

## Chapter 1.

# Commodification: Things, agency, and identities: Introduction<sup>1</sup>

by Wim van Binsbergen

### *Anthropology, economics, and economic life*

The present collection, and the Amsterdam conference ‘Commodification and identities: Social Life of Things revisited’ on which it is based,<sup>2</sup> return, two decades later, to Arjun Appadurai’s seminal collection on *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in cultural perspective* (1986).

The editors’ principal aim with the present book, and the conference, has been to help

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<sup>1</sup> This Introduction could not have been written but for Peter Geschiere’s very substantial contributions, not only in terms of the general conceptualization of this book’s project, but also in terms of specific ideas and draft sections towards the present text. However, in view of the preponderance of ethnographic (Zambia) and disciplinary (philosophy, archaeology, linguistics) elements adduced by Wim van Binsbergen, and the concomitant shift in emphasis and appreciation, the editors agreed amicably that only one of them would sign for the present Introduction, while acknowledging the other’s role. Further thanks are due to Nancy Rose Hunt, Birgit Meyer, Patricia Saegerman, and especially the macro-economist Henk Meilink, for their comments. Acknowledgment is also due of the latter’s permission to use an unpublished paper (Meilink 2002) from which I have greatly benefited. The responsibility for whatever contentious viewpoints, and errors, this Introduction is likely to contain is, of course, entirely my own.

<sup>2</sup> This conference was organized in Amsterdam (10-13 June 1999) by the editors of the present collection, on behalf of the national Dutch programme on ‘Globalization and the Construction of Communal Identities’. The programme (1993-1999), in which over forty researchers of varying seniority participated both in the Netherlands and abroad, was financed by WOTRO (Netherlands Foundation for Tropical Research) / NWO (Netherlands Science Research Foundation), The Hague. So was most of the conference, with important contributions however from the African Studies Centre, Leiden, and the Trust Fund of the Erasmus University Rotterdam, which the editors/convenors hereby gratefully acknowledge. Previous conferences organized by the ‘Globalization and the Construction of Communal Identities’ Programme addressed issues of identity, development, ethnicity and popular culture – all in relation to globalization. Moreover, this Dutch programme joined the departments of anthropology of the Universities of Chicago and Stockholm in launching the Interdisciplinary Network on Globalization which enlisted the participation of a number of institutes in the South: the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences in Calcutta; CEBRAP (Centro Brasileiro de Análise e Planejamento), Sao Paulo; CODESRIA (Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa), Dakar; and MEA (Middle Eastern Awards), Cairo. The main aim of this network was to give more scope to South views on, and experiences of, globalization; therefore it sponsored a series of conferences, organized by the participating institutes in the South.

elucidate present-day complex forms of economic life in the South, and in North-South encounters in the political, commercial, consumptive and development domains, by complementarily adducing, to a field heavily worked, and dominated, by economists, such data, perspectives and insights as anthropologists have to offer.

Such data and perspectives largely have to do with the rather privileged access anthropologists have, as compared with most economists, to the minutiae of micro-economics in concrete social situations studied through participant observation. *Being There* (Kosinski 1970) does make a difference, in two opposite and complementary ways:

- in the first place, through fieldwork the details of local actors' major and minor transactions can be scrutinized and their processual aspects followed, while taking these actors' own conceptualizations into account, against the background of a general understanding of their cultural and social local background; however, this unique obvious advantage of anthropological fieldwork must be offset against
- the risk that (as compared to a more detached, distant and comparative perspective) the anthropologist loses sight of the translocal and historical ramifications of whatever she encounters and lives through within the narrow local and presentist horizon of the field.

As an empirical method, anthropology is an obvious way to complement, by detailed micro-data of high validity and reliability, the aggregate, typically national-level (and often admittedly incomplete) data of economists. As I argued recently,

‘Anthropological participation in the context of fieldwork has a unique function of validation. (...) participant observation furnishes a practical feedback to the implicit and explicit insights that a fieldworker may have gathered earlier in the same research through observation and conversations. (...) If the fieldworker has actually arrived at some real knowledge and understanding of local cultural forms, then she is rewarded by the participants' affirmative attitude and an increased flow of subsequent information; and in the opposite case she is punished by the participants' rejection and a decrease in the subsequent flow of information' (van Binsbergen 2003a: 496).

Anthropological data on South economic life today, and on its interface with the North, tend to bring out the contradictions, transformations and hidden implications of economic assumptions, theories and interventions in ways hardly to be predicted on a theoretical, aggregate basis. The present book will offer the reader a fair share of such stimulating empirical data. Revealing the unexpected from distant places peripheral to the global economic system, and thus, by implication, showing the familiar under a new and estranging light, has always been one of the main roles of anthropology ever since its emergence in Enlightenment Europe during the late 18th c. CE. However, towards the understanding of South economic life today anthropology has ambitions and claims beyond the mere purveying of challenging data: a theoretical perspective that, like modern economics, largely roots in eighteenth and nineteenth-century European intellectual life (Kant, Adam Smith, Comte, Marx, Pareto), but whose different subsequent intellectual trajectory, inspired largely by socio-cultural settings outside the North Atlantic region, has produced an approach to economic phenomena that may well complement the understanding of eco-

nomics, to the mutual benefit of both disciplines.

The perennial danger besetting interdisciplinary dialogue is that (for reasons largely stemming from the competitive dynamics inherent in academia as an institutional setting) mutual enemy stereotypes – often based on popularizations of the respective fields that may lag behind for as much as an entire generation – tend to obscure real issues and real potential growth-points of encounter. The present contribution seeks to further the dialogue between economists and anthropologists on South and South-North economic life today, but the paucity of mainstream economists among this book's contributors has meant that this lofty goal cannot be expected to be realized already with the present book alone; let us hope however that it will trigger a sympathetic response among economists.

Among anthropologists, the enemy image of economists is dominated by the popular stereotype concerning 'neo-classical/neo-liberal economics' as blindly believing in perfect markets in which completely atomized, fully rational and fully maximizing individuals operate on the basis of full information of ruling prices but absolutely incapable of exerting any influence upon these prices (Meilink 2002). This position has meanwhile been identified and criticized by economists themselves (especially 'institutional' and 'transactional' economists) as utterly abstract, ideological even, and with insufficient attention to the actual (usually highly defective) economic and social functioning of markets in practice.<sup>1</sup> Various anthropologists and historians have joined this debate, especially in the African context.<sup>2</sup> Under the circumstances, anthropologists with a fascination with South and North-South economic life, and interested in the dialogue with economics, can spend their time better than regurgitating obsolete stereotypes. What has circulated in the North Atlantic region in recent years as the 'victorious ideology of the market' is rather a simplistic, bowdlerized version of obsolescent neo-classical economics cut to the measure of lay appropriation.

Indeed, the editors' main concern in the present volume is rather different. One of the editors' aims has been to see to what extent the changes since the mid-1980s – the end of the Cold War and the apparent victory of capitalism and of 'The Market' – force us to reconsider processes of *commodification* in the South. Below this pivotal term will be considered in detail, but let me here define it provisionally as *the ways in which things and social relations are effected by the market*<sup>3</sup> (i.e. are 'commodified').

Meanwhile, at least one other major development on the global scene has been the intensification of international terrorism – especially the various attacks of 11 September 2001 on the eastern seaboard, United State of America – and the subsequent 'war on terrorism' waged in the Middle East by selected North Atlantic countries. In the face of

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<sup>1</sup> Harriss-White 1999; White 1993; North 1989; Wuyts 1992; Raikes 1994; Jones 1996; for the penetration of 'Institutional Economics' even in World Bank circles, cf. World Bank 2000; also cf. Meilink 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Ensminger 1992; Berry 1993; Barrett 1997; Gould & von Oppen 1994; cf. Meilink 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Harriss et al. (1995: 87; cf. Meilink 2002) proposes the following definition of market which is adequate for our present purpose:

'An abstract realm of impersonal economic exchange of homogeneous goods by means of voluntary transactions on an equal basis between large numbers of autonomous, fully informed entities with profit-maximizing behavioural motivations and able to enter and leave freely'.

these topicalities the demise of international communism, and the triumph of ‘the Market’ under the aegis of North Atlantic hegemony, seem to fade back into history. However, there is an intimate link between recent global developments in the economic domain, and the confrontation between North Atlantic hegemony and militant Islamism. Rather than interpreting this confrontation as an inevitable ‘clash of civilizations’ on the somewhat naïve assumption that religion *sui generis* constitutes the uncompromising core of any civilization (Huntington 1996), I propose to invoke the central notions of this book’s project to shed light on these developments. ‘Tournament of value’, ‘politics of consumption’ and ‘commodification’ have much to do with the ideological mutations in the world of Islam, that lead a majority to embrace the regime of consumption offered by globalising capitalism, whilst a very small but very vocal minority opts out of this alternative, and increasingly insists on a particular transformative interpretation of Islam as an alternative road to modernity and globalization.<sup>1</sup>

According to some, it is precisely the recent victory of capitalism and of ‘the Market’, that brought ‘the end of history’. But that is a pedestrian reading of Fukuyama (1992). His Hegelian inspiration revolves on dialectics and contradiction as the motor of history, so that effective North Atlantic hegemony with its eradication of viable political and identity alternatives means the end of history. It is not the same as the victory of the Market. The irony is that, on the one hand, the availability of alternatives, is central to the idea of the market, while, on the other hand, North Atlantic hegemony has turned such alternatives into superficial sham alternatives underneath of which history may indeed be said to stagnate in increasingly global uniformity of both political and economic forms. The challenge of North Atlantic hegemony by militant Islamism, largely through terrorism, seems aimed at the postponement of the end of history, and at the assertion of at least one viable alternative, besides North Atlantic democratic neo-liberalism: Islam.

Illustrative of the mutual stereotyping of disciplines is the collection edited by James Carrier & Daniel Miller (1998) on *Virtualism: A New Political Economy*. To these authors, neo-liberal economics is the most important example of ‘virtualism’ in the present-day world since its exponents – internationally prominent economists that have the ear of North Atlantic governments and of the Bretton Woods institutions (the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund) – have such powerful means at their disposal to try and adapt the world to their models (instead of the other way round).

For a proper appreciation of Carrier & Miller’s earnest and well-taken criticism of current global economic policy, perhaps it is useful to consider their notion of *virtualism* a bit more in detail. They use this notion critically to characterise a major form of economic knowledge production as facilitating an abstract, model-based top-down imposition largely devoid of consideration of the real-life situation of the actual people who are devastatingly affected by such policy, especially in the South. In this respect their plea runs parallel to that of the present book: to allow modern economics to be cross-fertilized by

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<sup>1</sup> These recent developments have already given rise to an enormous academic literature featuring some of today’s best minds; cf. Baudrillard 2002; Chomsky 2003; Rockmore & Margolis 2004; von Trotha 2003; Virilio 2002; Derrida 2004; Derrida and Habermas in Borradori 2003; Kearney 2005. For a personal view from intercultural philosophy, cf. van Binsbergen 2005b, and in press (2005c).

the kind of detailed, first-hand concrete knowledge of people's livelihoods and life-worlds as anthropology can produce. Blind Faustian abstraction easily breeds injustices; it reminds us of the kind of violence inherent in the scientific word, especially after the latter has been raised (since the Enlightenment and the rise of modern, rational state bureaucracies) to the status of central legitimating power, in the North Atlantic region and increasingly globally. So far so good. Where I yet feel the need for a slight corrective of Carrier & Miller's position is, however, in the recognition that economic virtualism in some of its features is only part of a much wider intellectual and social trend, – so wide, in fact, that it cannot be dismissed wholesale without a retreat into anachronism. It is as if Carrier & Miller, anxious to expose the dangers of economists' proneness to use abstract models, themselves remain at too low a level of abstraction. The virtualism which Carrier & Miller chide, constitutes a case of academic analysts (today's prominent economists) being considered, by other academicians (Carrier & Miller), to resort, in their description of empirical reality, to models that display a high degree of virtuality – and of cherishing such models as particularly apt and revealing. But what then is virtuality? We may say that virtuality is the state in which objects and meanings have become systematically decontextualized and rendered unreal, yet in that state continue to have effects that are real. If we see recent globalization as a result of the technological reduction, to practically zero, of the costs which space and time have hitherto imposed upon communication and interaction processes, then virtualization is one of the major aspects of such globalization (cf. van Binsbergen 1997a, 1999a). In other words, to the extent to which globalization breeds virtuality, accusing a group of present-day academic producers of *virtualism* risks being equivalent of accusing them of being keenly aware of the pulse beat of this time and age! It is not the neo-liberal economists' virtualism *as such* that Carrier & Miller's well-taken humanitarian criticism seeks to confront, but those economists' absence of empathy, and the lack (especially on the part of the people most affected) of democratic checks and balances when it comes to the practical implementation of the neo-liberal prescriptions.

The term 'globalization' is becoming ever more problematic, precisely because of it being so much in fashion. One problem is that its meaning keeps changing: in the 1980s it referred both to the revolution in the means of communication (transport, TV, the Internet etc.) and to parallel economic change. Lately its economic meanings received more emphasis but now in a negative sense due to the rapid rise of an anti-globalization movement, targeting global capital. In this Introduction, the term 'globalization' is primarily used as a descriptive term to draw attention to the rapidly accelerating circulation of goods, people and images on a global scale, since roughly the 1960s; the emphasis is here on 'rapidly accelerating'.<sup>1</sup> For it is clear that global circuits are much older than this, in other words, that a long period of proto-globalization preceded recent globalization.

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<sup>1</sup> The literature on globalization is growing rapidly; cf. Appadurai 1996; Bauman 1998; Cohen & Kennedy 2000; Featherstone 1990; Hopkins 2002; Jameson & Miyoshi 1998; King 1997; Meyer & Geschiere 1999; Robertson & Lechner 1985 (one of the earliest uses of the term 'globalization' outside economics); Robertson 1996; Sassen 1998; Schaeffer 1997; Waters 1995; and with special emphasis on Africa: Asante-Darko 1999; Cooper 2001; Karnik 2000; Makoa 2001; Sheth 2000; van Binsbergen 1997a; van Binsbergen & van Dijk 2004.

Meanwhile it is no accident that in the present collection there is a certain over-representation of contributions on Africa. Precisely the inconsistencies and surprising turns in the developments at the periphery of the global economic system are highlighting most compellingly the obsolescence of neo-classical economic thinking in terms of ‘individual optimization’; they bring out the extreme vulnerability of South (and especially, of African) economies in a global context, and force us to take into account, one way or another, the socio-cultural complexities of the valuation of things (whether commodities or not).<sup>1</sup>

This book’s project hinges on the idea that the quality of economics as a pure and applied science may be improved if culture and history are taken into account to a larger extent. Anthropology offers one of the ways to bring this about, provided the latter discipline is not limited to those parts of the globe that for some can still be classified as ‘anthropology-land.’ In his contribution to the present book, Arjun Appadurai, outlining an anthropological view of the world of global finance capital, presents one particular example of how anthropology may break out of such limitations. In the same vein, we may point to Saskia Sassen’s work on global capital (Sassen 1996, 1998, 2000a, 2000b), and to the comments made by Roy Dilley (one of the contributors to the present volume) on the fierce debates between ‘substantivists’ and ‘formalists’ in economic anthropology during the 1960s and 1970s. Dilley concludes that an unexpected and probably unintended outcome of this debate was that the substantivists allowed themselves to be contained within ‘anthropological societies’ – there the economy was clearly embedded in powerful socio-cultural contexts – and did not transfer the battleground to the ‘market societies’ of the West. The cultural ‘embeddedness’ of the economy in capitalist countries was, therefore, lost from sight (Dilley 1992a). In this connection we are also reminded of James Carrier’s work (1995a, 1995b) on ‘Occidentalism’ as an inveterate though invalid model (some sort of complement to ‘Orientalism’ à la Said 1978) that permits economists and even many anthropologists to maintain a simplistic model of the West as a ‘market society’ as against ‘the Rest’ (see below). The present collection complements this critique by also stressing the extent to which South societies (with emphasis on Africa) fail to comply with the *non-market* stereotype usually projected onto them.

### *The pitfalls of ‘consumption’*

In the present collection, the vast and slippery notion of ‘consumption’ – despite, or rather because, of its problematic implications – emerges as crucial for an anthropological pro-

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<sup>1</sup> These, and many other themes relevant to the present discussion, are explored at length in *Modernity on a shoestring* (Fardon, van Binsbergen & van Dijk 1999). Like the present book, that collection was, in part, a product of the WOTRO (‘Netherlands Foundation for Tropical Research’, a division of the Netherlands Science Foundation NWO) globalization and identities programme 1993-1999, in conjunction with EIDOS (‘European Interuniversity Development Opportunities Study-Group’) and the African Studies Centre, Leiden. Half a decade later, and with special emphasis on cultural globalization, these issues were taken up in van Binsbergen & van Dijk’s collection *Situating Globality: African Agency in the Appropriation of Global Culture* (2004), summing up recent globalization research at the Leiden African Studies Centre.

ject that seeks to complement and to dialogue with the discipline of economics. ‘Consumption’ is an aspect where values and socio-cultural preferences, core subjects of anthropology, are central. Here we could point to Colin Campbell’s (1987) seminal study on ‘the spirit of modern consumerism’, while also Arjun Appadurai (2001) signals that it increasingly seems to be consumption that creates classes – even classes ‘for themselves’. Remarkably, there is little explicit acknowledgment<sup>1</sup> of the implicitly Weberian slant (Weber 1969, 1985) implied in these recent attempts to supersede Marx, to proceed from production to consumption, and to acknowledge the central role of commodity consumption in identity creation. All of this was already in place more than three quarters of a century ago, when Weber complemented Marx’s discussion of classes (German: *Klasse*) as defined by production, with ‘estates’ (German: *Stände*, usually rendered as ‘classes’ in English, as a source of considerable confusion), as defined by a life-style sustained by consumption. But whatever these antecedents in the history of ideas, it stands to reason that the notion of consumption should be at the heart of this book’s contributions – be it in highly varying forms, and sometimes more implicitly than explicitly.

As indicated, this collection contains a set of selected papers from a conference that set out to discuss new implications of the notion of commodification, by concentrating on the dynamic links between objects and identities in a context of rapid globalization. The editors/convenors proposed to focus on the pioneering collection *The Social Life of Things*, edited by Arjun Appadurai (1986), and to discuss its implications in relation to the profound changes in the world order since the end of the 1980s. ‘Consumption’ as such was not central in the original call for papers for the conference on which this book is based. However, the editors/convenors might have expected it to become central in the actual conference discussions, and this for several reasons.

The most obvious reason for this emphasis on consumption was the *Social Life of Things* book itself. Appadurai’s collection has proved to be seminal in many respects. It cogently showed that commodification should not be seen as a unilineal process.<sup>2</sup> By focussing on things and their circulation, the various contributors showed that the process through which ‘goods’ may become ‘commodities’ (or to use the Marxian terminology, how ‘use value’ may become ‘exchange value’) is not straightforward and unequivocal, but complex, varied, sometimes unpredictable and enigmatic, and that it is not a one-way-process either. A very fruitful notion in this perspective is that of ‘the social history of things’ (or their ‘cultural biography’ – Kopytoff 1986). This highlights, for instance, how an object can move in and out of market circuits. The consistent emphasis on the ongoing circulation of things in Appadurai’s 1986 Introduction prefigures his later work on globalization and on global flows of not only goods, but also people and images (notably in

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<sup>1</sup> But cf. Appadurai 1986b: 59 n. 9, a mere passing reference. By contrast, more exclusively consumption-orientated classic critiques of Marx are acknowledged, especially those by Veblen (1899) and by Sombart (1967, a selective English translation of Sombart 1902).

<sup>2</sup> The authors of *The Social Life of Things* rather use the term ‘commoditization’ (also cf. Long et al. 1986). The editors of the present book prefer – without, however, any intent to be dogmatic about it – ‘commodification’ since *-ification* relates to ‘making’ while *-ization* might seem to refer, in some sort of teleological sense, to a more or less automatic and unilineal process.

*Modernity at Large*, 1996). The circulation of goods, whether as commodities or not (or in all sorts of in-between forms) has, of course, a very long history, but – as Appadurai was to emphasize in his later work – it acquired an additional impetus in the context of recent globalization processes.

For anthropology, this emphasis on things and their history breathed new life into what seemed to become an obsolete topic within the discipline, namely ‘material culture.’ In the 1960s and 1970s this had become (especially in the United Kingdom and in the Netherlands) a somewhat quaint specialization in many anthropology departments, which mainstream anthropologists tended to relegate to museums, as a form of antiquarian ‘arm-chair anthropology.’ But in the 1980s, there was a renewed interest in objects amongst anthropologists.<sup>1</sup> Various factors combined to bring about this change. Among them I may mention:

- the critique of the extreme fragmentation and myopia of narrow local and presentist horizons, to which the rise of fieldwork as the principal anthropological method had given rise from the 1930s onward
- a renewed *rapprochement* between palaeoanthropology (the science of fossil humans) and anthropologists – while the latter brought theory and comparative method to the encounter, the former brought diffusion, which had always been an obvious perspective in archaeology
- the latter *rapprochement* was further intensified by the rise, in population genetics (aided by the decipherment of the human genome) and comparative historical linguistics, and most recently in comparative mythology, of long-range perspectives that lend independent, parallel, and high detailed models of linguistic and demographic diffusion to the diffusion of material culture
- much of this received a new impetus in globalization studies, whose initial emphasis on present-day technologies of communication gradually opened up to accommodate proto-globalization.

Diffusion suddenly was no longer a dirty word (*pace* Amselle 2001, who reviews these developments dismissively). Against this background, ‘things’ turned out to offer a vantage point for understanding the paradoxes of accelerated global flows and an increasing obsession with fixing identities and cultural closure. This is the approach followed in a collection edited by Birgit Meyer & Peter Geschiere (1999).<sup>2</sup> In their Introduction they try to analyse the Janus-like dyad of globalization and identity in terms of a ‘dialectics of flow and closure’: global ‘flows’ entailing, as flip side, an increasing obsession with identity and ‘closure.’

However, the major impact of *The Social Life of Things* stemmed from its effort to develop, in relation to all this, an anthropological approach to consumption, as basic to

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Etnofoor 1996; Stoller 1989; Jamin 1985. Folklore studies have always provided fertile ground for the study of things in culture; here, Korff (1995, 2000) has recently launched the untranslatable concept of *Dingbedeutsamkeit*, ≈ ‘the thing as carrier of meaning’.

<sup>2</sup> This collection was based on an earlier conference of the WOTRO/NWO globalization programme.



‘the politics of demand’. And it was precisely on this point that it received considerable corroboration from subsequent developments. Appadurai ended his 1986 Introduction with a clear if somewhat rhetorical programme: according to him, it was time to

‘demystify the demand side of economic life’ (Appadurai 1986b: 58),

just as Marx and the early political economists had unveiled

‘the mystery about the relationship between politics and production’ (*ibidem*).

Elsewhere, Appadurai (1986: 31) specified that ‘demand’ is

‘the economic expression of the political logic of consumption.’

Clearly, his emphasis on consumption reflected the growing attention, at the time, to consumerism as a major factor of economic growth in the developed economies of the world today.

Since then, this attention has only intensified, both among economists and social scientists. Also Daniel Miller put consumption on top of the anthropological agenda: he stated already in 1987 that consumption was central to contemporary life-worlds and the creation of identities (Miller 1987; another belated echo of Weber that did not register). However, a decade later Miller confessed that he felt somewhat swamped by the torrent of social-science studies on this topic (Miller 1998c: 205). Indeed, consumption has asserted itself surprisingly rapidly as a central topic in general social-science literature, and especially in cultural studies. But Miller, despite his leading role in defining the topic from the late 1980s onwards, was not exactly happy with its subsequent popularity. He harshly criticized recent studies for what he considered their postmodern slant – Baudrillard’s inspiration<sup>1</sup> looms large in this field – a trend which Miller held responsible for a neglect of ethnography and too abstract a treatment of consumption; for Miller this is another brand of ‘virtualism’. In view of my above discussion of the latter term, I propose to somewhat attenuate Miller’s criticism on this point. Why should we have to choose between the erudite, philosophically tutored sophistication and perceptive sociological imagination of Baudrillard (towards whom, incidentally, Appadurai expresses great indebtedness in *The Social Life of Things*),<sup>2</sup> and the careful and imaginative empiricism of Miller, if we can easily, and profitably, have *both*? Contrary to what Miller suggests, postmodern thought, although often irritatingly and irresponsibly un-sociological, is *not necessarily* and *not invariably* a pretext for bad (i.e. superficial, empirically lazy, self-indulging and navel-gazing) social science and nothing more, although that is what bowdlerized postmodernism has often deteriorated into, in the social-science domain from the 1970s onwards. Despite their marked aloofness vis-à-vis the Third World, and despite their tendency to re-invent the subject matter of the social sciences from scratch while unhindered by specialist knowledge of what one and a half centuries of the social sciences have already accomplished, the great names of postmodern thought (Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, Deleuze, Guattari, Agamben, Nancy, de Certeau, etc.) have pioneered essential

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<sup>1</sup> Especially Baudrillard 1979/1981, and further 1968, 1975, 1990b.

<sup>2</sup> Appadurai 1986b: 20f, 45f and *passim*.

conceptual and theoretical tools for any meaningful discussion of the modern human subject and its disappearance; of the construction and deconstruction of identity; of consumption as a strategy to defer being confronted with the incomplete and unconvincing construction of meaning that is typical for global, mediatized society today – all of these crucial aspects of the present-day experience that such terms as ‘globalization’ and ‘commodification’ seek to capture from a different but complementary perspective. To dismiss this body of innovating thought off-hand for reasons of empiricist professional myopia not to say ignorance, would be even more naïve than to blindly expect from postmodern thought the ready-made answers to the conceptual, theoretical, and empirical problems of social-science analysis when tackling today’s bewilderingly complex social world.

The background of consumption’s popularity as a research topic – and this is also the major reason why it is central to this volume as well – is the central place ‘consumption’ has acquired in economic thinking, in both its popular and its academic variants.

Reiterating his critique of virtualism in the narrower sense, Daniel Miller sees among present-day economists the tendency

‘...to supplant consumption as a human practice with an abstract version of the consumer. The result is the creation of the *virtual consumer* [italics added] in economic theory, a chimera, the constituent parts of which are utterly daft (...). Indeed, neo-classical economists make no claim to represent flesh-and-blood consumers. They claim that their consumers are merely aggregate figures used in modelling. Their protestations of innocence are hollow, however, because these virtual consumers and the models they inhabit and that animate them are the same models that are used to justify forcing actual consumers to behave like their virtual counterparts.’<sup>1</sup>

Miller’s conclusion results from an ambitious though timely effort ‘to go beyond’<sup>2</sup> Marx. For Miller, consumption can be characterized as the ‘negation of capitalism’. He interprets consumption as the increasing pressure, on the part of the working classes, to get their share of capitalists’ profits. Indeed, for Miller consumption is the main force to ‘...counteract the effects of capitalism that Marx described’. With this, Miller situates himself in the long-standing British sociological tradition of parading the affluent worker (cf. Goldthorpe *et al.* 1968) with considerable spending power as the refutation of Marxian analysis. What such a view could use is a more dialectical awareness of a fundamental contradiction *constituting*, rather than *annihilating*, 20th-c. CE capitalism: it is workers’ consumption that *both* denies capital *and* allows capitalist relations of production to persist because it offers the latter an insatiable and ever-expanding market. Miller’s conception of Marxian dialectics then brings him to recognise the ‘negation of the negation’ of capitalism in the abstract consumer models of dominant, neo-classical economics:

‘In some kind of global card trick, an abstract, virtual consumer steals the authority that had been accumulated for workers in their other role as consumers’ (Miller 1998c: 194, 200).

Prompted by an impressive ethnographic knowledge and by laudable humanitarian indignation more than by a profound and sustained theoretical argument (Marxist or other-

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<sup>1</sup> Miller 1998c: 200; cf. also Fine 1995 and 1998.

<sup>2</sup> A standard expression in philosophy, denoting the attempt to constructively build upon a previous thinker’s achievements whilst avoiding that thinker’s limitations and errors.

wise), Miller's approach may not in itself already succeed in leading us out of the tangle of contradictions that modern and postmodern consumption constitutes. Yet it serves as a reminder that dominant economic approaches are incomplete and may benefit from an anthropological perspective.

### *Things and agency*<sup>1</sup>

However illuminating, that consumption has become so fashionable a topic over the last decades may also imply a danger for any anthropology of consumption – maybe more clearly so now than at the time when *The Social Life of Things* was conceived. How can we avoid that such an anthropology of consumption becomes unduly subservient, either to mainstream economics, or to postmodern over-abstractions? An answer may be found in Appadurai's emphasis on the *politics* of demand/consumption. Indeed, a major question seems to be how to relate 'things' to human agency. Welcome as the emphasis on things and their history certainly is (also in the light of Marx's enduring insight in commodity fetishism as a situation where things seem to dominate people), it remains vital *to relate the life of things, in one way or another, to the ways in which people give meaning to them.*

However, this raises the issue of how to avoid universalist assumptions about human behaviour – notably to avoid the trap of equating agency (as neo-classical economics tends to do)<sup>2</sup> with the supposedly universal propensity towards individual optimization of *homo economicus*.

Formulating an anthropological approach to consumption may start from a focus on things and their social life, but it inevitably touches on the protracted anthropological debate<sup>3</sup> about culturally determined versions of personhood and agency. This debate has acquired new momentum with the work by Lambek & Strathern, and by Piot,<sup>4</sup> which makes it all the more interesting to explore its implications for developing the kind of 'sociology of consumption' that Appadurai advocates.

One general outcome of the anthropological personhood debate may serve as a *caveat*: in general, formulating general dichotomies does not solve our analytical and conceptual problems, since anthropological dichotomies have the tendency to converge almost inevitably with simplistic classifications in terms of 'the West' versus 'the Rest.' And such dyadic oppositions can all too easily be accommodated within current economic models – one pole standing for the West as the normal situation; and the other standing for 'anthropological societies' where alternative versions of personhood will soon succumb to general processes of modernization and individualization.

An apt illustration in this connection – of special relevance here since it originated

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<sup>1</sup> Relevant research on agency, especially in the African context, has been conducted at the Leiden African Studies Centre since 2002; it has formed one of the inspirations towards the following section.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Becker 1991, 1993; Becker et al. 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Carruthers et al. 1985; Jackson & Karp 1990.

<sup>4</sup> Compare, for instance, Lambek & Strathern 1998; Piot 1999.

from debates on the juxtaposition of commodity versus gift, Marx versus Mauss<sup>1</sup> – is the opposition between ‘individuality’ and ‘dividuality’ with which several anthropologists (including this book’s contributor Rijk van Dijk) have experimented in recent decades. Marilyn Strathern’s work (especially 1988) was a major source of inspiration here, notably the ways in which she developed the old opposition between *exchange* in the West (as supposed to be dominated by the market and commodities) and *gift-giving* in Melanesia (*pace* Malinowski 1922, who described the *kula* also as a deferred-exchange cycle). One of her contributions was to associate this juxtaposition with different conceptions of the person:

- exchange with ‘individuality’ (the person as a well-defined, more or less autonomous individual), versus
- ‘dividuality’ (the person as a set of relations with other people).

Strathern emphasized that, in her analysis, ‘the West’ and ‘Melanesia’ stood for highly abstract models amounting rather to Weberian *ideal types* – i.e. exaggerated contrasts which she claimed she needed in order to highlight genuine differences between the two poles compared, even though such contrasts might at the same time exist within either pole. Admittedly, she managed to highlight important aspects of both the Western and the Melanesian situation using this approach. However, there is always the danger that such models take on a life of their own, in the hands of people less subtly aware of the ethnographic details and theoretical implications than Strathern herself clearly was. This danger is all the greater because such reified contrasts correspond so nicely with popular distinctions between the modern West as, supposedly, a market society, versus ‘pre-modern’, ‘anthropological’ societies, that allegedly are dominated by reciprocity and gift-giving. And, as said, such distinctions fit in all too well with economic models in which such ‘pre-modern’ remnants are singled out as obstacles to economic growth.<sup>2</sup> We would need to develop seminal insights like Strathern’s to higher levels of differentiation and dynamism, if anthropology is to do justice to highly variable and changing conceptions of personhood and agency – and especially if it is to debunk simplistic universalizing conceptions, like those in terms of the individual as *homo economicus*.

Of special interest in Strathern’s work and in these Melanesia-inspired debates in general is the tendency to take the circulation of things as a starting point for exploring different conceptions of the person and human agency. Here we are reminded, notably, of Nick Thomas’ work (1991) which shows in a very subtle way how the historical – especially the colonial – ‘entanglement’ of things in Melanesia and Polynesia highlights the confrontation between different and rapidly changing conceptions of agency and the person. Further work along these lines includes Chris Gregory’s nuancing of the commodity/gift-giving (exchange/reciprocity) contrast (Gregory 1994); as well as the long-standing debates among Africanists on the contrast between ‘wealth-in-people’ and

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<sup>1</sup> Marx 1970 (first published 1867); Mauss 1966a (first published 1923-24).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the critique by James Carrier (1995b: 82) of Strathern’s ‘hypothetical’ oppositions.

‘wealth-in-things’.<sup>1</sup> A long tradition in anthropology, going back to Maine and to Tönnies’ paired concepts *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*,<sup>2</sup> used to discuss the *person* and its varying contours in relation (or in contrast) to the *group* – again a dichotomy that all too easily boils down to

- the West, supposedly dominated by individualism, as against
- the Rest, supposedly communitarian.

The tenacity and the obnoxious implications of such contrasts are particularly highlighted by the self-evidence with which Western development experts keep imposing forms of community development in Africa and other parts of the South which they would not dream of launching in their own societies. A graphic example of such impertinence is offered by the efforts of the ecological lobbies. In order to solve the issue of the tropical rain-forest and its rapid disappearance, these lobbies advocate forcing national governments to adopt new laws to ensure the participation of the local population in the management of the remaining forest resources. The aim as such may be laudable, but the problem lies in the apparently self-evident point of departure, notably the assumption that such participation has to be realized in communitarian terms. Thus, for instance, the new forest law in Cameroon imposes control by the ‘local community’, apparently without taking into account the fact that precisely in the forest areas local communities have a highly volatile composition.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the loose and often naïve way in which the term ‘community’ is used in much literature on development (also among anthropologists) betrays an unshaken faith in the ‘communitarian’ character of African societies – and in general the inveterate tendency of the West to construct itself by means of some stereotypical opposition vis-à-vis ‘the Rest’.

In more recent work, however, the categories of ‘person’ and ‘agency’ are increasingly discussed in relation to *things*. By the same token, there is now much attention to notions of ‘fetishism’ or even ‘fetichization’. What motivates such research is the hope to trace, especially in situations of rapid economic change, variable and ambiguous conceptions of personhood and agency by exploring the ambivalences and dynamics of conceptual separations between persons and things.<sup>4</sup> The pivotal questions guiding such research are:

- how can human capacities of agency be attributed to things? and
- how can human beings be reduced to things in the sense that they no longer seem to have agency of their own?

In his Introduction to *The Social Life of Things* Arjun Appadurai (1986: 5) warns us

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<sup>1</sup> For a summary see Guyer 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Maine 1861; Tönnies 1887.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Philip Burnham’s (2000) paper with the telling title ‘Whose Community? Whose Forest?’; or Peter Geschiere (2001) on ‘The Elusive Community.’

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Spyer (1998) on border fetishism; also cf. Pietz (1993).

that

‘...even though from a theoretical point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a methodological point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context.’

Studying persons through things might allow us to overcome the temptations of simplistic dichotomies and arrive at a more subtle understanding of the ambivalences and dynamics of varying conceptions of personhood and human action, such as exist in concrete human communities specifically defined in space and in time.

However, such an approach may also lead to problematically one-sided emphases. For instance in Daniel Miller’s seminal book *Modernity: An Ethnographic Approach: Dualism and Mass Consumption in Trinidad* (1994), ‘things’ sometimes threaten to out-voice ‘people’. Miller is clearly so interested, here, in what consumer goods tell about tensions between social categories (notably the apparent ‘Black – Asian’ divide) and about people’s experiences of modernity, that the comments of the people concerned seem to be of minor importance.

More convincing in this connection seems the work of Jean-Pierre Warnier (1999). He has proposed an original approach for relating objects and human agency. He tries to develop ‘a general theory of material culture’ that will succeed in bridging the gap – that in his view still hampers older approaches in this field – between objects viewed as representing something else, and an approach to objects primarily in their own materiality. Warnier takes one of the last articles of Marcel Mauss on ‘Les techniques du corps’ (1934/1966b) as his point of departure and proposes to focus on what he calls *la mise en objets dans les conduites motrices* – that is, people’s largely unconscious use of objects (he speaks also of ‘the incorporation of objects’, in the sense of an incarnation of the objects’ dynamics in the subject’s actions). One can wonder whether Mauss’ short article offers, indeed, a helpful starting point for such an undertaking (Warnier seems to need a good part of the book to emancipate himself from Mauss). But the ways in which he links this *mise en objet* to Foucault’s notions of *subjectivation*, *techniques of the self* and *governmentality* is certainly inspiring. Warnier’s examples (both from the Cameroonian Grassfields and Western Europe) clearly show how objects and the way they are incorporated in personal *conduites motrices* offer strategic starting points for understanding the ways (often implicit and therefore all the more coercive) in which identities and the self are expressed and affirmed.

### *How the present collection situates itself in the debates identified above*

The contributions in the present collection follow fairly different paths in order to relate ‘things-in-motion’ to human context. They certainly do not offer one all-encompassing formula for how to relate things to human agency – luckily so, since this would give rise to yet other false or misleading dichotomies and simplifications. But they do suggest a rich array of vantage points and approaches for understanding different trajectories in the human valuation of things, and as such amount to an invitation to intensify the dialogue

between anthropology and economics.

Obvious focal points in the collection are the relation between commodities (or, more generally, *things*) and *identities*; and, more or less parallel to this, the nexus between *money* and *convertibility*. But on both points the relation between things and human agency seems to be wrought with ambivalences. There has been a rich array of studies of the role of global commodities, re-appropriated and re-interpreted, in the marking of identities. Yet, there is basic ambiguity here:

- On the one hand, objects – whether ancient ‘prestige goods’ or imported commodities of a more recent vintage and signature – may be used to confirm or even freeze identities.
- On the other hand, however, these goods, also the local ‘prestige goods’, are involved in processes of commodification, related to a market that is in principle open-ended, and this necessarily undermines such efforts at closure.

For instance, as Birgit Meyer (1999) shows for Pentecostals in Ghana, the new consumption goods may function as identity-markers for the people involved, but the latter view them at the same time as threats – as potentially undermining their identity of being ‘born-again’.<sup>1</sup> In the present volume, Rijk van Dijk argues for Ghanaians in the West European diaspora, that in the context of their Pentecostal churches it is *gifts* (rather than *commodities*) that are seen as potentially polluted and therefore dangerous. Clearly, there are multiple patterns in the links between identities and things (whether commodities or not) that can lead in different ways to a fetichization of goods and to efforts to control and ‘de-commodify’ them – efforts which, moreover, are seldom completely successful.

In his 1986 Introduction, Appadurai approached this intriguing tension between the basic mobility of goods, and efforts to freeze them in a somewhat different way:

‘...since commodities constantly spill beyond the boundaries of specific cultures (...) political control of demand is always threatened with disturbance. (...) It is in the interest of those in power to completely freeze the flow of commodities, by creating a closed universe of commodities and a rigid set of regulations about how they are to move.’ (Appadurai 1986b: 57).

Clearly this precarious balance between circulating and freezing is a nodal point for relating things and agency. The nexus between money and convertibility of values is a similar point of uncertainty where both the intransigence of things (which often appear subjectively as though ‘having a will of their own’) and human agency come to the fore. In this volume the contributions by Jean Comaroff & John Comaroff and by Brad Weiss – on the Tswana in South Africa and on Bukoba in N.W. Tanzania, respectively – show how peo-

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<sup>1</sup> That this desire to be purified from the supposedly polluting effects of commodities is not just limited to the Christian domain is clear from Frank 1995. In South Central Africa, cults of affliction offer a further parallel. These cults have arisen from early modern times onwards on the wings of long-distance commodity trade (van Binsbergen 1981; cf. his monographic contribution to the present volume). Here, stranger spirits are supposed to take possession of local people, producing afflictions that can only be remedied by joining the specific cult of such a spirit; in this cultic context, the adept makes claims to specific foreign commodities such as cloth, beads, tea, etc.

ple's efforts to contain new forms of money, relating them to older means of exchange, create 'theatres' that highlight the intertwinement of things-in-motion and human action. The emerging arguments remind us of the general conclusion of van Binsbergen & van Dijk's *Situating globality* (2004): far from being helpless victims who slavishly submit to globalization and commodification, present-day African actors often turn out to be very well capable of holding their own in this apparent onslaught of modernity, creatively engaging a selection of whatever globalization and commodification is offering, in order to continue doing what these African actors have been doing for a long time using different resources.

Two other sections below may relate more indirectly to this theme of things-and-agency. In the section headed 'The Limits of Commodification', Mike Rowlands, Irene Stengs and Wim van Binsbergen discuss more or less ritualized objects – 'cultural patrimonies' in Mali and Cameroon; portraits of King Chulalongkorn, 'the great modernizer', in Thailand; and the objects of healing cults in Southern Africa – that seem to be at the margins of commodification processes. The comparison of these three contributions shows how very different and quite unexpected patterns can emerge from the linkages between ritualizing action and processes of commodification and de-commodification.

Another nodal point where closer attention could yield further insights, is *the relation between consumption and production*. In his contribution to the present book, Arjun Appadurai repeats his view – now somewhat differently formulated from the conclusion of his 1986 Introduction, and now with at least some tribute to Weber – to the effect that

'...we need an equivalent sociology of consumption (not a mirror image) to that Marx gave us for production.'

However, it is clear from Appadurai's own work that this has to be read as a relative emphasis, not as a plea for rigidly separating consumption from production.

Carrier (1997b: 52) has argued that presenting man as a consumer, rather than as a producer, is instrumental to the neo-classical economics' quest for a generalizable individual. He gives the following, telling quote from Michael Perry, chairman of Unilever in the latter's 1994 President's Lecture:

'The old rigid barriers are disappearing – class and rank; blue collar and white collar; council tenant and home owner; employee and housewife. More and more we are simply consumers.'

Producers tend to have different positions and interests (for instance, they may object to the closing of their working place because of the dictates of 'the Market'). But consumers are supposed to have only one general interest – that of optimizing consumption!

Understanding things-in-motion, and the ways in which people try to deal with this mobility, requires in any case that we take into account people's views (whether factually correct, or distorted, or entirely mythical) as to how these things are produced in the first place, and who or what produces them. It is striking that 'the occult economies' that Jean and John Comaroff see as characteristic of the 'millennial capitalism' of our days – not only popular fantasies about witchcraft and 'charged objects' in Africa, but also pyramid games or the obsession with asocial forms of consumption by Satanic sects in the North –



seem to focus precisely on the opaque relation between consumption and production.<sup>1</sup> In the present collection Roy Dilley and Peter Geschiere – on craft industries and alienation in Senegal; and on the rapacious wild rubber boom in German Cameroon, respectively – show how an elaboration on Appadurai's key-notions of 'politics of consumption' and 'tournaments of value' elucidate<sup>2</sup> the crucial linkages between consumption and production, especially by throwing into relief people's perceptions of such linkages. This kind of work shows another strategic dimension for highlighting the relation between things-in-motion and human agency.

### *The individual contributions in the present collection*

Let us now sample the individual contributions in the present collection.

The book starts with two ambitious attempts to show how important anthropological perspectives can be to understand the global world of finance.

Thus, in his piece on 'Materiality in the future of anthropology' Arjun Appadurai outlines strategic points of departure for an overarching sociology of consumption. Starting from the old anthropological gift-commodity polarity ('the Marx-Maussian relationship'), he formulates an approach for confronting new complexities of materiality. He focuses on the enigmatic materialities of global finance capital – 'its liquids and solids' – and on the changing spaces of consumption in order to complement 'Marx's factory-based map of production-relations.'

In the next chapter, Paul Alexander<sup>3</sup> and Jenny Alexander deal with the flip side of transnational capital: the rapid emergence of small, locally owned enterprises in Indonesia – more specifically the successful furniture industry in Jepara (Java). They explore the special strategies by which Javanese artisans/entrepreneurs have succeeded to retain control over the production in local hands. The abolition in 1987 of the more stringent forms of control by the Indonesian state was certainly conducive to this industrial growth from below. But this begs the question as to how a group of rural artisans could succeed in creating a highly efficient market system of global dimensions. The Alexanders identify special strategies of price-setting and payment as important factors in this.

The next section is devoted to 'Seminal Concepts and Empirical Application'.

Here, Colin Renfrew, the leading British archaeologist, deals with the role of commodification – and more generally, of things-in-circulation – for societal transformation in a global historical perspective. He postulates that symbols embodied in material objects

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<sup>1</sup> See Jean and John Comaroff 1999a, 1999b, and 2000. They highlight that even though spectacular expressions of such 'occult economies' emerge in 'peripheral' regions (magical interpretations of new forms of wealth; 'zombification' of migrant labour and of other forms of displacement), there are striking parallels in capitalist 'core' areas. See also Geschiere 1997 on witchcraft and modernity in Africa.

<sup>2</sup> On 'politics of consumption', cf. Appadurai 1986b: 3f, 56f and *passim*; on 'tournaments of value', cf. Appadurai 1986b: 21, 50; see footnote on p. 28 below for the literal definition.

<sup>3</sup> It was with deep sadness that we received the news of Paul's unexpected death in December 2004. He was a central figure in the debates during our conference. It is with a sense of great loss that we dedicate this volume to his memory.

precede concepts in human history. Therefore (against the background of palaeoanthropologists' discussions of the so-called 'Human Revolution' entailing the appearance of language, representation, and art), Renfrew sees the emerging circulation of commodities – from the Upper Palaeolithic onwards but gaining full momentum in the Neolithic – as the true Human Revolution (maybe of more consequence than the emergence of *Homo sapiens sapiens* as such). The etymology of the word 'commodity' as something corresponding to a specific regime of measurement is, in his view, of special importance to understand the crucial role of commodification in human history.

Janet Roitman focuses on the concept of debt and the unexpected implications it can acquire in areas of political-economic turmoil like the Chad basin, West Africa. Here the economy has been transformed by economic austerity brought on by Structural Adjustment Programmes, emerging transnational markets (especially in arms and drugs) and an intensification of smuggling. Therefore, debt and liability take on new modes. Seizure and pillage create novel forms of obligation. Roitman is especially interested in the productivity of debt relations in such a context – that is their role in the creation of new forms of regulation and new modalities for generating wealth.

Nancy Rose Hunt applies the concept of the 'social history of things' in a very specific context: the medicalization of childbirth in colonial times (and its post-colonial demedicalization) in Congo-Zaire. Such objects as birth certificates, enema clysters and bicycles played their role in the re-location of child-bearing in a clinical setting under the Belgian pro-natalist regime. In the late Mobutu period these objects were still central in reproductive practices but their social and economic values had changed dramatically and they had become part of very different routines. Hunt's analysis highlights that the notion of 'the social history of things' can point to wide ramifications: the commodification of the objects she studied was deeply influenced by underlying local cosmologies hinging on bodily fluids whose flow should not be impeded.<sup>1</sup> She shows also how rapidly the implications of such cosmologies for the valuation of commodities can change.

The next section deals with 'Money and the Nexus of Convertibility'.

Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff open this section with a contribution on the role of money as a potential nexus of 'commensuration' in the encounter of the southern Tswana people (South Africa) and European colonizers in the 19th century. The Comaroffs emphasize the need to study money and commodification as social processes that have played a crucial role in the construction of universalizing ideologies and modernist politico-economic regimes. But such means of exchange have the capacity to both construct and negate difference, and colonized people proved to be highly sensitive to the capacity of currencies to enable and impede convertibility. Their contribution shows that 'commensuration' – the negotiation of different orders of value – and its inherent uncertainties are, indeed, a vital moment in the linking of things-in-motion and human agency.

In a similar vein, Brad Weiss studies early colonial encounters between coins and coffee as media of value and exchange in Bukoba (N.W. Tanzania). Of interest is that in this area coffee functioned as a current means of exchange, before it was transformed into

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<sup>1</sup> For East African parallels of liquid cosmologies, cf. de Lame 1996; Taylor 1988, 1992.

the main cash-crop under colonial rule. Weiss argues that coffee as well as Western coins were capable of serving as currencies, permitting different forms of value to be made commensurate to one another. This is why their dynamic relationship is fundamental to the understanding of the crystallization of new forms of wealth and to people's changing perceptions of the significance of objects and their attachment to persons.

Rijk van Dijk discusses similar issues in a very different context: present-day Pentecostal churches among Ghanaians in diaspora (notably in the Netherlands). Strikingly, in this context it is gift-giving that is problematic. Money or commodities, by contrast, are considered to be totally impersonal and alienable. But personal gifts can be polluted and are, therefore, subject to strict scrutiny. Such gifts offer, therefore, a vantage point from which to study the politics of moral supervision that Pentecostal ideology and praxis impose on the members. Moreover, gift-giving and the transnational relations it can create prove to be crucial to the avenues of 'self-making' propounded by Pentecostalism in the diaspora. Van Dijk's contribution shows also how important multi-sited fieldwork (both in Ghana and in the Netherlands) is to follow goods in their circulation and their changing associations with persons.

The next two chapters constitute the section on 'The Relation between Production and Consumption'. These contributions take Appadurai's notions of 'politics, regimes, and tournaments of value' as their starting point.

Thus Roy Dillely analyses not only the pathways of objects, but also the growing distance between production and consumption in Senegalese craft industries. He juxtaposes the economy of weaving in the rural *Fleuve* area, craft production in a government-created 'arts and crafts village' in the town of Ziguinchor, and the economy of 'African art' in the city of Dakar. He shows that the variable relation between consumption and production in these different settings can only be understood in relation to varying forms of political control. In his view, the exercise of such political control over the locations of production and consumption constitutes a central factor in the regime of value.

Peter Geschiere tries to reconstruct the 'tournament of value' (Appadurai 1986b: 21, 50) that must have taken place during the violent wild rubber boom in German Cameroon (1900-1913). This episode brought an abrupt confrontation of very different regimes of value that were both, moreover, quite uncertain. To the locals, the rubber liquid never had had any value at all, but also to Westerners its sudden valuation due to new industrial developments was quite unexpected. In such an uncertain setting, power and coercion proved to be crucial to both the production and the appropriation of the product. Yet, it is striking that even in this context some forms of negotiation and commensuration developed. It seems wise to associate the notion of 'tournament' not too readily with an art auction à la Baudrillard.<sup>1</sup> Power and coercion are often vital to processes of valuation;

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<sup>1</sup> Appadurai (1986: 16, 21f) defines the tournament of value, somewhat impressionistically, as

'antagonistic, romantic, individualistic, and game-like ethos that stands in contrast to the ethos of everyday behavior.'

Baudrillard 1979: 127f (English translation 1981) sees the art auction in the following terms:

moreover, they prove to link consumption in a direct way to production.

The contributions in the last section on ‘The Limits of Commodification’ problematise the link between things-in-motion – or rather the freezing of things – and human action, again, in different ways.

Thus, Mike Rowlands shows how value can be created through the denial of commodification. He focuses on objects that are set apart as cultural heritage, for instance in museums, cultural centres or religious institutions. Relating to recent debates on the coalescence of persons and things and on how the materiality of things can be seen as transcending human agency, he discusses how such cultural heritage objects can be used to promote cultural autonomy and group identity. His comparison of the role of cultural heritage in two contrasting African settings (Mali and Cameroon) indicates how this has promoted distinct forms of cultural exclusion.

James Leach approaches the issue of the limits of commodification in a very different way. He warns that commodification can easily function as some sort of meta-narrative that makes anthropologists less open-minded in the field and leads to ethnography *à thèse*. As an example he discusses the stories with which he was confronted during his fieldwork in Papua New Guinea about White men circulating in the region to buy up human organs. Theories of commodification could easily suggest that such stories have to be interpreted in terms of a growing concern about global trade in body parts. However, a more open ethnography would indicate that such stories relate to older practices of violence and extraction in the area. Leach is certainly right that teleological interpretations of processes of commodification can anticipate the cause and trajectory of people’s interest in things and thus disempower peripheral people. Yet, people’s worries – and fascination – with new economic circuits that seem to be part of an open-ended market remain crucial for an understanding of the dynamics of the relation between persons and things.

Irene Stengs studies the present-day commodification in Thailand of the image of king Chulalongkorn, as the great modernizer of the country (around 1900). Especially the manufacturing and trade of the king’s portraits have become a flowering business. Stengs argues that these portraits have such strong emotional appeal because they stand for a person that has come to symbolize ‘Thai-ness’ as such. Of interest is that her analysis shows that investing objects with such strong emotional appeal can go very well together with their rapid commodification.

Wim van Binsbergen’s argument on commodification and the *sangoma* mediumistic healing cult in Francistown, Botswana situates itself at the very boundary between the domestic and the market domain. The paper’s title, ‘We are in this for the money’, derives from cult leaders’ claims that it is only the promise of a lucrative undertaking that attracted them to the cult, and keeps them in it. Admittedly, the cult can be read as a celebration of commodity exchange and even as an encoded historical precipitation of patterns of regional exchange that have existed in the wider region (stretching from Southern

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‘L’acte décisif est celui d’une double réduction simultanée, celle de la valeur d’échange (argent) et de la valeur symbolique (le tableau comme œuvre), et de leur transmutation en valeur / signe (le tableau signé, coté, valeur somptuaire et objet rare) par la dépense et la compétition agonistique.’

Africa to the Indian Ocean and beyond) for centuries. In this respect it shows an urban, cosmopolitan, commodified version of a cultic complex that has represented an intimate 'home' tradition of several centuries' standing among the Nguni-speaking peoples of Southern Africa. But on the other hand, in its sanctification of place and person, and its construction of an intimate community which is effectively therapeutic and identity, the cult – whilst quietly affirming commodification as a fact of Francistown life – appears to effect a crucial transformation. It is through the cult that its adepts and out-patients actively confront, rather than celebrate, commodification, thus recapturing vital meanings which has been obscured by the overwhelming effects of commodification of their lives outside the cultic sphere.

As said, this set of contributions does not add up to one all-encompassing formula. But they do suggest a series of strategic application points, worthy of further attention in order to bring out the specific subtleties that anthropological analysis can bring to such notions as consumption or commodification, thus complementing and occasionally even counter-acting the models of economics, despite the immense power with which the latter are surrounded in the world today, in addition to their unmistakable relevance. Things, especially when they are in motion, call forth powerful human imageries, precisely because they are so difficult to contain and control, in the world of the circulation of commodities, as much as in humans' existential struggles in general. And, as Bayart puts it so graphically in his seminal explorations into *L'illusion identitaire* ('Identity's illusions'):

'Qui dit imaginaire, dit ambivalence'  
(the imaginary is always ambivalent – Bayart 1996).

Linking things-in-motion to human agency, in all its ambiguities and uncertainties, remains crucial to such an anthropological project; the contributions that follow may be read especially for their varying suggestions on how to implement this idea in concrete research settings.

The poorer parts of our 'global village' have been exposed, first to the application of a statist (i.e. state-centred) version of development economics and its 'modernization' ideas, and subsequently – in an abrupt transition – to the neo-liberal creed of privatization and flexibilization under Structural Adjustment Programmes. With all the devastation this has brought about, it has also created openings for the anthropological and intercultural-philosophical corrective of what many economists still seem to take for granted. Although, regrettably, economics is insufficiently represented in this book to speak of a true dialogue between disciplines, this book is at least intended to further such a dialogue and to provide essential conceptual and descriptive elements towards it.

As further steps towards such a dialogue, the remainder of this Introduction will do two things:

- it will complement, and criticise, the economic and economic-anthropological perspective on things as commodities from the perspective of a more general philoso-

- phical perspective on things, and
- it will try to do justice to this collection's main title, and therefore present a heuristically illuminating case study leading up to an anthropological definition of *commodification*.

### *An otherwise blind spot in the present collection: The philosophical 'life of things' beyond their 'social life'*

What the present collection scarcely succeeds in doing is to relate the new anthropological interest in things and their commodification to alternative perspectives on objects and their social encapsulation in other disciplines, notably in art history and philosophy (aesthetics and philosophical anthropology).

No one can expect me to add, to this already unduly long Introduction, the outline of a philosophy of things that goes beyond this book's relatively narrow focus on commodification, and that brings out the great centrality and bewildering variety of human reflection on things in the many documented thought traditions of humankind. Engrossed in our current debates on commodities and globalization we might well get the impression, with Daniel Miller (1983), that '*Things ain't what they used to be*'; yet it is fair to say that thinking about things is one of the few constants of the history of human thought.

Preliminary to any substantive analysis of such thinking about things, we would have to conduct an extensive terminological exploration, since certainly not all languages have the expression 'things', or a fairly close equivalent, in the sense of 'an extensive (in principle unbounded) set of distinct, countable individual objects, marked as non-human (even as inanimate), and together constituting the ensemble of the concrete world that surrounds humans, without including or implying them'. Let us make a short and hopelessly eclectic round of a few languages from three continents.

In ENGLISH, the expression *things* clearly has the above connotation, and it has close parallels in FRENCH (*les choses*), GERMAN (*die Dinge*), LATIN (*res*; cf. Lucretius 1907). DUTCH has *de dingen* (cf. German), but the expression tends to refer to concrete objects, not to the empirical world as a whole – unless in stilted poetical or philosophical language use. Interestingly, a temporal dynamism seems to attach to the etymology of *thing/Ding/ding* in the Germanic branch of Indo-European; the proposed root etymon being *\*tenkw-*, cf. Latin *tempus*, 'time'. In the Germanic languages, *thing/Ding/ding* selectively survives in the sense of 'court proceedings, parliament'.<sup>1</sup> This would make the original conception of 'things' far more dynamic and fluid, and far less frozen, than 'thing' tends to be in our modern usage. One is tempted to see the latter-day development as the increasing dominance of the commodity aspect in the course of history. Interestingly, a similar semantics obtains in HEBREW, where the same root דָּבַר, *dabar* (cf. AKKADIAN *dabab-*, semantically similar), is used both for 'speaking, word' (including God's speaking through the prophets – but for God's creative

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<sup>1</sup> Partridge 1979, s.v. 'thing'. Other etymological authorities (de Vries 1967; van Veen & van der Sijs 1997, both s.v. 'ding') however see the meaning 'object' for *thing/Ding/ding* derive from the *subject matter* of the *ding* in the sense of 'court proceedings'. De Vries proposes a basic meaning deriving from filling-in of a dobe-and-wattle wall – also, I would say, suggestive of undivided and extensive, rather than singularized and bounded, materiality, or perhaps marking the very transition between the two (the loam being caught in the rough rectangles formed by the wall's interwoven infrastructure of branches or bark) – *which is in essence a transition from analogous to digital*.

word in Genesis 1 a different root is used), and for ‘thing, case, court case, adjudication’ (with possible contamination with a homophonous but different putative root meaning ‘swarm’, hence *דבורה* as both ‘bee’ and ‘the Judge Deborah’). Of course, *some* recent reconstructions in the field of long-range linguistics, in terms of a particular version of the Nostratic hypothesis, see Afro-Asiatic (including Hebrew) and Indo-European as closely related language families.<sup>1</sup> In CHINESE, the expression *wan wu*, 萬物, literally ‘the ten thousand things’,<sup>2</sup> does carry the ‘general world’ implication although *wu* 物 is also used for ‘object(s)’ and ‘commodity/ies’. Finally, in the NKOYA language of western Central Zambia (a typical exponent of the Bantu sub-family of Niger-Congo),<sup>3</sup> the expression *by-uma*, ‘things’, mainly refers to individual objects (e.g. *sh-uma*, ‘something’) – usually with the connotation of being commodities, and one could never use the *-uma* root to refer to ‘the concrete world in general’. In the standard expression – contaminated with Christianity<sup>4</sup> yet in essence much older – *ha kutatika Nyambi balengile bitondo na bantu*, ‘in the beginning God created the trees and the humans’, it is *bitondo*, ‘trees’, that comes closest to ‘things’ as standing for the concrete empirical world – in the Nkoya case a dense savannah. In Nkoya the link between ‘speaking’ (*ku-amba*) and ‘adjudication’ (*ku-ambola*, cf *ng-amb-ela*, ‘judge’) also exists, but without any etymological link with ‘thing’. Clearly, ‘things’ are not conceptualized in the same way across cultures and languages, and the nexus between ‘non-human world in general’, ‘object’, ‘man-made object’ and ‘commodity’ may vary greatly.

The distinction between knowing subject and known object has been characteristic of the Western philosophical project; it is increasingly called into question in postmodern thought, which proclaims the demise of the autonomous subject, seeking to expose this idea as, among other things, a myth of a thoroughly commodified modern society. Other traditions of specialized philosophical thought, like those in China and India, tend to greater continuity between person and world, and even (in the Advaita Vedanta school associated with Shankaracharya, 8th c. CE) tend to deny that very distinction. But the earliest recorded traces of the encounter between humans and the world suggest that this distinction is not so easily cast aside. More or less fashioned stone tools have formed humans’ most conspicuous archaeological traces through over two million years, and they are the unmistakable indication of the way in which humans, however dimly for most of that time, must have dissociated themselves from their natural environment, scanning the latter for what they could use, appropriating that once they found it, shaping it in order

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Bomhard 1984; Bomhard & Kerns 1994; both contested by many Eastern European supporters of the Nostratic hypothesis. With thanks to Peter Broers for confirming the Hebrew details.

<sup>2</sup> For instance, in *Dao De Jing*, chs. 1 and 2. Also cf. Jullien 1995. Ames & Hall (2003: 77f), in their exciting philosophical translation based on the newly discovered bamboo texts, alternately interpret ‘all things’ and ‘everything that is happening’ – which brings 萬物 close to the etymology of the Germanic *thing/Ding/ding*, and perhaps to Wittgenstein’s (1922: 1) *die Welt ist alles, was der Fall ist*, ‘the world is everything that is the case’.

<sup>3</sup> See below, the section of this Introduction entitled ‘Commodification: A concrete case study as stepping-stone towards a definition’, for details on the Nkoya people. The present, quasi-biblical quotation can be found in van Binsbergen 1992b.

<sup>4</sup> In western Central Zambia, Christianity was formally introduced at the end of the 19th c. CE, although a trickle of influence may have seeped through from the Lower Congo and the Lower Zambezi from the 16th c. onwards.

to suit their purpose better.<sup>1</sup> In the case of stone tools, this purpose would largely relate to the needs of food, shelter and defence. Only from 200,000 Before Present, Anatomically Modern Humans come into sight. Now that we begin to be able to reconstruct their earliest intellectual products (myths; van Binsbergen 2005a), we find strong indications that these are about the concrete natural world: the earth, lightning, the rainbow: ‘*the things*’ in the generalized sense, certainly, but not concrete, bounded, countable objects yet – nor the world as a whole. Attempting to articulate narratives about the non-human, humankind shaped its own humanity, and came to language, thought, representation. One could claim that the whole of human cultural history is the struggle of humans to define themselves vis-à-vis ‘the things’ – working on the naturally given environment to be able to sustain its dangers and challenges, selectively appropriating, domesticating and reshaping parts of that environment, in the process, into verbal and conceptual representations of ‘nature’ as well as into man-made tangible things, and using these things in turn as props to shape human thought and society (cf. Leroi-Gourhan 1964). All this needs to be considered *before* we arrive at the capability of things to be exchanged, circulated, and, in the process, to be used to articulate a specific socio-cultural identity.

As poets and pictorial artists (cf. Schneider 1998) have always known, the thing is the greatest mystery, and the source of all other mysteries: not human, it yet represents a form of being independent from the human, capable of an unaccountable parallel existence next to the human, and resisting, even destroying, the human. As aspects of Being just like we ourselves are, things are both our siblings, and (like siblings struggling for their parents’ favour and the family’s limited good) our ultimate denial, our doom.<sup>2</sup> Things constitute the inescapable reminder to humans of

- both humans’ essential *continuity* with all of reality (with Being itself; humans eat and drink things, they produce things from their hands and their bodies, they become things after death); but also of
- humans’ proud but painful *exile* from that reality through their capability of distinction and self-reflexivity (cf. Plessner 1981).

The instrumental use of ‘the things’ or of ‘a thing’ denies the *continuity* and speaks of *control* – foreshadowing the delusions of unlimited detachment, circulation and control, that reach their paroxysm in the concept of the *commodity*; but ultimately, ‘the things’ have their revenge, in their failure to be pressed into service just when humans need them most, in the injuries things afflict upon us, and in our inevitable death (when at long last we return to the state of being things ourselves and nothing more!).

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<sup>1</sup> At first scarcely, but soon by a characteristic pattern of repeated and specific hits, which in the end – with the microliths of the Upper Palaeolithic – developed into a fine art, involving a large number of highly specialized subtle hits.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Baudrillard (1990a) 2002: 172f, ‘the object as strange attractor’; the latter concept derives from chaos theory and denotes a mathematical function involving a broken exponent capable of producing extreme and unexpected values of the function, whose graphical representation may inspire a sense of beauty and bewilderment.



While cultural history is the record of this struggle in kaleidoscopic detail, the history of thinkers' specialized thought from the Ancient Near East onward may be read (cf. Flasch 1972) as the process through which the conceptual tools for this struggle were being forged; in other words, as *Die Frage nach dem Ding* (Heidegger 1935/1984), 'the question as to the thing':

'The question: What is a thing? amounts to the question: What is Man? That does not mean that the things are subsumed under the domain of human control, but rather to the contrary: Man is to be understood as the being who always jumps higher than the things, but in such a way that this exaltation is only possible because the things meet us and precisely in doing so remain themselves – whilst they send us back behind ourselves and underneath our surface' (Heidegger 1935/1984: 189, my translation; cf. Prins 2004).

In this process, writing, the state, organized religion and science (as emerged in the Ancient Near East only a handful of millennia ago) have constituted a package facilitating the trend towards the transcendent and the virtual: not the here and now of concrete things, but the institution, the letter of the law dictated by a distant or long-deceased monarch or a thought-up god, wriggled itself between 'the things' and mankind, and brought about a detachment liberating man-made things from their makers and from the moment and site of their production. From the pre-Socratics to the early Moderns, such as Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz, one of the great challenges was to define the nature of things as against the nature of humanity. Historians of philosophy like to depict the Kantian critical epistemology as a Copernican revolution greater than Copernicus' astronomical one itself. Kant's *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (1783/1781-1787) is the beginning and the foundation of modern thought. He argued, extensively and cogently, that we are utterly incapable of knowing things as they really are. We can only know our mental representations of them. Yet there is the unmistakable continuity between these representations, and reality. As a result, human acts, and man-made contraptions based upon these representations, do actually work, and do work with the intended effect, out there in the world of 'the things'. In order to account for this (if Kant is right, *extremely surprising*) continuity, he had to postulate the *transcendental*: i.e. built-in categories (time, cause, etc.) that, without being learned, are supposed to shape our thinking so that the same structure would permeate both our thought, and the – essentially unknowable – world of 'the things'.<sup>1</sup> With Kant, the detachment between humans and things, already foreboded in the shadow play of Plato's cave,<sup>2</sup> was complete, and humankind's victory over the things, definitive. Henceforth the history of Western thought (and, given the enormous influence of thinkers like Hegel, Marx and Freud, the history of North Atlantic society) would be the history of that detachment, condemning us moderns to be '*Moved by Appearances*' (*Door Schijn Bewogen*) only (Oosterling 1996). The cinema, video, TV, and (towards the late 20th-c.) cell-phones and the Internet, have only continued the same line, intensifying the unreality of experience by inserting ever new, and ever more deceptively real, man-made things in

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. the work of the distinguished Dutch metaphysician Otto Duintjer (1966), who traces, in terms of spirituality, the implications of 'the transcendental' which, for that pioneer of genius Kant, still had to remain the rational (though far-fetched) solution to a self-imposed philosophical puzzle.

<sup>2</sup> *Republic*, VII: 1f (Plato 1975).

between humans and ‘the things’. *Kantian modern thought, thus, is the matrix of commodification, as much as commodification is the matrix of Kantian modern thought.*

There is hardly a modern thinker of the first rank who has not reflected on aspects of this process, either resignedly in the technical language of logic, epistemology and logical positivism; or critically and passionately, in the existential language of phenomenology; or ironically and spirally, in the postmodern language of deconstruction.<sup>1</sup> Let us not forget that the first extensive discussion of the role of money in the circulation of commodities, stemmed not from Adam Smith or Marx, but from Aristotle!<sup>2</sup> Tracing these ramifications even in the most superficial manner is beyond our present scope. However, I cannot refrain from making one crucial observation: *the general trend in 20th-c. CE thought has been not to re-affirm, but to expose, criticise, and remedy such a separation between humankind and ‘the things’ as is taken for granted, celebrated even, in the concepts of ‘commodity’ and ‘commodification’.*

A few examples must suffice. The Rotterdam metaphysician Prins tells us that in Heidegger’s later work

‘emphasis is laid upon the distinction between some false *Besorgen* (i.e. the appropriating and subjugating exposition inherent in technology) and *Besorgen* proper (i.e. *Gelassenheit*). In the latter mode we do not reduce the things to merely objects of use and waste, nor do we assault the things in a theoretical sense, by fixing them as “object”, as a configuration of matter and form, as a source of apperception, etc. *Gelassenheit* breathes a sense of openness towards the autonomy of the thing as thing. Hence, far from being a form of indifference, *Gelassenheit* is the highest form of loving care.<sup>3</sup> It is only from the *Gelassenheit* that we may arrive at a thought that is “thing-worthy”, that does justice, once more, to the estate of things.’ (Prins 2004; my translation and emphasis).<sup>4</sup>

In this *rapprochement* via-à-vis ‘the things’ (cf. Macho 1987), Heidegger, though perhaps most articulate among modern philosophers, is far from alone. The quest for spiritual coherence beyond the destruction of value inherent in commodification is also marked in the work of Duintjer (1966, 1988, 2002). In fact, Heidegger reiterates the intense reading of concrete reality that, for Husserl (e.g. 1973), constitutes the key to the phenomenological method (also compare, on the anthropological side, Jackson 1996). In this highly influential phenomenological movement, Kant does not rule supreme: the thing is, on the contrary, considered to be far from unknowable insofar as it is, with the beholder intent on knowing, an aspect of Being; least of all is the thing merely a commodity and nothing more – becoming a commodity would amount to a thing’s ultimate degradation.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> An arbitrary selection from the heterogeneous and extensive literature includes: Bransen 1991; Chisholm 1976; Joske 1967; Kobusch 1984; Macnamara 1982; Seidel 1972; Castaneda 1977.

<sup>2</sup> *Eth. Nicom.* 1133a13f; Aristotle 1990.

<sup>3</sup> Original reference to van Doosselaere 1975.

<sup>4</sup> I am inclined to leave Heidegger’s key terms untranslated. *Besorgen* ≈ ‘care’; *Gelassenheit* here ≠ ‘resignation’, but (on the authority of Prins and van Doosselaere) ≈ ‘attitude geared to liberation’.

<sup>5</sup> This applies widely, but not universally. Although in many respects part of the phenomenological movement, Sartre (1943) sees the object/thing as close to a commodity, to a rigid given that can be controlled, appropriated, and that (by implication; the following phrasing is far from Sartrean) is divorced from a life-giving network of relations, so that reducing the other to a thing is the ultimate tragedy of the human encounter. Characteristically, Sartre (1964) has joined only half-heartedly the ranks of modern philosophers

Not too distant from this orientation is Buber, whose emphasis on encounter and dialogue is not just limited to human beings but who advocates a view of human life as an encounter, once more, with the world, i.e. with ‘the things’ (Gruenfeld 1965). ‘Words and things’, as if the two are equally endowed as complementary keys to the mystery of Being, was to become a downright catchphrase of twentieth-century CE philosophy, reverberating from Peirce to Austin, then to the latter’s scornful critic Gellner, yet continued with Quine, given a feminist slant in Barrett, and somehow echoed, in the French tradition, from Foucault to perhaps Mudimbe. The latter sees both words and ‘beings’ (which, by analogy, I am inclined to read as ‘things’ here) as endowed with ‘a glorious body’, as if of the Roman Catholic saints he venerated in his youth. Deleuze & Guattari’s oeuvre seeks to bring out the pathological effects of capitalism, and to stipulate the conditions for ‘reterritorialization’ *beyond* commodities.<sup>1</sup>

All this philosophical work<sup>2</sup> shows a search to establish or to revindicate some kind of unity between the human subject and ‘the things’, *beyond, or in lieu of*, human’s cynical domination implied in commodification. Here, as in many other respects (van Binsbergen 2003a), anthropologists, in the present volume and elsewhere, diverge from philosophers, and rather indulge in an fascination with new forms of circulation, detachment and appearance. In the process, committed anthropologists (leaving their profession’s build-in nostalgia behind) may even rejoice in the unmistakable signs that their host societies, too, far from being backward and doomed, are at long last turning modern, even postmodern.

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*Verdinglichung* / ‘objectification’ as the state in which the object lands when fully commodified, and it is largely this sense that continues to inform the present-day usage of such words as ‘objectification’ and ‘reification’.

<sup>1</sup> Austin 1962; Peirce 1991; Quine 1960, 1981; Gellner 1959 (cf. Hann 1996); Barrett 1992; Foucault 1970; Mudimbe 1994; Deleuze & Guattari 1995, 1980. Burkert 1970 traced this preoccupation back to Ancient Greek philosophy.

<sup>2</sup> Reflection on ‘words’ and ‘things’ is not limited to the West but includes Indian and Chinese philosophy. Yet, having undergone the tremendous impact of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, just how much has the West owed to a linguistic situation, like in Hebrew, where ‘word’ and ‘thing’ coincided lexically? How much has that contributed to the emergence of the state, writing, organized religion, and science – the full package of the Ancient Near Eastern Revolution? This question is central to my current long-range research (see my forthcoming *The leopard’s unchanging spots: Long-range comparative research on the world history of shamanism as a key to enduring patterns of African agency*; various previews as extensive slide presentations (2003-2004) available at: [http://www.shikanda.net/ancient\\_models/index.html](http://www.shikanda.net/ancient_models/index.html)). My argument there suggests that the semantic situation of Hebrew, where ‘word’ and ‘thing’ converge in the same lexical item *d<sup>a</sup>b<sup>a</sup>r*, cannot be claimed as necessary or sufficient condition for the Ancient Near Eastern Revolution, because it fits a widespread Old World pattern. The form *d<sup>a</sup>b<sup>a</sup>r* derives from an inconceivably old etymology that informs (however contentiously this may sound) all Indo-European and Afro-Asiatic languages, as well as proto-Sino-Tibetan (and by extension proto-Dene-Sino-Caucasian), proto-Bantu, and ultimately proto-Khoi-San, where (as \**g<sup>o</sup>r<sup>o</sup>b*) it means ‘speckle, spot, heterogeneous point disturbing an otherwise homogeneous extension, point of discontinuity triggering the human consciousness, difference, separation’. There is overwhelming linguistic, iconographic and archaeological evidence for this etymology, and its ramifications and transformations in space and time; one of its index fossils is the symbolism of the leopard, ubiquitously recognized as a speckled animal *par excellence*. Whatever the merits of this etymology, what the Hebrew *d<sup>a</sup>b<sup>a</sup>r* does is simply remind us of the close parallel between the commodity (as ‘thing’) and the word (or the phoneme as constituting the word): both crucial inventions of humankind exist by virtue of:

- (1) an *absolute separation* that articulates detachment from among an undifferentiated flow (of things in general, for the commodity; of sounds and breath, for the word, or phoneme); and
- (2) a powerful *generalizing potential* beyond the singularity of the here and the now.

Thus both the word and the commodity are predicated on Deleuze’s (1968) *difference and repetition* as basic operations of the mind of Anatomically Modern Humans. There is, therefore, reason to link the rise of commodification with that of articulate language, and to propose a *Middle Palaeolithic* date for both.

The philosophical contributions cited invite us, not only to study things as commodities, but to critique them as commodities. If the parading of ever new French thinkers *à la mode* (from Althusser to Foucault to Baudrillard via Derrida to Deleuze, etc.) is to be more than cosmetic and consumptive, it is time anthropology engages in real encounter, not only with economics, but also with philosophy.

The regrettable absence of art historians, philosophers in the continental tradition, and indeed economists, from the present collection and from the conference on which it is based (the editors/convenors did invite representatives of these disciplines) means that the more extensive pursuit of these eminently promising themes will have to be reserved for a later occasion. In the present collection, faint echoes of these intellectual struggles and debates resonate in the contributions by Rowlands, the Comaroffs, Roitman, and van Binsbergen, among others. Colin Renfrew shows how archaeology is developing a sophisticated and illuminating discourse on things-in-exchange, from which anthropology, with participant observation's characteristic temporal and spatial myopia, has a lot to learn.

### *Commodification: A concrete case study as stepping-stone towards a definition*

Inevitably, my Introduction so far has slipped into the kind of abstract, placeless and timeless verbal constructions that anthropology needs as much as economics to define and direct itself as a discipline, but that (and here I could not agree more with Daniel Miller) anthropology perhaps more than any other discipline is capable of complementing with concrete detail that has the flesh and blood of social life. *The Social Life of Things*, the debates preceding and following that book, the contributions in the present book, and my introductory framework for the latter, all point towards the concept that dominates this book's title: *commodification*. Let me therefore, in conclusion, seek to address that concept from an anthropological angle, as an illustration of the kind of complementarity vis-à-vis economics that has been the editors/convenors guiding idea throughout.

### **Setting the framework for an ethnographic reading of commodities and commodification**

A person's access to the surrounding world is regulated – in addition to such limiting factors as reside in the environment and in that person's physical body – by a network of social relations constituting a community, and by an intersubjective ('cultural') system of classification and evaluation as more or less upheld in that community.

The nature and size of the community may differ considerably: from an isolated homestead to the globalising system of communication and consumption encompassing the North Atlantic, and elites world-wide. Technologies of space and time differ and, under the technological conditions prevailing today, there is no compelling reason why the network of social relations should not encompass the entire globe. However, many historic societies that are studied by historians and anthropologists have a technology of space and time hardly comparable with what is found in the urban centres of globalized society today. Until quite recently (spread of bicycles, cell phones and internet) there has been a tendency for communities (especially in rural areas and among the urban poor, and especially in the South) to be spatially restricted in a rather narrow way, since they have con-

tinued to rely on the, essentially Palaeolithic, technologies of face-to-face contact and unaided human ambulation. In many cases therefore the network of social relations is effectively a *local* community. That local community's intersubjective system of classification and evaluation defines, for a specific human being, which items in the surrounding world, including other humans, are available for what sort of actions and transactions. The network of social relations surrounding that person defines specific forms and conditions of that person's access to these items.

Thus we obtain a generalized social system, consisting of humans, their actions and transactions, and intersubjectively defined non-human items in the surrounding world. What would be required for these actions and transactions to have a commodity aspect? Crucial here is the *detachment*, in space and time, from the immediacy and multiplex nature of the total network of social relations in which a person's specific form of access to a specific item in the surrounding world is generally embedded. But how is this detachment brought about? Is it simply produced by thought, therefore amounting to a faculty of the human mind which may have universal distribution (at least, among Anatomically Modern Humans, a variety that emerged in Africa c. 200,000 years ago and to which all present-day humans belong)? Then we would expect commodities to occur in any human social and cultural setting – as briefly argued in footnote 2 on p. 35. Or, alternatively, is the condition of being a commodity limited to specific social conditions which are only found in certain societies and not in others? Is commodification perhaps typical of the modern world and its globalising tendencies?

The following example may elucidate some of the steps towards an anthropological definition of commodity. The example, presented here in the form of a mini-essay incorporated in this Introduction, is ethnographically precise in so far as it is based on a fair rendering in Nkoya village economy, Kaoma (formerly Mankoya) district, western Central Zambia, such as it was in the early 1970s; but of course, this is only a case study, merely intended for heuristic purposes, and I am not in the least claiming that in all villages all over the world non-commodities, and their path to commodification, are regulated by the same principles.<sup>1</sup>

### **From use value to commodity: Mushonto's reed mat within, and beyond, the Nkoya village economy, western Central Zambia, early 1970s**

Suppose that, in the Nkoya temporal and spatial context just defined, an aged man named Mushonto, member of a kin-based small village, wove a reed mat.

The proper place to do so is in public, in the un-walled thatched shelter (*nkuta*) that in every Nkoya village constitutes the centre of male sociality; here the women of the village serve the meals to their assembled menfolk, here home-brewed beer is consumed, visitors are entertained, and petty chores are undertaken such as making and mending of implements. The reed mat is woven from natural materials available in abundance from the edges of the wet riverside gardens. For centuries, in this part of South Central Africa, such gardens have been among a person's most cherished items of the natural environment. The individual ownership of the gardens may be contested – although until recently never in court –, but the reed supply

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<sup>1</sup> Fieldwork among the Nkoya was conducted in 1972-74 and during shorter periods, repeated almost yearly, until 1995. Thanks are due to the African Studies Centre, Leiden, for financing the shorter trips; and to the Institute for African Studies, Lusaka, and the Nkoya people, for accommodating this research and myself. On the Nkoya, cf. van Binsbergen 1978, 1981, 1992a, 1992b, 1994b, 1999, 2000, 2003c.

is held to be owned by the kin group as a whole, and therefore uncontested within the kin group. This was the case especially up to the middle of the twentieth century CE, before which time low population density guaranteed that the natural annual supply of reed would be more than sufficient. Nkoya people living in villages tend to have few possessions, and a reed mat is certainly an item to be formally passed on from one generation to the next. Suppose that upon Mushonto's death that reed mat was inherited by his kinsman Shabizi. Then Shabizi's more or less exclusive access to that reed mat is informed by

- the total network of kin relations in the village,
- the sense of continuity of this network over time as shared by the members of the village, as well as
- their sense of locality stipulating their network of social relations to be valid within the local horizon and to be constitutive of a sense of community there.

Within the network of social relationships that centres on this small village and the kin group that largely coincides with it, it would be difficult to conceive of this particular reed mat as a commodity. The same localized, more or less enduring network of social relations that allows Shabizi to have predominant access to the reed mat during most of the time, would force Shabizi to grant his other kin access to the reed mat on special occasions, e.g. when the mat is needed for visitors' bedding, for protagonists in a village ritual or court session to sit upon, or to wrap around a corpse prior to burial.

The point is not that transfers of money between kinsmen in the village are unknown (cf. van Binsbergen 1978). Far from it:

'We do not have the kind of reluctance (even taboo) to mix money and kinship, that you are talking about in relation to where you come from [the North Atlantic region]. Among us, when you give money to a person in the village, he/she<sup>1</sup> will be very happy. You give him/her the best thing there is in life.'<sup>2</sup>

Bride wealth is paid in money (usually in instalments over periods that easily extend into a decade, and that often never get finished); the bilateral descent system and the incessant residential mobility of individuals across the countryside as well as back and forth between town and village, render 'the village' a protean set of claims and potentialities rather than a firmly tangible local given. In fact, kin groups constitute and re-constitute themselves ephemerally on an ad hoc basis: the village is pragmatically defined as the answer to the following composite question: *which people (conceptually constituting 'a village') collaborate to pay bride wealth for which bride on behalf of which groom, and which people (conceptually constituting 'another village') join up to redistribute ('to eat') the bride wealth thus received?* Moreover, there are quite a few ceremonial occasions where small sums of money pass hands, e.g. to acknowledge kin obligations at the birth of a new member of the kin group; to punctuate various stages in the wedding ceremony itself, through which the groom gains more and more access to the bride's physical intimacy; to pay a fine imposed by impromptu and informal kin courts for infringing kinship rules, e.g. failure to observe inter-generation etiquette.

Although minted money was largely unknown in Nkoyaland before the advent of missionaries and labour migration (to the Witwatersrand) in the final quarter of the 19th c. CE (preceding the imposition of colonial rule, which took place in 1900), I am disinclined to consider this ceremonial circulation of money a relatively recent, 20th-c. CE adaptation to the penetration of the Western-dominated cash economy. Such penetration<sup>3</sup> constituted much less of a break than Eurocentric history of an earlier vintage would myopically assume. The region that is now associated with the Nkoya identity (the latter only emerged in the late 19th century CE, at the earliest; van Binsbergen 1992b), and South Central Africa in general, have been

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<sup>1</sup> Like all Bantu (and by extension, Niger-Congo) languages (and like most language families with the exception of Afro-Asiatic, Indo-European, and Khoi-San), Nkoya does not have gender.

<sup>2</sup> Mr D.K. Shiyowe, 7 September 1977; Wim van Binsbergen's field notes, Shumbanyama village, Kahare, Kaoma, Zambia.

<sup>3</sup> Not unlike the penetration of missionary Christianity; cf. van Binsbergen 1981: ch. 4.

touched by at least the peripheral capillaries of long-distance trade for centuries if not millennia (in cloth, beads, shells, more recently also iron cooking-pots, firearms, and – by a commodificatory transformation of pawnship, tributary relations and a mother's brother authority over his sister's son – slaves).<sup>1</sup> For the same period, this part of Africa had local and regional trading networks in petty commodities (axes, hoes, tinderboxes, beads, shells) and produce (beeswax, honey, dried meat, dried fish, tobacco). Any of these items appear to have displayed the kind of convertibility and commensurability that would make them appear not just as commodities, but even as incipient currency.

It remains a point for further historical research to ascertain whether the ceremonial circulation of money in 20th-c. Nkoyaland must be considered

1. a *transformation* of long-standing trade involving commodities and currency,
2. an *accommodation* between a trading/commodity domain and a kinship/marriage domain, or
3. rather constituted a historically independent ceremonial kinship/marriage domain of its own.

Marriage as an institution is a cultural universal among Anatomically Modern Humans, and therefore probably formed part of the original Out-of-Africa package c. 140,000 years ago (Brown 2000; van Binsbergen 2005a). As compared with the Out-of-Africa exodus, archaeologists propose a much more recent date for the emergence for commodity trade, whose age is yet deemed to be a dozen of millennia if not more.<sup>2</sup> Despite the tendencies towards local endogamy and/or group endogamy in many historic societies including those of North and South Central Africa and of the Middle East, a dominant paradigm in anthropology has closely associated marriage with exchange (Lévi-Strauss 1949). This suggests an intricate parallel between the conjugal circulation of people and the circulation of objects, both of which have a time depth of at least a dozen millennia. In this light neither of the two domains distinguished here could claim primacy on *prima facie* grounds; of the three alternatives cited above, the *accommodation* alternative (2) would appear to be the most likely, if still entirely hypothetical.

Beside this ceremonial encapsulation of money which (under present conditions and in the local actors' own conscious cultural constructs) has nothing to do with commodification, the village economy has a limited domain that is commodified in the sense that there cash transactions provide, for distant kin, especially from neighbouring villages and neighbouring valleys, as well as for non-kin, access to a variety of locally recognized commodities: home-brewed beer, home-baked buns, bundles of dried game meat, village crops; specialist services offered by the diviner, the healer, the mentrix in girl's puberty rites, the midwife, the blacksmith, the bricklayer, the tailor, etc.; occasionally also for the sexual services of unmarried or abandoned women. Moreover, distant kin and non-kin occasionally work as casual labour on a day-to-day basis, selling their labour cheaply to female household heads or to absentee village farmers. In the periphery of village society, but very much within the local horizon, there are teachers, game guards, court clerks and medical assistants who are salaried employees and as such have turned their labour into a commodity. Most of these are strangers, but where there are royal capitals, some locals are employed as court assessors and as musicians in the royal bands. This pretty much sums up the extent of commodification in Nkoya life today. Despite a trickle of cash transactions, Nkoya villages have no physical markets and, outside rural centres near the highway, village shops rarely survived the first decade after Independence (1964). However, everyone in the village is profoundly familiar with the experience of commodities. Commodities bought in more or less distant places (cloth, items of underwear, trinkets, guns, cartridges, tea, sugar, clothing especially the second-hand variety imported from

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<sup>1</sup> Miracle 1959; Phillipson 1977; van Binsbergen 1992b.


<sup>2</sup> Cf. Renfrew's contribution to the present book, for a typical statement proposing a dating between the Upper Palaeolithic and the Neolithic; the standardization which has been marked in Upper Palaeolithic artefacts (White 1989, Shreeve 1996: 229, 303; Deacon 1989, 1992) and the dramatically increased distances over which both people and materials can be shown to have travelled then (Shreeve 1996: 290; d'Errico 1992; Clottes 1987), might tempt us to favour an Upper Palaeolithic date if not earlier (cf. Gamble 1993).

Europe, bicycle parts, tools and implements) are the obvious things for relatives, returning migrants, husbands and lovers to bring to the village. Also, most adults have lived as migrants in urban areas, and all are familiar with the shops and the market at the district capital, even though this may be as much as 100 kms. away. At the far opposite end of this commodity spectrum are not only the tendencies to autarky in autosubsistence agriculture, hunting and gathering, and fishing, but also the withdrawal of objects from circulation in the context of royal capitals. Although the local history of kingship throughout the 20th c. CE was one of decline, even today (cf. van Binsbergen 1992b, 1999b, 2003b) the remnants of a once glorious royal court culture carry many reminiscences of the precolonial hoarding of animal skins, tusks, beads, shells, ironware, cattle, women and slaves in the face of their suitability and cultural eligibility for circulation. Such hoarding, of course, was a manifestation of the king's nearly total control over the long-distance circulation of commodities. This afforded him a logic of disposition that was, in many respects, the opposite of the logic of disposition reigning in the subject villages surrounding the capital: the village emphasis on non-violence, reciprocity, and mutual recognition of a shared humanity, at the royal capitals was replaced by violence, denial of reciprocity, and the atrocious denial of shared humanity through human sacrifice, summary executions, and surrender of local, even of close kin, into the hands of slave traders (van Binsbergen 2003c).

From the late 1980s onward, the Kazanga Cultural Society, at the initiative of returning urban migrants, started to organize (before a large audience of non-kin strangers) the annual Kazanga festival as a two-day catalogue of Nkoya symbolic production in the domain of music and dance. In this new context, these forms of symbolic production appeared for the first time under a new, partly *commodified* format involving cash payment (van Binsbergen 1992a, 2000). This contrasts strikingly with the historic ('traditional'), non-commodified format under which such symbolic production would punctuate important moments in the seasonal cycle and the individual biographies of villagers, before an audience of fellow-villagers who were largely kinsmen. At the festival, a few elderly village women make a point of dressing up in ancestral bark cloth that otherwise has completely disappeared from the village scene – a reminder of the fact that, before long-distance trade brought textiles (which before the 20th c. CE were typically a male and aristocratic prerogative anyway if not hoarded as shrine gifts), clothing could be produced locally even though there is, as far as I know, no evidence of spinning and weaving in the savannah south of the Congo-Zambezi watershed.

Let us finally dwell on the symbolic connotations of the reed mat in the Nkoya context. These are very extensive. In the first place, a person's bedding symbolises home. It is the (classificatory) sister who prepares the bed for the village son, and one's home is therefore the place where a sleeping mat is waiting for one. It is only in strangers' or enemies' territory that a person would travel carrying a sleeping mat. It is therefore significant that a section of the Nkoya people, the Mashasha, consider the reed mat their special group symbol, almost their totem. An oral tradition recounts how the Mashasha people trekked through the Zambezi flood plain carrying their reed mats over their shoulders, on their way to their present home 200 kms. east of the Zambezi – as if they had been expelled by the Luyana people. The latter are associated with the more powerful Luyana/Lozi/Barotse kingdom, but their original language, much of their ceremonial court culture, and indeed much of their history, greatly overlap with those of the Nkoya. This oral tradition is so central that when Mwenekahare Kabambi, king of the Mashasha people, posed in state to have his photograph taken in 1977, he insisted (despite the availability of more impressive regalia) on holding a vertical rolled-up reed mat as main sign of identity. The tradition of migrating carrying a reed mat has a considerable mythical element in it: it has long been established (White 1962; Vansina 1966; van Binsbergen 1992b) that, in South Central Africa, it is small lineage segments especially of aristocrats, and not entire peoples, that migrate and that are described as migrating peoples in oral traditions. The presence, among the Nkoya (van Binsbergen 1992b), of a myth evoking the remote past where Prince Luhamba ('Royal Person Soaring High'/'Bee-hive') and his 'sister', Katete ('Reed Mat Person') manage to escape from murderous enemies reinforces the to-



temic impression in suggesting<sup>1</sup> a link with Ancient Egyptian royal titlature ('Him of the Reed and the Bee'), and with the myth of Isis and Horus at Chemmis in the Egyptian delta. In Ancient Egypt, the symbolic connotations of the reed mat extended even beyond the kingship – the oldest houses and royal shrines were constructed out of reed mats (a fact acknowledged and imitated in the earliest stone architecture), and, with the loaf of bread, the reed mat features in the highly frequent hieroglyphic sign  for *htp*, 'altar, sacrifice, propitiation, peace'.

Against this background of a modern village society far from oblivious to the notion of commodity, Mushonto's reed mat under normal circumstances yet does not constitute a commodity, – not because the idea of a commodity is unknown, but because this very mat does not fall into the category of recognized commodities and is not surrounded by the type of relationships defining commodities. It is a heirloom, made from readily available natural materials by means of a technique that many local people have mastered, and if at all circulating it does so among close kinsmen as part of a generalized exchange not involving money. Only by a stretch of the imagination could one contemplate the arrival of a visitor, who does not fully or not at all qualify to share in the generalized sense of community, locality, and temporal continuity of the established members, and who therefore would have to pay an extra fee (beyond such generalized exchanges as are part of the daily practice of village life) in order to qualify for access to the reed mat, – especially if this access is to be fairly permanent and exclusive, e.g. as bedding. But even in the unlikely case that the fee would consist of the payment of a small sum of money (rather than the gift of a cup of beer, or the gift of a loaf of bread brought from the distant town or district capital), this would not turn the reed mat into a fully-fledged commodity. There would be the tacit assumption that the stranger would not permanently, irretrievably and without additional, explicit permission remove the red-mat from the village and from the villagers' potential access, thereby cutting this object loose from the sense of community, locality, and historical continuity, in which it was originally incorporated.

The latter, though, for the sake of the argument might yet happen one day, when the village is visited by one of its former members, a teacher. The teacher is driven up to the village by his patronising friend, an American expatriate worker, Reginald. The latter, who is a complete stranger to the village and who will never return there, is enamoured with the old, slightly ragged reed mat (but with a rich patina of many shades of pale yellow, ochre and burnt sienna) underneath the wobbly small table on which lunch is served. Conscious of the financial predicament of the villagers, Reginald declines to accept the mat as a gift, and insists on paying an unrealistically high price for it in the Zambian currency. We could argue about whether the reed mat, rolled up and tucked in the spacious trunk of the car, leaves the village as already a commodity; or whether it only becomes a commodity when Reginald in his turn parts with it, selling it to newcomer expatriates when he leaves the country to take up a promising assistant professorship in a moderately reputed college in the United States. But from the moment the reed mat leaves the outskirts of the village in the trunk of Reginald's car, the new owner has gained – vis-à-vis its last owner(s) i.e. Shabizi and the latter's kin, – access to the mat irretrievably, exclusively, and without this access requiring any more to be backed, in future, by anything like Reginald's generalized relationships with Shabizi, the latter's village, and his kin. Because

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<sup>1</sup> The merits, or demerits, of this preposterous, apparently Egyptocentric suggestion with Afrocentrist overtones cannot be argued here; cf. van Binsbergen 1998, and forthcoming.

of the format of the cash transaction (imposed by Reginald in order to eclipse and render invalid whatever locally recognized forms of exchange could have given him access to the reed mat – and a continued relationship with the community where it was at home), and because of whatever such a cash transaction implies (see below), Reginald's ownership of the reed mat has become absolute in the original sense of 'washed loose', 'detached'; it is a Western type of ownership as could not be defined within the cultural conventions, within the life-world, of Shabizi's village. (Of course Reginald, the new owner, is himself, in his turn, embedded in a network of social relations where his access to the newly acquired, commoditized reed mat will be qualified in the light of his wife's, children's, siblings', friends' and creditors' desires and strategies; but that is another story.)

In the process of being turned into a commodity, items of the surrounding world pass from one logic of disposition, and one life-world, to another logic of disposition and another life-world which is substantially differently structured even though both are likely to coexist in the same place and time, and even though the same person typically moves back and forth all the time between them. In both life-worlds things are subjected to elaborate classifications, but these two classifications have little in common. Why did Reginald want the old reed mat in the first place? Because it fits one or more external, globally circulating classifications that are imposed on the object. These externally imposed classifications are almost completely independent from those that surrounded the reed mat originally, in Shabizi's village. We may imagine that Reginald is attracted by the artistic play of yellow, brown and grey colours on the reed stalks, or fancies the parallel stripes of shade and sunlight shining through the mat when unfolded and set upright. There is a remote chance that he realises that the reed mat is a fitting symbol of the riverain, swampy environment which its original producers inhabit; or realises that the reed mat has been a feature of African architecture, ritual and burial at least since Archaic Egypt, and from there has been a symbol of authority and sacrificial offerings. There is even a remote chance that he realises that the reed mat embodies one of Africa's important claims to having made an original contribution to mathematics: weaving involves sophisticated counting practices and applied topology (Gerdes 1996; Zaslavsky 1990). But more likely, Reginald is simply reminded of the cheap and handy reed mats for sale in the local garden centre of his USA home town. In whatever way Reginald classifies the reed mat and turns it into an object, it is certain that his *classification differs in most respects very markedly from the classification originally applied* to the reed mat by Shabizi and his kin. By the same token, the commodified reed mat finds itself incorporated in *a totally different network of social relations*. When the mat was still in Shabizi's hands, this attending social network was marked by generalized exchanges and obligations on a kin basis and hence by the lack of individual exclusivity and totality – Shabizi's ownership applied mainly to the extent to which he was effectively and actively a member of the village. When the reed mat became a commodity, however, the network of social relationships then surrounding it became formalized in terms of impersonal, national and international legal codes defining legal ownership, the transfer of ownership by explicit cash transactions, the absolute applicability of these codes regardless of the history of personal relationships between rivals both claiming access to the object, and hence exclusivity and immutability. In other

words, the network of social relations surrounding the commodity consists primarily in the preponderance of legal relationships (defining unequivocal and absolute ownership, and complete control) over personalized social relationships (defining community, communal-ity, shared access and diffuse, fragmented control). *Hence the social person of the owner, seller and buyers no longer plays a role in defining the commodity and its access.*

This *detachment* from the here and now means that the object, turned into a commodity, exists not just within the local horizon, but that it speaks, in principle, of unlimited spaces and times, beyond the here and now, where it may also exist, and which in fact become thinkable because of the limitless detachment inherent in its commodity nature. Without such detachment, the local community is the obvious horizon of persons and objects; with such detachment, the impersonal principles of money and the state (and their inseparable companions: writing, organized religion, and science) become thinkable, and they create a multitude of potential worlds, beyond the local horizon, in which the commodity may be exchanged into ever new contexts, into ever new hands, without in principle being transformed in the process. For as a commodity, its essence is defined, no longer by the historicity, the sociality, and the systems of classification and evaluation of a specific local community, but by a claim to universal applicability and convertibility, against a universalizing standard that is impersonal, meta-local, non-identitary. The essence of the commodity is its meta-local exchangeability, which means that it has shed such meaning as the local community with its network of social relations, classifications and evaluations, can attribute to an object.

The commodity as commodity is devoid of intrinsic meaning. One might even say that it is devoid of life. (To the extent to which objects could be said to have a life of their own – as they often have in other life-worlds than the official statements of the scientific world-view of the West. These other, non-scientific life-worlds include those of Western housewives and artisans – who may often be overheard to have half-jocular, half-reproachful conversations with the very tools of their trade – hammers, spanners, brooms, cooking-pots; the life-worlds of children, artists, poets, and of those given to superstition; and of all Westerners when dreaming or feverish.) Yet the commodity must have had local meaning for the people who first appropriated it, and usually produced it, as an object. It is only by leaving (conceptually, and often also spatially and temporary) the original context of appropriation/production, that the object becomes a commodity, shedding its original meaning. By the same token, *the commodified object, devoid of original meaning, must be endowed with new meaning in order to motivate people to covet it; that meaning is inevitably different from the one informing the thing's original context.*

Insisting to pay an unrealistically high price for the reed mat, and thus to bring the object he coveted within the regime of commensurability by means of the cash nexus, Reginald sought to bring the object within the Western sphere of commodities and ownership which he obviously takes for granted, thus avoiding any suggestion that to his appropriation of the reed mat local obligations would continue to adhere that would risk tying him, for the rest of his life, to Mushonto's next of kin, and to the puzzling realm of generalized exchange they inhabit. Of all the possible roles that village society had available in order to structure the relationship between Reginald and his hosts, he opted for the most

distancing and alien one: that of the incomparably rich buyer scooping down from another world, one who can afford to pay a condescendingly high price to the rural paupers, and by doing so chooses to terminate the relationship the moment it is initiated, while scoffing any self-esteem and dignity the transaction might have offered to both sides if it had been allowed to have its course by local models. Thus, even in such a simple act as buying a reed mat, very restricted in time and involving protagonists who do not qualify as elites, we may detect some of the characteristics of a tournament of values (Appadurai 1986b: 21, 50; Geschiere, monographic contribution in the present volume); and of course, such a tournament is also one of identity. Ultimately the transaction reflects the hegemonic power of the North Atlantic region, which allows Reginald the illusion of imposing his own regime of value by turning the exchange into a over-tipped cash transaction, even though he makes himself a fool and a stranger in the eyes of his Nkoya interaction partners.

This hypothetical episode has one final lesson for us in stock. Shabizi's reed mat was a singular item with a unique history involving a unique set of named people, specific in time and place. If Reginald insists on turning it into a commodity, it can no longer remain absolutely singular and incomparable in its object history and its network of social relations, but has to become more or less interchangeable with the thousands of possible and actual reed mats. Regardless of their own particular object history, network and provenance, the commodity aspect these objects acquire makes all of them in principle similar, in the light of the great equaliser that money is. Until the object is once again rescued from the vortex of replaceability and commensurability in which it is caught as a commodity, is withdrawn from further circulation, and is appropriated and hoarded as a unique object, by a collector, museum, artist, or simply a person customising her home with things that may be imagined to 'breathe the life of Africa'. To the extent to which Mushonto's reed mat remained a single piece accidentally picked up, it somehow lacked the *repetitiveness* through which (with a Deleuzian play on *difference*; Deleuze 1968) it could effectively become a commodity articulating its uncontested owner's identity (that of a North Atlantic traveller to the remote interior – a *been-to*). Only as an item in a class of many more such commodities could it really serve that purpose. And that is why Mushonto's reed mat only became a fully-fledged commodity when Reginald's squash partner Bill, back in Zambia's capital, managed to persuade a well-intending expatriate-controlled non-governmental organization to make a number of trips to Nkoyaland and place an order for a regular supply of similar reed mats, but unused ones, please, for the curio trade and for export.

The realm of objective detachment and convertibility which money creates, does not have to span the entire world. In fact, the typical currency is not a global one but a regional one. But in order to be a currency at all it has to extend beyond the kin group's domain of generalized exchange, and to include unspecified sections of the world which, from the point of view of the local community, are 'not here' and 'not us'.

### **Definitions of commodity and commodification**

Having wrung out the heuristic potential of my example to the full, let us now present a

tentative definition of commodity to which it gives rise:

*A commodity is*

*1. a domesticated object, i.e. a part of the physical world that has been defined, classified, and appropriated by humans.*

Under today's conditions of Information and Communication Technology, and given the fact that rights over commodities may be commoditized in turn and be bought and sold in a market, the category of commodities may be taken to include not just physical objects identifiable in space and time, but also virtualized objects which have merely a symbolic, not a tangible, existence. Given the existing virtualization of the world of high finance, these immaterial aspects of commodification are of the greatest importance in the modern world, but they are least so in Africa, so far.

It is impossible for anything to become a commodity without it first being appropriated by humans. E.g. the Moon, as the Earth's satellite, has been defined and classified, most probably in all cultures from the Middle Palaeolithic onwards,<sup>1</sup> but the Moon as a whole, or parts of its surface, escaped the risk of being turned into a commodity (for instance in the context of the exploitation of minerals, or the dumping of terrestrial waste) until humans set foot on the Moon and physical appropriation became a fact.

Usually, but not necessarily, any domesticated object has been worked upon, processed, transformed, in short produced by humans. A mountain is not readily conceived as a commodity, but a representation of a mountain in the form of a painting may very well be. Also bird's feathers, metal ore worked into complex machinery such as an alarm clock, and even human bodies, may be examples of such domesticated objects. Here, the feather, if entirely in its natural state, is not produced by humans; but the human body is, in the most literal, reproductive sense;<sup>2</sup> and the alarm clock is unmistakably the end product of a long and complex chain of human production. *The Social Life of Things* largely concentrated on commodities of the man-made variety, on the basis on the Marxian principle articulated by Renfrew:

'Th[e] fetishism of commodities has its origin (...) in the peculiar social character of the labour that produces them...' – complete with the reference to *Capital*.<sup>3</sup>

Although any commodity made available for circulation implies the expenditure of such social labour if only for packing and transport, there is a world of difference between offering for sale calabashes grown in one's field and only occasionally embellished with minimum decoration (Kopytoff 1986); ornately packaged but fundamentally unprocessed saintly relics (Geary 1986); and the production, intensive in terms of raw materials, labour, equipment, and knowledge, of textiles and carpetry in the Middle East, and in early

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<sup>1</sup> There is Marshack's case for lunar calendars in the Upper Palaeolithic (Marshack 1964, 1972a, and extensive later work; however, cf. d'Errico 1989 and the critical comments by various authors in *Current Anthropology* following Marshack 1972b, 1979). Reconstructions of humankind's earliest myths as, arguably, contained in the original 'Out-of-Africa' package with which Anatomically Modern Humans left Africa c. 140,000 years ago afford us further peeps, however conjectural, into *Middle Palaeolithic* representations, with suggestions of lunar symbolism; cf. van Binsbergen 2005a.

<sup>2</sup> If, in the face of new medical technologies, many people today are abhorred by body parts being turned into commodities, this is partly because the connotations of 'the home' as the site of reproduction (in other words, of the physical and cosmological *womb*) cling to human organs, imparting a sense of indivisible wholeness, integrity, and respect that, in Lacanian terms, evokes the totalizing pre-separation phase of infant-mother relationships. In the background lurks a binary cosmological opposition between male and female: the former the domain of detachment/separation and generalizability i.e. commodities and (see below) articulate language; the latter the domain of maternal inclusiveness, singularity and uniqueness, of the home and the unspoken, *pre-verbal* life of the body. I am precluding here on the idea of the necessarily constituting *complementarity* between commodification and home-making domesticity (see below, p. 50).

<sup>3</sup> Marx 1970: 77; of course, in his 1986 Introduction, Appadurai (1986: 8) covers the same ground.

modern France and India (Reddy 1986; Bayly 1986; Spooner 1986). Mushonto's reed mat required the expenditure of a considerable amount of social labour – yet we found that *that* was not what turned it into a commodity. Further research and reflection may explore to what extent Marx's bias in favour of man-made commodities ethnocentrically reflected his own life-long experience as a member of a complex urban industrial society.

*2. The domesticated object becomes a commodity, is commoditized, through 'exchange',<sup>1</sup> i.e. through a process of detachment, in space and time, from the immediacy and multiplex nature of the total network of social relations in which a person's specific form of access to a specific item in the surrounding world is generally embedded, – replacing such access by generalized exchangeability and convertibility. The latter become thinkable, once (beyond the horizon of the local community, its network of social relations and its system of classification and evaluation) a much wider, in principle unbounded space of circulation is conceived. Here the object, released from the social context in which it was originally domesticated, and shedding its original meaning, becomes socially and culturally placeless, ready to be appropriated in potentially distant and unknown meta-local contexts, and to be measured there – not against the particularising evaluations of a historic local social network, but against the universalizing standards of a meta-local medium of exchange (of which money is the principal example), thus being endowed with a new meta-local meaning.*

## Discussion

The concept of commodity has universalizing tendencies. Of course, the capability to think beyond the here and the now is already inherent in Anatomically Modern Humans' most striking characteristic: their developed, articulate language. The essence of a word is that it may be used, not just once in a concrete specific situation, but with unlimited repetitions, with reference to situations both familiar and unfamiliar, both real and imagined. But even so, the human capability of universalizing thought beyond the here and the now must have owed a lot to the objectifying, meta-local connotations which objects acquire once they become commodities. Characteristically, recent research has situated the emergence of writing in the Ancient Near East in the context of trading records.<sup>2</sup>

It is not always easy to detect the commodity aspect under what we take to be the essence of an object. Descartes has a famous passage<sup>3</sup> on the immutability of substance, as exemplified on a piece of wax which he heats, kneads, melts etc. and which yet remains the same substance, wax. As son of a thoroughly commodified early-modern world, Descartes fails to appreciate that he is discussing not the essence of wax, but wax as a commodity. In terms of my above analysis, the reed mat is a different reed mat before and after its being commodified, occupying a totally different classificatory and evaluative niche in a totally different life-world. Descartes' passage is an evocation of a logic of disposition saturated with commodification – with the transferability of circumstance in

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Appadurai's (1986: 13) definition of the 'commodity situation'.

<sup>2</sup> Schmandt-Besserat 1992; but my discussion p. 30f above suggests older and more comprehensive roots.

<sup>3</sup> *Meditationes, II*: Descartes 1641/1897-1909.

the light of generalized, universalized substance.

Commodification is the process by which domesticated objects (out of which our human life-world largely exists) become commodities in the above sense. If commodities have provided the substance for human exchange relationships ever since the Upper Palaeolithic if not earlier, then commodification is hardly an exceptional occurrence: it is the pulse beat of social and economic life among humans wherever and whenever. Many societies, including present-day North Atlantic society, seem to display a two-tiered structure, where a domain of commodified exchange ('the market') may be distinguished from a domain of multiplex, primary, communal social relations ('the community' perhaps, or rather 'the home'), articulated by a flow of objects that are domesticated within a local system of classification and evaluation, but that are not commodified i.e. that are not drawn within the orbit of a universalizing system of commensurability and exchangeability.

The implication of the above definition of commodification seems to be that commodification is *the very origin of the object as such*. Without commodification, the object is incorporated in the life-world as classified and incorporated in a network of local, enduring and community-generating social relations, endowed with a meaning which, because of this incorporation, is specific in time and place, enmeshing with many, or most, other local meanings. Given the fact that human communities articulate their identity, and safeguard their distinctiveness as a local gene pool, through the proliferation of cultural differences, such meaning is practically impossible to mediate across space and time unless at the cost of thoroughly transformative distortion – as is the fate of all translation, all representation. After commodification, the object is detached from the temporally and spatially specific. It has entered the world of generalized, universalizable standard value, as represented by the state, the formal organization, and money. The world of commodities is not intrinsically the same as the world of classified items in the surrounding world – but it is the same as the world of objects.

And the world of commodities is also, potentially, the world of globalization. The spherical shape of the Earth, and the (in principle) boundless realms of placeless exchange implied in the concept of commodity, mean that the only limiting factor in the spread of commodities is the technology of communication available at a specific place and moment of time. We may wish to concentrate on proto-globalization, with sea-borne trade along the shores of the eastern Pacific Ocean, the Indian Ocean, the Mediterranean, the Atlantic Ocean, and elsewhere, at least since the third millennium BCE, but probably much older. Alternatively, we may prefer today's almost instantaneous movement of goods, and especially of virtualized claims to goods and to value, across computer networks world-wide. But whatever emphasis we lay, the nature of commodities already implies the global spread which many commodities have in fact acquired today, and which some commodities have aspired to already centuries ago. Thus cowry (*Cypraea*) shells, mainly originating from the Indian Ocean became a major currency and divinatory objects in West Africa, where they were partly imported by the Dutch – while the Chinese use of the 'cowry' character, *bey* 貝, for 'treasure, currency', suggests further ramifications of this proto-

globalization spanning three continents.<sup>1</sup> Another example is Chinese porcelain, which among many other destinations graced the treasure hoards of Great Zimbabwe in the early second millennium CE, centuries before porcelain spread to Western Europe as a major commodity (Mathew 1956; Caton-Thompson 1931).

### *Anthropology as commodification*

With the exception of the work of economic anthropologists, the bulk of anthropological research has been invested in the non-commodified domain, whose investigation and appropriation – not to say, whose invention – has largely defined anthropologists' professional identity throughout the twentieth century CE. Here a historical parallel may be illuminating. Nineteenth-century CE Christian missionaries working in rural areas in Africa have often sought to pinpoint there, and to salvage, a coherent, simple rural life-world reminiscent of their own rural backgrounds in Europe then under attack from urbanization, industrialization and secularization.<sup>2</sup> By the same token, anthropologists have often sought to project onto the distant societies they have studied, a non-commodified orientation which may reflect the actual orientation of these societies under study, but which may also be suspected to be, in part, a utopian projection to compensate for the intimacy, meaning and order these North Atlantic intellectuals are missing in their own home society today. From an unmistakably nostalgic anthropological tradition, the very term 'commodification' appears to sum up not so much the ubiquitous and perennial, emotionally and morally neutral, processes by which local societies have linked up with the wider world – but the defenceless destruction of once viable systems of meaning and sociability in the global periphery, under the onslaught of European imperialism, colonialism, the capitalist mode of production, and the processes of military, linguistic, cultural and especially consumerist hegemony in the world today. Here anthropologists tend to become the nostalgic champions of *authenticity* (cf. Appadurai 1986b: 44f) as the opposite of commodification: each object in its own meaningful niche of original domestication, framed by the historicity of the local social relations that surround it – on the tacit, nostalgic anthropological assumption that breaking out of this cocoon can only lead to the destruction of value, of local meaning, and of local communities. By contrast, one of the strategies of the present book is to further the dialogue with economists by proposing an anthropology in which the world may not be as commodified as economists take for granted, but *where at least such commodified aspects as socio-economic life in the South today presents in abundance, are no longer dissimulated.*

This characterization of the more nostalgic anthropological perspective on commodification could be dismissed as a caricature, containing more of Redfield than of Lewis in terms of their famous confrontation over the appreciation of the social system of the Mexican town of Tepotzlan – with Redfield championing the view of authentic meaning,

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Jeffreys 1938, 1942, 1953; Bascom 1980; Gregory 1996; Chang Hsing-lang 1930; Irwin 1977; Brad Weiss, contribution to the present volume.

<sup>2</sup> Comaroff & Comaroff 1991-1997, and their contribution to the present volume.



versus Lewis' reading in terms of cultural erosion under external influences.<sup>1</sup> Yet it also reminds us of a remarkable contradiction haunting anthropology as a form of intellectual production. In the last analysis, the process of commodification is very similar, if not identical, to the act of ethnography – to the extent to which ethnographers produce texts that are to circulate and to provide them a living. For what the ethnographer does could be described as

- cutting images and descriptions loose from their, and their author's, previous incorporation in a sense of community, locality and temporal continuity;
- projecting, upon these detached images and descriptions, a classification and a purpose that are defined in the context of destination and not in the context of origin;
- doing so through an objectified and generalized medium of exchange, which pretends to be universal: the international language of academic communication, the parochial jargon of anthropologists;
- and doing so usually in a context of financial remuneration, as an employed academic researcher.

A contributor to an anthropological book about commodification like the present collection, may well be heedful of the fact that her or his very work – whether aiming at understanding commodities as essentially neutral, or at exposing their apparently destructive effect upon local peripheral societies, or at celebrating them as signs of progress and development – far from situating itself on conceptually and evaluatively neutral terrain, may well be taken to represent a form of commodification in itself (cf. van Binsbergen 2003a).

In this way my essentially anthropological argument on commodification may acquire autocritical self-reflexivity. Inevitably, this is somewhat suspect, as any attempt to self-reflexively lay bare the underlying contradictions of a particular political position (in this case: a position in the politics of global knowledge production) without fully accepting the consequences, i.e. without relinquishing that position.<sup>2</sup> However, the discussion so far

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<sup>1</sup> Redfield 1930; Lewis 1951; Kloos 1987.

<sup>2</sup> This dilemma also reflects a marked difference in outlook between the two editors of the present book, Peter Geschiere and Wim van Binsbergen. For decades our respective careers ran parallel, from 1967 when we prepared jointly for our first fieldwork in north-western Tunisia, and culminating in our joint editorship of *Old Modes of Production and Capitalist Encroachment* (1985, Dutch version 1982). However, from the late 1980s onwards there was considerable divergence. Peter Geschiere has continued to situate himself firmly in the centre of the anthropological discipline, with a persisting identification even though he would often claim a complementary professional identity as a historian. Also Wim van Binsbergen's main publications have included historical studies, in addition to his ethnographic research in various African locations. However, he has felt increasingly weighed down and demotivated by, what he believed to be, the extent to which the commodification aspect of the relation between researcher and host community in ethnographic and oral-historical fieldwork was professionally dissimulated (cf. the early debate on this issue in *Human Organization*: van der Geest 1979 and van Binsbergen 1979 – when van Binsbergen still occupied a naïve, professionally entrenched position; but culminating in his massive book *Intercultural encounters*, 2003a, pivoting on the North-South politics of knowledge). Wim van Binsbergen's way out was, first, 'going native' and becoming an African diviner-healer in the Southern African *sangoma* tradition, thus seeking to

seems to indicate that commodification is part of an opposition that requires the counterpart, the denial, of commodification. It looks as if commodities cannot exist in themselves *sui generis, in vitro, without being counterbalanced against the idea of a meaningful non-commodified 'home' domain*. It is in such a 'home' that generalized reciprocity may be thought to reign, in the social actors' opinion; that they prefer to situate intimacy and reproduction; that they believe that truth and value exist in their purest form, most original form. For it is in such a 'home' that meaning is thought to be produced and managed in ways that are not easily deconstructed, by the local actors themselves, as mere man-made, as commodified. This seems to hold even though we realise that under modern (even post-modern) conditions, such a 'home'<sup>1</sup> tends to be merely an *imagined* home of nostalgia, or at best a *fragmented and highly personalized* home of disconnected moments of truth: a friendly gesture; stares meeting in mutually acknowledged encounter; the sudden surge of beauty that overwhelms one in the contemplation of nature, art, or fellow humans; the sustained struggle to meet the other person, and the other thing, as an invitation to mutual self-realization at the existential, spiritual level, and not as a trigger to switch to mimicry mode or to overpowering mode; a furtive glimpse of the purpose of life, if any. *Typical of the global postmodern experience is to have lost one's home, whilst not having completely lost the idea of a home*. In fact, such an idea (through its reproduction-based embeddedness in early childhood experiences, in the nostalgic constructs of authenticity, and in moral self-construction) appears to be coterminous with the human person, and as ineradicable.

Perhaps the ultimate lesson of commodification is that we must develop the courage to deliberately impose limits upon our deconstruction of 'home'. In other words, even if we have become conscious of the commodification side of the anthropological project itself, and believe we understand that anthropologists are forced to construct as well as deconstruct the illusion of such a 'home' (typically projected onto the African village, which thus takes on mythical dimensions), this may not be the whole story. Perhaps we should not take our deconstruction so far as to explain away the general impression – for many anthropologists based on prolonged personal association with village life and family life in the South – according to which *it is meaningful to distinguish between 'home' and 'market'*.

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resolve the commodification dilemma by adopting a 'home' perspective (albeit one whose local exponents claim, ironically, that it was *commodification*, of all motives, that attracted them to the cult). Subsequently he exchanged his Amsterdam chair of anthropology for the Rotterdam chair of foundations of intercultural philosophy, in which capacity reflection on the epistemological (including political) conditions for the production of valid knowledge across cultural boundaries has become one of his main concerns. However, in addition to his philosophical position he has continued to hold an appointment as senior researcher with the African Studies Centre, Leiden – and in that respect his current practical position does not differ greatly from Geschiere's.

<sup>1</sup> My present scope has forced me to reduce this discussion to bare outlines, even less. In sub-Saharan Africa today, it particularly relates to the appreciation of the 'village home'. The latter (van Binsbergen 1981: ch. 4, 1997a, 1999a) is neither a total invention, nor a concrete, tangible, fully sociological and historical reality, but something in between: it is the social actors' *dream*, that informs action and thus is essentially virtual. Probably most group identities now so humourlessly mediated and so bitterly and violently contested in the world today, are of a similarly virtual nature.

It is at the interface of these two domains, however culturally structured and however analytically represented, that vital processes of transformation manifest themselves anywhere in the modern world, including in Africa. Research on social and cultural processes straddling this boundary is not easy. The boundary is usually fuzzy, contested, and the interactional and normative processes that create and maintain that boundary are elusive – as is borne out by my heuristic parable on Mushonto's reed mat as well as by all the factual descriptions and analyses in the contributions that make up the present book. Contestation over the precise definition of the market/home boundary forms a major component of contemporary transformation processes anywhere. Home truths may turn up at the market place. The allegedly sacred, secluded sphere of intimate, close social relations (for instance in gift giving, sexuality, parent-children relationships) within an enduring community often turn out to contain elements strikingly reminiscent of commodification. Alternatively, commodification is often less than complete, with home classifications and evaluations adding a disconcerting touch of particularism and singularity to what is yet presented as fully detached commodified objects on the market. Commodification (to conclude with the popping champagne corks of Marxian dialectics) appears to contain the seeds of its own destruction; as does the non-commodified 'home', however much we (and the historical actors we study) try to construct it as the opposite of commodification. Between the ritual economies of territorial, royal and kinship cults; the reorganization of time-honoured regimes of ceremonial exchange in the context of marriage, initiation, clan organization, and statehood; and the virtual destruction yet occasional revitalization of ancient productive systems in agriculture and animal husbandry, old and new commodities may often be seen to function as they would be expected to do in the context of global commodity markets, yet equally often they drift away in a twilight zone of singularized non-commodification.

Which makes it hardly an exaggeration to claim that much of the experience and the predicaments of today's Africa, and of the world at large, may be revealingly (I almost wrote, *profitably*) considered from the perspective of commodification.