

## 8. Animating Relationships: Inca *Conopa* and Modern *Illa* as Mediating Objects

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[Figure 8.1. *Conopa*. Emilo Montez collections, Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago. Cat. No. 3463. Photograph by Bill Sillar. Courtesy of the Field Museum.]

In the inventory of the Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago, accession number 3463 is described as a zoomorphic cup, made of stone, originating from Cuzco, Peru, and it is identified as a *conopa* (Figure 8.1). The animal depicted is almost certainly an alpaca as the four lines on the neck indicate folds of fleece, with a fringe, ears, and teeth. It is 12cm long, and weighs 324g. There is a 2.8cm wide, 3cm deep vertical-sided hollow in the animal's back, giving rise to the description that it is a 'cup'. Accession 3463 is one small item in a collection of approximately 1,200 artefacts including archaeological and colonial-era ceramics, metal, cloth, and stone artefacts, which were acquired by Emilio Montez in the vicinity of Cuzco. Montez, a Peruvian citizen, brought the collection to the World's Fair: Columbian Exposition held in Chicago in 1893 to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Columbus's arrival in the Americas. The Field Museum purchased the collection from Montez on September 9th, 1893. This was two months before the end of the exposition, but a letter from Montez shows that he was eager to find a buyer as he had to return to Peru urgently (Bauer and Stanish 1990: 2-3).

*Conopa* were not simply stone figurines or whimsies. In the Andean highlands a *conopa* was considered to be an animate entity that was an active participant in the preparation of offerings. The objects themselves were thought to be alive, forming part of people's communicative relationship with the sacred geography of the Andes. Spanish Colonial priests considered these 'cult objects' to be a

dangerous focus of idolatrous practice which they were trying to eradicate. *Conopa* and objects like them, which are now more commonly referred to as *illa*, continue to play an active role in ritual offerings and are an emotive expression of Andean ideals and aspirations. In this chapter I wish to explore a range of mediating and transforming roles that were and are played by these objects. Inca *conopa* and modern *illa* are an active link between distinct entities and ideas: between people and deities; intimacy and inaccessibility; consumption and production; household and state; animism and Catholicism; tradition and modernity; preservation and destruction; ethnography and archaeology. But this analysis raises questions about how we should use the concept of ‘inbetweenness’. If we are to avoid a return to overly simplistic structuralist pairings, we need to ask what relationships particular objects mediate. By emphasizing the social role that *conopa* play in facilitating communication, and how this has changed in different historical contexts, I hope to show that they are not only a link between oppositional pairs, but that they are active participants and transformative agents within social networks.

### **Social relations between people and things: mediating objects.**

People do not just have relationship with people: objects are always ‘inbetween’. Human beings surround themselves with objects, and any social relationship is facilitated and expressed by the artefacts people use. Our clothes, homes and work tools are active agents in human communication. But, not all artefact/people interactions are the same, and artefacts can play multiple roles in communication (Schiffer 1999). Like people, objects can take on identities and mediate relationships. Objects can engage our emotions and evoke memories, ideas and meanings, so that things can have a ‘social life’ (Merleau-Ponty [1948] 2004; Appadurai 1986). Some objects acquire part of their identity from their makers or previous owners, who become ‘inalienably’ linked to the memory and meaning of the object (Weiner 1992). Artefacts may also have a ‘secondary agency’ (Gell 1998) that has an effect

on other people which may be quite independent of the original maker's intentions (Latour 1993; Gosden 2005).

Within the Andean highlands of Peru and Bolivia animistic beliefs attribute active social identities to places and things. Although Tylor (1871) defined animism as the belief that an entity has a soul or animating spirit, Marett (1914) critiqued the focus on a 'spirit' or 'soul' and adopted the Melanesian word *mana* to describe this vitalizing force. Equivalent Andean expressions are *camay* or *ánimo* which refer to an animating force that resides in and activates living things including material objects (Bray 2009, Sillar 2009). Recent discussions of animism (e.g. Ingold 2006) have emphasized how animism may be an experienced aspect of the physical world and that the material world can be understood to be sentient, something that can be communicated with in a direct and social way. Bird-David (1999) adopts the term 'relational epistemology' to describe how animism locates people as participants in the materiality of the world who take responsibility for their relationship with animals, plants, places and things as well as other people.

As Allen (1988: 62) has argued, 'For Andeans, all matter is in some sense alive, and conversely, all life has a material base'. Places and things are considered to be sentient with social identities, and people have a duty to care for these through their labour, moral behaviour, and ritual obligations (Isbell 1978). Andean animism is most clearly expressed in relation to prominent mountains, agricultural fields, the house, and the recently dead, as well as miraculous Catholic saints who have been incorporated as important players in the Andean pantheon (Bastien 1978; Allen 1988; Gose 1994). These entities have a power, or sphere of influence, that extends beyond their physical location: the ancestors and *pachamama* (the animate earth) influence the growth of crops; the *Apu* (Sacred mountains) care for and maintain animal herds and some mining activities; and the saints may teach people how to weave, provide security during travel or promote good health (Allen 1988; Gose 1994; Sallnow 1987). The mountains and saints can offer benevolent productivity to those who engage in

appropriate reciprocity, but they can also become malevolent and potentially violent to those who do not participate appropriately in reciprocal exchange. The mountains and miraculous saints are, however, somewhat distant bodies (Allen 1988; Sallnow 1987), so it is largely through ‘lower-order’ intermediaries, such as village crosses and specific offering locations, that people seek to communicate with the *Apu* and direct their offerings to more distant animate powers. Small stone *illa* and *conopa* facilitate a personal relationship between the human actors and the animate world, acting as vital intermediaries when making offerings.

### ***Illa*: The sympathetic communicative power of objects**

In the Andean village of Raqchi, in the Department of Cuzco, an offering is made by most households on the night of San Luis (August 24th/25th) when family members chew coca, and make libations. Watching over the preparation of this offering are the *illa*, which are carved figures, found objects and natural pebbles some of which evoke animals, houses, or crop plants (Figure 8.2). The offering itself involves preparing a sequence of small bundles of three leaves of the coca plant (referred to as a *k'intu*) which are held in the hand while blowing across the leaves to dedicate them to a named recipient. The naming of these recipients starts with the house, hearth and stores, as well as fields worked by the family, pasture lands or paths used by their animals, and the clay mines, roads and market places that the household members commonly visit. After each *k'intu* of three coca leaves has been prepared and directed to the named recipient it is placed onto a cloth or paper alongside a maize kernel and a small piece of llama fat (*vira*, a vitalizing force). One bundle of the coca leaves, fat and maize may be taken into the household patio to be burnt and another is taken to one of the household's fields where it is burnt with libations of alcohol. After arranging these burnt offerings the family members move back to the house and chew coca while the fire consumes the offering. Only later do people return to observe

the ash and see if the complete burning of the offering shows it has been fully accepted. The household's *illa* are then stored away carefully until the next offering needs to be prepared.

[Figure 8.2. A ritual bundle with the *illa* positioned to watch over the preparation of the offering. Most of the contents of this bundle were inherited by the father of the house, when he inherited the house itself. Raqchi, Cuzco Department, Peru. Photograph by Bill Sillar.]

As noted above, *Illa* can be oddly shaped pebbles, ancient artefacts, and other objects found by the household, or they may be small carved stone figures representing animals, maize cobs, or houses, for example, which can be bought at annual pilgrimage sites. *Illa* are considered to be living entities that are powerful sources of animal and crop fertility. *Illa*, like people and animals, have 'ánimo', the vitalizing energy that animates life (see Allen 1982; 1988: 60-2; Gose 1994: 115-6; Stobart 2006: 27-8; Sillar 2009). During rituals they are said to drink the *chicha* and chew the coca given in the offerings (Allen 1988: 54, 150). Although some of them are clearly carved stones of the type sold in markets, very few householders offer this as the explanation as to how their *illa* were acquired; most either say they inherited them from their parents or that they found them in the fields or pasture lands. *Illa* are under the care of the household, but they are not considered to be 'owned' commodities. Rather, *illa* choose to reside with the family – and if they are lost (or stolen) it is because they have chosen to leave. In his study of contemporary Andean pastoralists, Flores-Ochoa (1976: 249) states that some herders are still using pre-Columbian carved stone animals that have an indentation in their back which is filled with animal fat during rituals. Some *illa*, particularly the stone figures, are described as children of the mountain deities (*Apu*) (Isbell 1978; Sillar 1996). According to Flores-Ochoa's (1979: 84) informants, *illa* come from *Ukhu Pacha* (the inner world associated with the mountain deities and the dead), and emerge through caves or springs (origin places called *paqarina*), which are the source of life though

which the creator god Viracocha sent the original inhabitants of the world. Because *illa* are children of the mountain *Apu* they are constantly communicating with the *Apu* (Skar 1994: 65). Thus the performance of these rituals and participation of the *illa* creates a liminal time when past and future are interacted with: the *illa* themselves evoking a mythical time of creation. During the ritual, participants remember their inheritance, dead family members and where they have been in the landscape; and the offering itself expresses both thanks for previous health and fecundity and aspirations for the future wellbeing of the household.

The ritual brings together a hierarchy of different entities: the recipient of the offering (e.g. *Apu* or saint), the constituents of the offering (e.g. coca, maize or fat), material intermediaries used to help transmit the offering (e.g. *illa*), the target of concern (e.g. fields/crops, animals and households/stores), and the human actors who prepare and direct the offering. The importance of ‘sympathetic magic’ can be seen not just in the connection of the small stone *illa* to the mountain *Apu*, but also in how the composition of the offering brings together a wide range of important locations either by naming them during the ritual and through the orchestration of material elements used in preparing the offering. Frazer (1915) identified two principle components of sympathetic magic. First, homeopathic magic in which like produces like, or an effect resembles its cause (which he called the law of similarity). Secondly ‘contagious magic’ where things which have once been in contact with each other continue to influence and effect each other at a distance. This could be described as an ‘inalienable character of things’. Whereas Weiner’s (1992) analysis of inalienable possessions focused on how objects remain connected to previous human owners, even if physically separated, Andean animism stresses how objects can communicate because of the source of their raw materials, visual representation, or prior connection to a person, place or thing. Although I do not favour the term ‘magic’ in this context, the descriptor ‘sympathetic’ is a highly appropriate way of expressing the connectedness (the ‘concern’ or ‘attachment’) that is thought to exist between physically separated things. These sympathetic

relationships are a primary principle of Andean ritual practice where the components of an offering are brought together from a wide range of environments and contexts in order to influence the animate forces of the material world (Bolin 1998: 40-1; c.f. Zedeño 2008). Just as people remain connected to their family through kinship obligations, so too the 'inalienable character of things' means objects continue to exert an influence on their origin or referent. Places and things are considered to have a social relatedness similar to those surrounding human kinship. For this reason the little *illa* are interlocutors that can communicate with the mountains as well as with the animal herds, crops and houses, just as the icons from pilgrimage sites are thought to communicate with 'their' origin saint. *Illa* consume the coca, alcohol, fat and maize themselves and direct these offerings to the mountain deities, they can also bring the vitalizing *ánimo* from the mountains so that herds procreate, crops are productive, and humans are healthy. For this reason *illa* must be guarded and passed down the generations, usually staying with the child who inherits the family house.

*Illa* are not for public display, they play no overt role in any aggrandizing behaviour by the household, they are curated for private household use. Nonetheless, they play an important role in maintaining the value systems and commitments of family members. It is not primarily the physical materials or appearance of the *illa* that is important, what is important is its relationships with the animate landscape and host household. The construction of the offerings, which the *illa* bear witness to, is an emotive performance that involves the choreography of meaningful materials as well as the evocation of people, places and things that are the concern of the family (the landholdings, animals, and buildings that came through the maternal and paternal lines as well as the craft and trading activities that members of the household are engaged in). Offerings are 'sent' to named recipients through the preparation of selected ingredients with life-giving qualities that are directed to specific locations, through the choice of materials and verbal evocation of the recipient (Allen 1982; Sillar 2009). Through the skilful process of bringing words and things together the members of the household

activate sympathetic magic, and the *illa* play an essential role as intermediaries or conduits to send the offering to the recipients. One common name for these Andean offering is a *despacho* (from the Spanish word for a dispatch or shipment), as the offering is sent to the deities.

### ***Conopa*: The Inca state's insertion within household rituals**

The term *illa* was in use in the early colonial period. Holguin ([1608] 1989: 366) defines *illa* in his Quechua dictionary as a notable stone that may be bright and shiny or found in the stomach of an animal, and which will be kept for riches and luck; the alternative spelling *ylla* is defined as all that is old and guarded for many years, while *yllayoc runa* is a rich person who has and guards 'tesora' (treasure). But in the period following Spanish colonization of South America another Quechua term, '*conopa*', was more commonly used to describe these objects. Today archaeologists, museum curators and collectors tend to restrict their use of the term *conopa* to refer to carved stone in the form of camelids with a hollow in their back. But colonial sources discuss *conopa* in very similar terms to the *illa* from Raqhi described above. According to seventeenth-century documentary sources, Spanish priests reported many individuals whom they found guarding *conopa* (Mills 1997). *Conopa* of various materials such as wood and found stones are described as being selected for their unusual natural colour or shape as well as stones that were carved in the form of llamas, maize, potatoes and so forth (Arriaga [1621] 1999: 36). In some cases these *conopa* were used specifically in relation to the care of the crops and herds, whereas others were used more generally for the well-being, wealth and protection of the household (Mills 1997). The Catholic priest Arriaga records that *conopa* were family heirlooms, passed from father to son, and that they were fiercely protected and regarded 'as the most precious thing that their parents had left them' (Arriaga [1621] 1999: 35). 'Rare are those who do not have them, for they are the principal inheritance of the family, and sometimes they have two, three, or four of them' (Arriaga [1621] 1999: 80). *Conopa* were the focus of intimate household rituals that were held in

private at particular times of the year, such as before going on a journey or beginning to sow crops (Arriaga [1621] 1999: 36). Arriaga ([1621] 1999: 50) also describes the use of coca, maize, animal fat and *chicha* (maize beer) within the offerings, the blowing of the essence and burning of these offerings to dedicate them. Here again the *conopa*, like modern *illa*, were not part of the offerings, but the *conopa* witnessed and mediated the composition and directing of the offerings, and were guarded by the household for use whenever the offerings were being prepared.

Pre-conquest Andean religious practice ranged from massive public rituals in the architectural complex and ceremonial spaces of Inca Cuzco, to small-scale community and household rituals. A major focus was the devotion to *huaca*, which included large rock shrines and other sacred locales in the landscape (Cobo [1653] 1990; Dean 2010). Most *huaca* were locations for small scale community devotional practices, although some *huaca* were visited on long-distance pilgrimages and were endowed with new buildings and priests by the Inca state. Arriaga describes many instances where *conopa* are found next to *huaca*, and he quotes Licentiate Rodrigo Hernández who discovered a stone *huaca* in the form of a falcon surrounded by many *conopa* which represented the children or servants (*criados*) of the *huaca* (Arriaga [1621] 1999: 99), much like modern *illa* are considered to be the children of the mountain *Apu*. Similarly another Catholic priest Hernández Príncipe ([1621] 1923: 27) discusses how herders kept their *conopa* above their old village, next to a cult place for lightning. Silverblatt (1987: 199) discusses how a priest, Father Avendaño, removed a stone idol in the form of a man with five *conopa* around it that had been placed at the base of a *molle* tree near the village of Otuco. This may suggest not only that *conopa* were more openly displayed prior to the Spanish Conquest, but also that *conopa* were being placed next to *huaca* in order to benefit from the contagious effect of each other's identities. Cristobal Albornoz ([1584] 1989:171) describes how the power of a *huaca* could be reproduced, for instance a cloth that had been laid on the original *huaca* could be placed on a distant stone, thus transferring the *camay* (animating force) to the new *huaca* which took on

the name of the original. It seems likely therefore that the placing of a *conopa* near a *huaca* was also intended to facilitate their connectedness or communication.

[Figure 8.3. A number of highly polished black stone Inca *conopa*, five of which are alpacas with stylized folds of fleece carved around their necks. Museo Inka, Universidad de San Antonio Abad del Cuzco. Photograph by Bill Sillar.]

I have reviewed collections of carved stone *conopa* held in various museums, including Museo Inka, Cuzco; Museo de Antropología y Arqueología, Lima; Field Museum, Chicago; British Museum, London; Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford; and Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge. Many examples in these collections are in the shape of llamas or alpacas, ranging in length from 5cm to 15cm, and carved from a wide range of stone types some of which have distinctive coloration and banding. A small number of the llama and alpaca *conopa* in the Museo Inka have come from secure Inca contexts in the Cuzco region, particularly from excavations in the area of Sacsayhuman, so we know that some of these objects were being produced by the Inca. The choice of stone, the size and shape of the animal, and the quality of carving is variable, suggesting that many are ‘one-offs’ carved out of ‘charming’ stones found by non-specialists. But there are also recognizable groups that are made in similar forms using consistent raw materials. For instance some highly polished fine black and dark green Serpentine stone, alpacas with stylized folds representing the wool around their neck and a hollow in their back, are particularly distinctive with examples of these in each of the above collections (Figure 8.3). A preliminary look at the elemental composition of some of these, as measured by portable X-Ray Fluorescence, suggests there are two distinct compositional groups representing two sources for a large number of the carved stone *conopa*. This points to fairly large scale production which is quite different to the rather individual relationship to ‘found objects’ described by most

colonial sources. In the absence of a market trade within the central part of the Inca Empire, the larger scale production and distribution of these *conopa* suggests institutional involvement in their production and circulation. The large-scale production of these black *conopa* in the non-market Inca economy, and the large number of these found in and around the Inca capital of Cuzco indicates that the state is likely to have been involved in distributing them. An association with state rituals and prestigious *huaca* would have added to the power of these *conopa*, and their use as gifts to trusted devotes and state workers could have been a powerful tool of apparent state largess that brought the state into the core of household identity, with the *conopa* taking Inca state institutions into the intimacy of family/household concerns.

### **Seek and destroy: *La Extirpación de la Idolatría en el Perú***

Andean rituals and the use of cult objects were a major concern for Spanish colonial authorities who sought to locate and eradicate indigenous religious practice. This included public *autos de fe* during which idolatrous objects were gathered together and burned or destroyed, often in the village plaza. Pablo José de Arriaga's ([1621] 1999) book, *La Extirpación de la Idolatría en el Perú*, is written as an instruction manual to advise other Spanish priests how to locate and root out idolatrous practice. Arriaga ([1621] 1999), Albornoz ([1584] 1989), and Hernández Príncipe ([1621] 1923) glorify in the success of the Church in rooting out 'diabolical idolatrous practices'. For instance, Arriaga ([1621] 1999: 23) reports that between February 1617 and July 1618 Hernando de Avendaño heard 5,694 confessions of idolatry, discovered and punished 669 'ministers of idolatry', and destroyed 603 *huaca* and 3,418 *conopa*. The Catholic church also considers some objects, such as images of saints and relics, to be an animate conduit for communication with the supernatural, and Spanish priests in Peru were aware of Protestant iconoclasm in Europe, so they would have understood the feeling of horror when the sacred objects of Andean people were destroyed. But, as *conopa* and other objects of Andean

eneration were not communicating with the Christian god many priests believed they were communicating with the devil and felt compelled to eradicate them. Although the aim of the extirpations was to root out the idolatrous beliefs of Andean people the enumeration of how many *conopa* and other objects were seized suggests that the rapacious desire of these priests to seek and destroy native cult objects became an expression of their Christian devotion. Ironically, however, in recording their 'achievements' the priests unwittingly preserved some of the most detailed accounts of native beliefs and religious practices. Neither was the physical destruction of these animate objects that easy. Not only were there many attempts to hide cult objects, including Christian converts who re-engaged in native ritual practices, but 'sympathetic magic' also made the destruction of *huaca* and *conopa* very difficult. In many incidents objects that priests had burnt or broken were rescued or their place of destruction and burial became the focus of renewed Andean offerings (Arriaga [1621] 1999: 31, 93).

During this period, it was perilous for households to possess *conopa* and it is unlikely that these small objects would have been on open display, and the ritual focus of Andean animism moved away from named *huaca* and ancestor cults. While the ceremonies of the Catholic churches and saints' cults were rapidly absorbed into native cosmologies, animistic concerns focused on the indestructible features of the landscape so that local *huaca* were replaced by a focus on the more distant mountain *Apu* (Gose 2006). In spite of Spanish attempts to extinguish household ritual practices, four centuries later *illa* continue to provide a strong focus for domestic rituals. The *illa* and *conopa* provided a vehicle for the continuity of some aspects of native Andean cosmologies and cultural values, although the fact that these rites are today held in private within the security of the household may well be a consequence of the historical fear and dread of extirpation. The continuity of these practices was an act of defiance in the face of physical aggression from colonial authorities, and these familial acts became a focus for cultural continuity.

At the same time, native ritual practice began to incorporate the materials, ideals and iconography brought by Spanish colonial authorities. An extirpation trial from 1656 describes how a native, Hernando Caruachin, was given a black stone *conopa* in the form of a man's face and an indentation on the back which he filled with llama fat and a small colonial coin to supplicate for good fortune (Mills 1997: 96-7). And one of the *conopa* within the Montez collection of the Field Museum is unusual in having a human face carved in a European/colonial style. Today the cloth on which *illa* are displayed is referred to as a *messa* and when devotees raise each *k'intu* of three coca leaves and name its recipient it is reminiscent of a Catholic priest raising the bread at communion. *Conopa* continued to be made in the colonial period and the example in the Field Museum's collection with which I started this chapter (Figure 8.1) has the hollow in the alpaca's back drilled out as a vertical cylinder (unlike the Inca period hollows which are chiselled out and have concave sides); a European carving techniques has been used to produce an indigenous cult object.

It might also be noted that some *huaca* were transformed into shrines for Catholic saints (Sallnow 1987). For example, the two cult sites of el Señor de Huanca and el Señor Qoyllur Riti near Cuzco attract many thousands of pilgrims to see miraculous images of Christ painted onto the rock, and here devotees buy the stone and pottery objects that become their *illa* as well as portable copies of the miraculous images of Christ, and ingredients used for their *despachos*. The iconoclastic efforts of Spanish priests to excise indigenous 'idolatry' did not fully succeed, but rather resulted in the development of syncretic forms of ritual practice. Although most Andean communities adopted Catholicism (until more recent incursions of evangelical Protestants), many continue to communicate with animate landscape through making offerings. The intimate repetition of family members communing with their *conopa* and *illa* must have been an important element in achieving this integration of animism and Catholicism. A 'syncretistic' combination of native Andean concepts and European Catholicism is expressed in today's ritual practices, including those involving *illa*, which

have brokered the culture clash of European colonization and now draw together the beliefs, materials and techniques of distinct cultures within the intimacy of household rituals.

### **Display objects: *conopa* and *illa* as museum accessions**

The display of Emilio Montez' collection of artefacts from the Cuzco area at the World's Fair and their acquisition by the Field Museum in the 1890s took place at a time when many thousands of artefacts were being looted from archaeological sites in Peru. Most of this material was coming from coastal cultures such as Moche, Chimu, Chancay, Nazca and Paracas, with much of it shipped out of Peru to be sold in auction houses and acquired by museums around the world (McEwan and Sillar 2013).

Although the Peruvian highlands were not experiencing the same level of economic development and were less integrated in world trade systems, they also suffered from some looting (Gänger 2015). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century many private collectors and museums sought to acquire Inca material and most collections include some *conopa*. *Inca conopa* became desirable acquisitions for tourists and collectors and, in spite of Peruvian and international legislation against the antiquities trade, they, alongside more recent *illa*, and modern fakes/replicas, are sold in the streets, markets, boutiques and antique shops of Cuzco and Lima as well as via the internet and international antiquities market. For this international audience they have the aura of exotic found objects and curiosities to be displayed in the living rooms of tourists and art lovers. Colonial documents explain that *conopa* can be almost any small natural or manufactured item (as is true of *illa* today), and the Montez collection is unusual for including a number of stones with crude faces and some lacking any ornamentation. But, today archaeologists, museum curators and collectors have restricted their use of the term *conopa* to refer particularly to the carved camelids with a hollow in their back. Part of what makes these desirable to museums and private collectors is that, unlike most Inca material culture, they have a clear representational form that appeals to 'Western' tastes, as expressed in Becker's comments on the recent

National Gallery of Australia's exhibition *Gold and the Incas: Lost worlds of Peru*: 'my favourite item is a basalt Incan *conopa*. ... Subtly carved, the sculpture is sturdy, smooth and pleasing ... it is a lovely link to an ancient culture and sparks a human conversation that spans 500 years' (Becker 2014).

Very few *conopa* in the collections of museums in Peru or elsewhere have any archaeological context recorded. This could be considered a counterpart to Andean householders who no longer recall having bought their *illa* – for collectors any knowledge of the looting of these objects from archaeological sites would be 'an inconvenient truth'. But it may also be because many have been acquired more directly from Andean households, some of which are now abandoning the ritual performance and beginning to see their *conopa* and *illa* as having a commodity value. Others are of recent manufacture, with some being made directly for the tourist and 'antiquities' market. *Conopa* are now being used for display in elite households and museums rather than being guarded under wrap for the privacy of an occasional Andean ritual.

It could be claimed that museum *conopa* have been made 'inanimate' by their removal from their original social and ritual context. They have become mere accessions in museum collections. However even in this setting they can enchant and enthrall visitors and researchers. Perhaps by recontextualizing these seemingly passive objects, as I have attempted to do here, by drawing on historical records and analogous practices in the present, these museum objects can remain animate, as are the millions of *illa* and other objects used in Andean household rituals.

### **Objects are always inbetween**

Human agency is 'a *process* or *relationship* of engagement with a social and material world' (Gardner 2007: 103). But the material world does not just provide a medium for human agency; objects evoke memories, ideas and meanings which gives them a 'social life' of their own (Merleau-Ponty [1948] 2004; Appadurai 1986; Jones 2007). Robb (2004) has discussed the idea of the 'extended artefact',

highlighting the complex web of interdependent relationships that things embed us in, and Gell (1998) refers to the ‘secondary agency’ of artefacts which can provoke reactions from people. For all these reasons objects are located ‘between’ or ‘within’ layers of social relationships, and some objects can become touchstones for contested identities and ideas. Robb (2004) argues that the degree to which an object has a ‘secondary’ or ‘effective’ agency depends on how people perceive and engage with that object: within Andean animism *illa* and *conopa* have powerful roles as ‘extended artefacts’ which actively mediate many relationships.

At the start of this chapter I suggested that *conopa* were a vital link between distinct people, entities and ideas. The *conopa* mediate these relationships. Mediation is not passive; rather, objects can be active intermediaries that draw distinct entities together and help to transform the relationship between them. *Illa* are thought to originate from the mountain deities and make the sacred mountains accessible for familial communication with the greater powers of their animate world. The Inca state appears to have sponsored the production and distribution of *conopa* and subsequently the Catholic priests of the Spanish viceroyalty sought to destroy them. While *conopa* were a focus for the extirpation of idolatry and imposition of Catholicism, the continuing use of *conopa* and *illa* today combines Catholicism and animism in a syncretic process whereby households now prepare offerings that are directed toward saints as well as mountain deities. *Illa* and *conopa* are living entities that to link and protect places, things and people that are of concern to the household. This is why *conopa* were guarded as the most precious part of a household’s inheritance. The destruction of these objects threatened the network of relationships that linked households to the sources of their prosperity. Andean *conopa* and *illa* are not inert rocks, or even beautiful carvings, they are animate objects that mediate relationships between people and the living landscape.

This may seem an exotic belief to someone within an objective or scientific approach to the world. But human social relations are never just between people. We all invest our hopes and fears in

objects. This includes the aspiration that a new acquisition (a computer, bicycle or house) will help to transform our lives, as well as the sentiments we attach to mementos and keepsakes. Objects are inherently inbetween both because the world is as active place where things are in constant interaction, and because humans conceive of and interpret the world in terms of relationships. All objects make connections – and all human relationships are mediated through objects.

But our perception of the world is learnt with a social and historical context. When the Inca commissioned and distributed *conopa* they were probably proudly displayed; this was very different to the defiant practice of secret household rituals conducted during the extirpation of idolatry, or the commercial value that *conopa* gained in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Yet, each of these changes in the significance and role that *conopa* played was predicated on some knowledge of their earlier connections. Indeed the *conopa* were one of the foci around which changing values and beliefs were negotiated. Exploring precisely what relationships are mediated by particular objects, and how these relationships and the object's significance are changed in relation to their historical context, is a productive approach for future research.

## References

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