefacts as epistemic objects and the onset of their systematic recuperation for anthropological theory have come too late for ethnographic museums, who now attract a new breed of museum curators educated as managers rather than as anthropologists and audiences who expect the exotic and curious, rather than the mainstream and scientific.

Urgent intervention is required by anthropology in its teaching and training to harness the possibilities that have sprung up from within the new interdisciplinary space to which the anthropology has increasingly been attracted over the past few years. Future anthropologists, working as curators or advisors, will need to be able to work on collaborative and interdisciplinary projects, such as the Humboldt Forum in Berlin, which will contain a science laboratory, library and ethnographic collection in the spirit of the 17<sup>th</sup> century

German philosophy of Gottfried Leibniz. A new type of comparativism is called for, not between like things, but between things that are as unlike as a Pacific barkcloth and laboratory engineered fabric, based on what one might describe as a new, rational Ethnology, which compares daringly, including across to the domain of science, and does 'big' theory.

Questioning the reasons for rejecting the comparative perspective is essential when approaching comparativism today to avoid undoing the critical thinking that has sharply delineated the pitfalls of the comparative method and at the time to avoid to get caught in the same exclusionary argument that has restricted the generalizing capacity of anthropology during the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Where to go from here**

Ironically it is with reference to two classic assumptions guiding the rejection of comparativism in anthropology that anthropology can find a way forward. The first assumption is that data, from beliefs and institutions to artefacts, are socially constructed, placing subjects into a direct interchangeable relation with objects perceived from an ego-centric, relative and anthropomorphic point of view. The second is the assumption that translation, both linguistic and analogical, is an impossibly complex and uncertain task that cannot be entrusted to deliver stable data.

Both of these assumptions were called into question by two theorists in anthropology whose work has shaped anthropology at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: namely Alfred Gell's *Art and Agency* and Bruno Latour's Actor Network Theory.<sup>viii</sup>

The more than ten year reception of *Art and Agency* has underscored its status as one of the few works in anthropology that can be said to have paved a new direction for anthropology by challenging the assumed primacy of the social over the material and cultural.<sup>ix</sup> The book presents us with the framework for a theory of the work things do as exponents of thought and as catalysts for imagination and intuition. Rather than merely mirroring how to 'be in relation', Gell forces us to recognize that things, those that are efficacious as artworks in society, make thinking about thinking possible and shape the way we see connections in the world spontaneously and effortlessly. By positioning artworks in the pre-hermeneutic space of generalizable cognition, Gell postulates the possibility for a comparative theory of art that is profoundly anthropological in nature, on the grounds that artefacts that elicit person-like agency prefigure or intuit socially recognized action in mutually compatible and yet richly diverse ways.

In a move that reminds one of Alfred Gell's work as ethnographer of Melanesia where all things, even persons, are 'made', not 'born', it is the manufactured artefact that is foregrounded in *Art and Agency*. Such made things are shown to partake of intentional and systematising thought and potentially serve as vehicles of knowledge, as threads of thought that bind things and people via things to one another. Associative thought and matters of attachment are welded here together in *Art and Agency* in ways that allow the once peripheral subject of art to emerge as the crux of an anthropological theory concerned with the nature of biographical relations.

Yet beyond its overt concern with thought and thing, there is a perhaps even more fundamental idea to be found in the book that makes *Art and Agency* into a pivotal work for an anthropology that is bracing itself for the 21<sup>st</sup> century in which comparativism is retaining its theoretical stature. Returning to an earlier tradition of classical ethnology in which big questions and big answers were preferred over regional ethnographies, *Art and Agency* prompts us to consider the long disbanded concept of mankind and the nature of diversity without requiring us to create or invoke a hierarchical order. As we are led to discover the nature of relations in the inter-artefactual domain and their presence beyond the horizon of our own expectation, we realize that anthropology may have something to contribute to the discussion of the nature of what it means to be human.

Reaching beyond our once so neatly domesticated relation with the material world, in which visual knowing was locked into relations of property and effect, Gell draws our attention to a long lost sense for a material aesthetic which works unmoored from the trappings of markets and institutions in a creative lacunae untrammelled by branding. It is Gell's genius to have realized for us the renewed relevance of imagination, intuition and its exposition in things for a theory that looks beyond the specificity of the internal workings of cultures and societies to the underlying patterns of relations between things upon which a comparison of ways of relating between persons and between persons and things can rest.

Where Gell had directed our attention to the logic of relational action underlying the workings of aesthetic systems, the work of Bruno Latour has explored the pre-hermeneutic logic of relational action in a sociological investigation of the advent of a material world made to a measure.<sup>x</sup> His work on actor network theory critiques the modernist project and its assertion of a fabricated world that had nothing of the characteristics of society and politics, yet which built the body politic all the more effectively because it seemed completely estranged from society. The technological materiality he presents to us in his close up examination of laboratory practice empirically challenges the dualist thinking underlying

much of our recent history and practice of science and humanities, separating mind from body, nature from culture, which has separated science and social science for centuries and which has, within social science rendered pre-hermeneutic and hermeneutic data incompatible in analysis.<sup>xi</sup> Beyond what Latour called the “boring alternation of humans to non-humans, and back” pursued by studies of technology and society, there lies a now ‘real’ space, that of the laboratory, in which we can observe the swapping of actions and properties and ask questions about the difference made to culture and society by a material world made to measure.

And yet, as much as I admire both projects that have brought comparativism back into the frame of social science and the humanities, more is at stake than the chance to construct a new non-dualist axis for social theory, which tries to do justice to the idea that objects do *do* something other than laundering the socialness of the forces that we project onto them. Given the huge amount of incredibly complex and fine tuned ethnographic data and the wealth of digitized collections of cultural imagery, old questions about the scale of the comparative frame and about the interests that inform the framing of questions at the heart of the comparative project rise up again, challenging us to consider not just what questions to ask and what to compare, but what kind of models we are going to construct and whose they are.

In this paper I am taking up the question of how best to describe and analyse complex models and argue that the comparative method is essential to enable us to ask the big questions such models demand. This question has been asked most recently by the anthropologist Frederick Damon<sup>xii</sup> who conducted extensive research in both China and the Trobriand Islands of Papua New Guinea on the way the material technology of seafaring and slash and burn agriculture, resonating in the construction of outrigger canoes and storage houses, model dynamic processes underlying cultural ecology in ways that requires the anthropologist to collaborate with scientists to comprehend as model of process what otherwise is rendered opaque as ‘mere’ object of use.

Like Fred Damon I will be turning to Oceania to expose complex models underlying perplexingly opaque artefacts such as mats, carvings and quilts that have either been ignored in analysis chiefly because of their abstract qualities or that have been subjected to frequently unproductive semiotic analysis. Following the art historical approach of tracking an exemplary body of artifacts, comparative analysis alone can enable us to move beyond contextual analysis of what anthropologists conventionally identify as art or image production. By borrowing Gell’s proposed method of inter-artefactual analysis, the approach will uncover the artifact’s role in the mapping of biographical relations in island societies that

have proved both resistant to change and are surprisingly consistent in terms of their use of material and technical concepts to arrive at diverse and yet analogous solutions to the problem of devising spatial markers that capture connections across time. It will become apparent that the logic underlying seemingly disparate practices of mapping social worlds spatially and temporally is inseparable from their embeddedness in an Ocean world where an analogical schema that conjures up the action of binding invites an understanding that is distinctly non-anthropomorphic, non-ego centred and non-relative. Critically, the schema is invested in a topological understanding of the world as constituted in 4 D and attended to by a sensitivity toward geometry in both its abstract and its substantive articulation in fibre and water.

Topological perception, as documented in studies of Pacific navigation, is commensurate with strategies required for living in a landscape dominated by water and wind, and thus by invisible, but by no means random forces manifest in the currents of the sea.<sup>xiii</sup> The argument extended in this paper is that image making practice across Oceania, although arguably not limited to it, overtly exploits topological perception to construct rotational, movable and generative images that are capable of inviting a polyphony of possible perspectives on singular entities. Inter-artefactual relations, which become apparent in artefact collections as a product of the transformational and generative deployment of topology as technique of image production, make manifest ways of apprehending the extension of the body politic, both regionally, via trade and exchange and historically, via the projection of past relations into potential futures. While arguably not foregrounded in the highlands of mainland New Guinea, where Marilyn Strathern has shown relations to be ‘intrinsic’ to persons and manifested in the partible constitution of social bodies<sup>xiv</sup>, topological imagination invites the ‘extrinsic’ and virtual propensity of relation as the multiple iteration, or the manifold, of one<sup>xv</sup>.

The possibility of comparative analysis to interrogate the social history of Oceania in terms of an underlying dynamic of relational action that is commensurate with a material cognition suited to specific ecological systems arose while taking stock of long term ethnographic research in two distinct locations in the cultural areas of Island Melanesia and Eastern Polynesia that are held in literature to be incommensurable.<sup>xvi</sup> By taking the Ocean as the material basis for shared cognition and action, this paper makes use of ideas developed by the neuro-scientist Vittorio Gallese who, against the background of the discovery of mirror neurons, argued for the significance of a ‘relational nature of action’ in establishing inter-subjective empathy and distributed cognition.<sup>xvii</sup>

### Mapping Relations in an Ocean World

Oceania encompasses one of the largest inhabited maritime expanses in the world, with over two thirds of its area covered by water. The charismatic writer, scholar and intellectual Epeli Hau'ofa, Tongan by ethnicity, born and raised in Papua New Guinea and widely travelled in the Pacific and beyond, inaugurated the Oceania Centre for Arts and Culture Centre with a lecture entitled 'The Ocean in Us', outlining a regionalist vision of Oceania as both a place and an idea, with the ocean serving as material metaphor for reconceptualising Islander identity.

Oceania is well known for the articulation of de-centred spatial perception and of a transformative paradigm underlying spatial and temporal relations.<sup>xviii</sup> Reliant on complex navigation for the economic, political and social sustainability of island worlds, third person subjectivity, invoking a complete disregard of distinctions between subjects and objects, is crucial to the modelling of the transformation of spatial and temporal relations in ways exposed most famously by Ed Hutchins in his work on Micronesian navigation, which shows that the canoe is conceived as stationary while everything else is moving in relation to the canoe.<sup>xix</sup> Joel Bonnemaïson has given us a sensitive account of how Melanesian islanders refract a geographers vision by showing how spatial sensibilities of different groups are at the root of cultural differences in Vanuatu and the island of Tanna where he conducted fieldwork. Tannese conception of networked spaces are at the heart of the everyday lives of people, placing the symbol of the tree and the canoe where the western notions of networks envision a hierarchical organisation of space structured around nodes.<sup>xx</sup> The cognitive anthropologists Giovanni Bennardo went further and analysed the relation between language and spatial conception in Tonga, showing that a concept of 'radiality', utilizing a point-field organisation of spatial relations, shapes the way various domains of knowledge are organized in Polynesian Tonga.<sup>xxi</sup> In contrast to a container model of space that assumed spatial relations to be bounded and finite, Oceanic spatial modelling can be best comprehended using physics and cosmology that adopt equally a point-field manner of representing space as essentially a *relation on points*, with the estimation of distance being derived from the acceleration of particles *over time*. Contemporary physics directs our understanding to the nature of non-linear and topological space/time, in which boundaries are defined by the symmetrical overlap of adjacent topological fields rather than as existing as axiomatic constituents of a given space. In such a system, topological thought enables navigation by giving time a spatial value.



The cognitive relevance of topological thought in an Ocean world resonates with the fiber based material imagination at work in shaping planar, patterned surfaces for which the material culture of Oceania is famous<sup>xxii</sup>, recalling the words of Michel Serres<sup>xxiii</sup> who saw the synonymous nature of topological thought with pliable, tearable, stretchable, ‘bodily envelopes or writing support, able to flutter like a curtain, neither liquid nor solid, to be sure, but participating in both conditions.’ To the unschooled eye there is no relation at all between knotting, the mapping of space-time via quaternion number sets, supporting topological thought by offering not precise measurement but articulations of neighbourhood and the relation in space, and intricate patchwork found in its most remarkable form in the Cook Islands of Eastern Polynesia, and yet, when we give their materiality precedence, our thoughts cannot help notice a transformative surface stretched between the sensible and the intelligible, mapping the connections and relations that the patches mark and maintain. The geometric thinking that dwells in these surfaces takes the form of a transformative boundary that invites an intellectual probing into and an understanding of the world beyond the visible.

Huge patchwork quilts, requiring at least 3 people to handle and fold, are the must have property of households across Eastern Polynesia today, gifted at all major life ceremonies and stored in trunks until they are rendered permanently invisible by wrapping them around the dead in the grave.<sup>xxiv</sup> Made as shrouds that travel in the reverse, gifts of patchwork known as *tivaivai* connect the living with the dead in ways that is underscore by a practice of naming known as *ingoa mate*, or the giving of death names, the official registration of which was banned by the Cook Island Christian Church in 1958, but which is still privately observed in families.

Names recalling the assumed cause of death, such as ‘*Mate Anu*’ (‘Cold Death’ – a reminder of death in the cold sea) or ‘*Totiko*’ (the name of a passage in the reef in which a young man drowned), are given to family members in remembrance of the deceased. The young person who is given the name, and is called for in this way with affection by his family, is made to stand in a definite relation of succession to the dead, as he or she is associated with the act of offering water, paying back services received during life. In addition to explicit death names, which refer to services performed by the recipient for the deceased and which are acquired later in life, all birth names also refer to a deceased relative or friend of the person giving the name to the child – specifying either the cause of death, some personal attribute of the deceased, or some circumstance associated with the last illness of the deceased. Death names can be seen to create the fiction of a social body that is

immortal, as it offers both new physical bodies for the souls of the dead and also cancels out the indebtedness of the living towards the dead.

The Cooks southern islands are divided into image based polities that extend temporally to around 48 generations and spatially across 3 or more island whose inhabitants have today largely abandoned the homeland for work in transnational communities that have taken root in most major cities in the world. Genealogies, vital to situating oneself in the land of the ancestors, are made manifest in the patchwork, recalled from within the underground tombs whose superstructures map former, present and future house sites and the tiny islands. From a bird's eye view, one can imagine the relations between tombs on the ground to be mapped by the patches in the quilts whose regular and iterative arrangement assigns spatial values to units of time, while setting them into precise relation with one another. It should come as no surprise that genealogies are transmitted when seating boys, decked out for the first hair cutting as marker of their entry into adulthood, on patchwork.

There are 3 different types of patchwork, each mapping distinct and yet intersecting dimensions of genealogical relations in distinct spatial ways: The first and most time consuming to produce is the *taorei*, composed of thousands of coloured squares or hexagons cut from shredded, readily coloured Azlin imported from China. The patterns are replicated in an iterative and transitive manner across the surface of the quilt, measuring 3.5 to 5 meters in total, with the precise visual arrangement of iterated patches being recalled from memory in terms of sets of non-commutative numbers. The geometric arrangement of patterns are said to be worked out using the lattice work of mats woven from coconut leaf fronds and are found drawn by hand on barkcloth pieces in historical collections dating back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Although two dimensional and measured in exact units of space, the resulting pattern is generated by a topological perspective on floral motives, with distinct and yet interrelated patterns being created by zooming in, visualising the flower literally from the inside, zooming out to show the single pattern in its full polyphonic complexity, or changing the angle of perspective by altering the symmetry within which replicated motives are arranged.

The two other quilts are made by applique, arranging cut out floral shapes in a circular and rotational manner. In contrast to the piecework mentioned above which is gifted by women vertically across generations down the mother's line (from grandmother to granddaughter), the applique patchwork is gifted between women of the same generation, related to one another by marriage. The final patchwork is made as a cut out to create a four fold surface pattern teasing the eye to see the foreground as background. Gifted between friends

and work colleagues, the patchwork manifests a singular unit of time that is measured and apportioned as the manifold of one.

The fractal concept of personhood, made famous by the anthropologist Roy Wagner<sup>xxv</sup>, is given tangible expression in the Cook Islands *tivaivai*, a term that is translatable as the iteration of patches. If one asks what might be relational about the action of shredding, cutting and stitching fabric into self-similar iterative floral patterns one is pointed to a practice of adoption that is fundamental to understanding affinity. Like cuttings of plants that are shared across households, infant girls are adopted by grandmothers and are raised as the future owners of the knowledge that is passed down the genealogical line.

Navigation, as Alfred Gell, reminded us long ago is a skill required not just for the traversing of space, but of time, enabling the strategic approach to the future.<sup>xxvi</sup> Cook Island ethnography, much abridged as it is presented here, brings to the fore a fascinating parallel with data from island Melanesia, in that images can be shown to make tangible the way society works in their relation to one another and most significantly in their geometry, constructed from quaternion number sets. In Eastern Polynesia as in the islands of Melanesia, images and their generative and transformational relation to one another are equally making manifest distinct geometries, although continuity, neighborhood, insideness and outsideness, disjunction and connection are projected here frequently not as calculation but as outcome of the action of topological navigation, that is as knot-like configurations resulting from actions of binding together points in space and time.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Whether as the action itself or as its product, the projection of topological thought into instruments of navigation produces a modular system of composition, not unlike that described by the archaeologist Lothar Ledderose for the terracotta army discovered in Shaanxi Province in China, displaying different combinations of clay body parts that were used to generate non-identical yet structurally similar models of the human form.<sup>xxviii</sup> It may indeed not be too far fetched to follow the argument of Ledderose who has suggested that this organization of production could be extrapolated to explain Chinese social organization as a whole. In Oceania, the modular mapping of biographical and spatial relations has arguably supported the efflorescence of expansive and stable systems as we know them from the archaeological record and from the regional and transnational political and economic systems that have been described in ethnography.

Turning away from Eastern Polynesia toward island Melanesia, modular mapping of biographical relations received no less attention and yet its articulation in artefact systems appears to be profoundly different, accentuating not iteration, metamorphic composition. While in the Cook Islands the material properties of shreddable and restitchable cloth are called for in the making of maps that make the collapsing of time into space tangible in the form of repeatable patterns, it is the repeatability of connections and the versatility of composition, made possible by carving conceptually separate motivic elements from wood, that is called for in island Melanesia.

It is chiefly on the back of comparative analysis of New Guinea and island New Guinea ethnographies that anthropology has produced a model of distributed personhood, capturing a social body as the sum total of the distributed effects of persons actions and thoughts, composite, fractal, unbounded and uncontrolled by institutions. Social groups are here not on the ground, but in the head, are covertly active, fluid, interstitial and invisible, bar moments where singularity is staged, from death, marriage to warfare. Parts and composite wholes, and their relative and quantified relation to one another, have for long been recognized as the key conceptual strata that are underlying a fractal description of personhood.

Malanggan art, produced on one of the northern most islands of a ring of islands around coastal New Guinea called the Bismarck Archipelago, manifests this model of the social body in its technical production, capturing not just the relational, but distinctly modular nature of distributed personhood in the scaling, proportioning and multiplication of distinct and named elements.<sup>xxix</sup> Ethnographic collections contain more than 25 000 of these wooden sculptures, collected between the onset of colonial rule in 1870 and 1990, in a bewildering manifold of modular forms whose combinatorial logic is complexly bound up with a rituals system of exchange that has enabled people to pool resources and move products and ideas across a vast and ever expanding territory in the face of sheer overwhelming scarcity in both labour and land. Malanggan is the generic name for manifold and composite imagery made manifest in selected materials, an algorithmic system whose logic captures the dynamic composition of the social body.

Not so much what, but how much is made visible in a Malanggan carving is held to be indicative of the circumference of the social body that is activated by distributing and re-assembling parts of a system of images: The number of figurative motifs assembled in a figure, for example, indicates the number of dead commemorated, the scaled position of the figure in a series of related images reflects on the relative position of the Malanggan event in the continuous process of building up politically and economically significant connections

by distributing or conversely acquiring parts of larger wholes whose totality remains absent and is ultimately synonymous with death itself. Additive in nature, the image based exchange that officiates under the name of Malanggan and originates in distinct and yet inter-related sculptures allows for fluid exchange networks that contract, expand and direct themselves to where prosperity appears to beckon, in the form of fertile land or knowledge not yet controlled.

Malanggan seen as a system, viewed from the point of view of collected artefacts or alternatively from the logic informing the production of figures from memory, is a modular map of biographical relations whereby persons who are in the system relate to one another in terms of their particular connection to certain parts, but are able at any point to bring different parts together or to split them into further modular parts. The map is temporal in that it allows people to navigate between past, present and future modular constellations, strategically plotting to bundle up lost parts of their own making, recombine them and break them into new parts in order to claim new resources.

In a marked contrast to malanggan sculptures whose variations are produced out of an imagined whole, projected into different dimensions and fragmented into constituent parts that can be assembled or decomposed at liberty, the *tivaivai* of the Cook Islands described in the previous section is the physical and tangible manifestation of the whole. Measured precisely, with cloth pre-bought prior to sewing in exact quantities, what matters here is the qualitative arrangement of its constituent parts, arranged in a hierarchical manner that reflects in its reflexive and transitive nature the reckoning of genealogical connections that compose the social body.

As Polynesian women took charge of fabricating the new items of ritual exchange with the onset of Christianity, their stitching quickly became the dominant emblem of emerging national identities, gathering figuratively the dispersed family in the homelands. One of the most aggressively diasporic societies in the world, the Cook Islanders appear to manage nomadism by virtue of gathering distributed personhood into central places, defined by chests and tombs. Quite the opposite is the case for the people who produce Malanggan who literally conquer the neighbouring communities and even entire societies by converting their inhabitants, exporting a generative image system whose inter-chained parts allow for infinite additive transformation.

### **Modular Maps and Analytical Models**

Much of our interest in the power of images to amplify, disguise or deny recognition is derived from our assumption that material worlds show up in their diversity the socialness of their construction. The approach which pays attention to the making and manipulation of objects that elicit identification, uncovering the logic of relations between artefacts as parable on the relation between persons and between persons and things, has successfully redressed the pitfalls of behaviourist and cognitivist interpretations by tying, as Ingold recently reminded us, free floating ‘meanings’ into the fertile grounds of a hylomorphic model in which matter and form are seen to be originated or manipulated according to a logic grounded in the nexus of relations within the vicinity of the artefact.<sup>xxx</sup>

The hylomorphic model evokes two related assumptions: Firstly, that objects are prototypical in that they are situated in space in relation to one another and in relation to human actors, and secondly, that objects reference such relations in their design. As seemingly ‘natural’ and ‘universal’ disposition of man to conceive the world from an ego-centred point of view, proceeding from a human body which stands upright and looks ahead in what the cognitive linguist Clark called the “canonical position”, anthropology has continued to be heavily invested in the description of prototypicality in the hylomorphic model.<sup>xxxi</sup> The problem is that in an Ocean world, where invisible currents and winds define the fate of a journey, the canonical position is as unlikely to be significant in calculating effective relations, as it is that relations between artefacts are confined to what is observable. The hylomorphic model, as useful as it is, in other words, is therefore useless to furnish us with a method suited to uncovering how images are made and manipulated in situations where relations critical to social life span the visible and invisible domains and disrupt distinctions between subjects and objects in ways that are symptomatic of the human condition in modernity.

The anthropologist Knut Rio went furthest in his probing for the implications of spatial conception that contradicts the ego-centred, relative and anthropomorphic perception underlying the hylomorphic model. Rio<sup>xxxii</sup> asks what difference the mathematical conception and visual modelling made famous by the early twentieth century anthropologists Deacon and Layard makes to conceptions subject-object relations in the islands of Vanuatu, which embrace hierarchy as constitutive of societal processes par excellence.

It was in the south-western extension of the Bismarck Archipelago in the islands of Vanuatu in the South Pacific where, trained in physics, the early anthropologist A.B. Deacon<sup>xxxiii</sup> was able to translate diagrams that were drawn, plaited and lashed by the

islanders of Ambrym into principles of affinity, enabling Deacon to establish the existence of the most complex marriage system known to us consisting of six classes. Following Deacon, the French anthropologist John Layard recorded the narratives that were associated with distinct geometries and established the relational capacity of actions that are made manifest in the geometry of drawing, dancing and singing. It was this abstract and yet concretized logic of quaternion number sets made manifest in the geometry of these artifacts that inspired Levi-Strauss to seek the aid of computing to model structures of kinship, creating the means to investigate marriage rules comparatively.<sup>xxxiv</sup> By describing indigenous modelling of relations in image making actions as ‘thirdness’, the analytical vantage point that allows for the conception of social ‘wholes’, Knut Rio<sup>xxxv</sup> has successfully brought a simple, but remarkably important point to the attention of anthropology, namely that it is not just anthropologists but also their subjects who deploy images to capture, translate and transmit their understanding of ways of relating in the social world.

Rio argues in his ethnography of Ambrym that the external, decentred positioning of a social imaginary implicit in the concept of thirdness gives people the capacity to ‘see’ how to create society. He observes that islanders are not concerned with animating the material world, but that subjects and objects are made to collapse upon each other through carefully staged spiral-like performances that overlap at certain cataclysmic points. Circles, leading to and resulting from such crossing of spheres are animated in circular dancing, and addressing the moment of the creation of life, are a phenomenon that resonates across island New Guinea in the repertoire of dance and visual pattern. Rio gives us a carefully argued and intriguingly complex account of the acts of circling that consumes ‘people’s labour, love and care [in a ] a spiralling motion that in the end manifests an alienable object as the result.’<sup>xxxvi</sup> He brilliantly concludes that Ambrym islanders take advantage of the very indistinctiveness of subjects from objects, with the productivity of ontology residing in an inanimate, material entity, distinctly lacking in ‘agency’, yet capable of bringing forth new associations and quasi biographical relations in men’s ritually sanctioned networks into which one is not born, but made and which unfolds in parallel to the world of the living.

While his exposition explains the bewildering manifold of tree fern statues which mark the ceremonial processes in which men’s rank and position in society is at issue, it does not explain what he calls the ‘circling constitution’ and the peculiar association made tangible through circling of seeing with turning around, enabling the realization ‘of totality by seeing simultaneously from all sides.’ It is arguably this deployment of topology, capable of creating and managing an abstract modelling of relations in space and time and of envisioning a

shadow world in parallel to the world of the living, which we must understand in order to appreciate fully the questions and theoretical challenges that are emerging from such alternative models of social life as described by Rio for island Melanesia and beyond in which neither subjects nor objects, but geometric images and computational artefacts, creatively informed, matter profoundly.

The complexity of topological thought enables one to rotate images in production and in the mind. Rotated to give off multiple and co-existing views, multiple images may capture one and the same artefact seen in the round, while the calculation and mapping may be oblique, deflecting the understanding of those who are unaccustomed to recognizing complex relational sequences within abstract geometric forms. It is, however, only when we zoom out and look at the qualitative relation between artworks that we do notice that artworks in the Pacific work like time-maps, allowing people to navigate biographical relations in mutually constituted and yet quintessentially divergent ways - recalling Deleuze and Guatari's concept of the *Rhizome: a map that must be produced, constructed, a map that is always detachable,, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entranceways and exits*. The concept of the rhizome in turn enables us to see that what we have here are ways of managing relations and information. Unlike the communicative systems we have come to rely on, the modular systems underlying Malanggan or Tivaivai are comprised not of units, but of dimensions and directional flows, and are scaled multiplicities of itself, like the ligaments of a homunculus that connect any point to any other point. Concrete and material at the same time as they are abstract and immaterial, the modular maps of distributed cognition we have come to recognize via this very brief exercise of comparison of ecology, cognition and material culture in an Ocean world enable us to glimpse a potential alternative vision of how to conceptualize and activate relations in ways that matter.

Who could benefit from such a comparison and the resulting insight that the materiality of modular systems can reflect on the logic of computational systems we believed to be abstract and immaterial? Ultimately arguably the people who inhabit such worlds that have at their fingertips a radically new way of managing digital media that could transform the way we think about connectivity in the world.

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<sup>i</sup> Leach 1950, 1965; Needham 1962; Evans-Pritchard 1965



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- <sup>ii</sup> Holy 1987:6
- <sup>iii</sup> a good example of this are regional collections whose comparative frame is made obvious in the title such as Barker's (1992) collection of works on Christianity in Oceania. Other anthropologists, such as Knauff's (1999) work on Melanesia as a cultural area, attempted to write a regionally framed comparative perspective into their ethnography.
- <sup>iv</sup> Holy 1987
- <sup>v</sup> see Wengrow 2010 and Metzinger 2009 as well as the debate about the consequences of neuroscience for philosophy edited by Bennett (2007).
- <sup>vi</sup> The exhibition on African Art in Anthropology Collections at the Museum for African Art in 1987, published by the Centre for African Art in 1988, was one of the last exhibitions that overtly was organised around comparison, in this case modes of presentation, as art or artefact, of African objects.
- <sup>vii</sup> This critique of a context bound approach to art and artifact in anthropology was made most successfully by Alfred Gell in his *Art and Agency* (1998). An attempt at a radical comparative perspective was made recently by Philippe Descola (2013).
- <sup>viii</sup> The following section draws on Kuchler 2013.
- <sup>ix</sup> Gell 1998; Chua and Elliott 2013
- <sup>x</sup> Latour and Woolgar 1979; Latour 1996; 2005
- <sup>xi</sup> Latour 1994: 58; Uberoi 2002
- <sup>xii</sup> Damon 2008.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Hutchins 1995; Gell 1982
- <sup>xiv</sup> Strathern 1979; 1992: 83
- <sup>xv</sup> Wagner 1991
- <sup>xvi</sup> Sahlins 1963; Thomas 1989
- <sup>xvii</sup> Gallese 2001; a related argument has also been advanced by Tim Ingold (2012) .
- <sup>xviii</sup> Wassman 1994; Munn 1977
- <sup>xix</sup> Hutchins *ibid*; Ascher 2002.
- <sup>xx</sup> Bonnemaïson 1994
- <sup>xxi</sup> Bennardo 2002.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Kuchler and Were 2005
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Serres 1994
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Kuchler and Eimke 2009.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Wagner 1991
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Gell 1992; Hutchins *ibid*.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Kuchler 2003
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Ledderose 2000.
- <sup>xxix</sup> Kuchler 2002
- <sup>xxx</sup> Ingold *ibid*.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Clark 1973: 34
- <sup>xxxii</sup> Rio 2007
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> Deacon 1934
- <sup>xxxiiii</sup> Levi-Strauss 1966: 125-126
- <sup>xxxviii</sup> Rio *ibid*.
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