

# Assembling things: Warao crafts, trade and tourists

Journal of Material Culture  
2021, Vol. 26(4) 365–381  
© The Author(s) 2021



Article reuse guidelines:  
sagepub.com/journals-permissions  
DOI: 10.1177/13591835211052463  
journals.sagepub.com/home/mcu



**Christian Sørhaug**   
Østfold University College, Norway

## Abstract

We tend to give less attention to the process of assembling things when analysing their social life or biography. There is a preconception of things being relatively stable, fixed and inert entities. In this paper, I suggest exploring the ordinary life of things, accounting for the interweaving of the human life with nonhuman materials. The mutual becomings of various entities, both humans and nonhumans, create assemblages that emerge from the interaction between their parts. Assembling things works to conceptualize how mutual entanglements create new possible worlds among a contemporary indigenous group in low land Latin-America. Ethnographically I trace the production process of hammocks and other types of items among the Warao of the Orinoco Delta, Venezuela, and how it entangles different ‘others’ like traders, tourists, missionaries and anthropologists and how these encounters affect the process of assembling things. Assembling things draws attention to how heterogenic component parts construe temporary but stable configurations that partake in people’s worldmaking efforts. I use ethnography from the Warao and how their crafts, especially hammocks, become differently as they entangle various assemblages. I investigate three fields of assemblages in order to discern how the human/nonhuman entanglements unfold, namely household, market and museum.

## Keywords

Assembling, relational ontology, anthropocene, natural, worlding, symmetry, agency

## ‘The tourists want natural hammocks’

My foster mother Angelica said: *Turistatuma ha natural obonea*, ‘the tourists want natural hammocks’. We were sitting on the floor in the house discussing the making and selling of hammocks. *Turistatuma*, the tourist people, was a term I had often heard. However, I was surprised that she would use word *natural*. It is certainly not

---

### Corresponding author:

Christian Sørhaug, Faculty of Health, Welfare and Organisation, Østfold University College, Halden 1757, Norway.

Email: [chs@hiof.no](mailto:chs@hiof.no)

part of the Warao vocabulary, and I had never heard it used in a Warao setting before. She and her husband, living in the relatively isolated area of the Orinoco Delta, Venezuela, have few sources of income. Selling hammocks is one way of getting hold of cash to buy household necessities. As I inquired further, she explained that she meant that tourists wanted hammocks without colour. She made the colours with chemicals bought in the stores of Tucupita, the state capitol of the delta. Angelica was probably glad that this meant one less element in the arduous production process of hammocks. However, given inflation, the economic crisis, social insecurity and the general decline of the Venezuelan state in 2017, tourism was virtually non-existent, and so the market for selling hammocks was limited. Anyway, Angelica was always an entrepreneur, looking for an edge in any transaction.

Although the concept of nature, as discussed by Whitehead (2006 [1919]) and later generations of science and technology studies researchers, was far from my foster mother's mind, the different understandings of *natural* serve as an interesting point of departure for the argument of this paper. In the Amerindian literature, and in social anthropology in general, there has been an effort to scrutinize and destabilize claims that something is natural or represents nature. The problem is ontological as well as political. Transforming things and places into natural resources like rivers, forests or mountains paves the way for capitalist exploitation and development (Tsing, 2005). In the Anthropocene, understood as a time where humans impact the geology of the earth, we divide the world into raw materials exploited through human ingenuity while subsequently undermining alternative political indigenous understandings and worldmaking efforts (De La Cadena, 2010; Lagrou, 2018). A trait of this modern constitution is the work of purifying and organizing nonhuman objects on the one side and human subjects on the other (Latour, 1993). Similarly, we find a tendency in economic markets to halt the material movement of the commodity so that the commodity exchangeability is not affected, thus disguising the ephemeral aspects of things (Graeber, 2001: 46). Conceptualizing things into stable entities makes property and ownership possible and is an integral part of a nation state regime focusing on individual rights, a market-based economy and a particular scientific regime (Brightman et al., 2016). In *The Social Life of Things* (1986), which also contains contributions like 'The cultural biography of things' (1986), Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff suggest that things themselves have social lives or biographies. By tracing the biography of things through various contexts and settings, investigators can discover something about the larger cultural setting things are a part of. 'Thus, 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-motions that illuminate their human and social context' (Appadurai, 1986: 5). A problem with this methodological and analytical perspective is that material things become illustrations of human social worlds. For example, Marilyn Strathern notes that such approaches tend to reduce objects to mere illustrations of a social context (1990) or, as Jane Bennett suggests, this perspective confirms the adamant connection with materials as inert substances (2010). A consequence of reducing things to illustrations, encodings or representations is that their participation in social life becomes limited to how humans allow them to have meaning.

In my first attempts at analysing the material culture of the Warao, I found myself doing the work of purification, assuming the stable and fixed properties of things. However, as I was working my way through Warao material culture, investigating things like canoe carpentry, house building, basketry and hammock weaving, I became aware of the imbrication of things in wider networks of relations. The indigenous Warao have for over a century been in various degrees of contact with 'Others' like missionaries (Lavandero Pérez, 2004; Rodriguez, 2008), medical personnel (Briggs and Mantini-Briggs, 2003), traders and other indigenous populations (Heinen and Henley, 1998–1999), state bureaucracies (Allard, 2012), smugglers (Allard, 2020) and tourists (Sørhaug, 2016). The Warao also travel to urban centres, like Tucupita or Ciudad Guayana, to trade, work, beg (García-Castro, 2000) or to gather goods from a garbage heap (Sørhaug, 2014). The inability to separate material and cultural practices in Warao householding became a major analytical problem. How should I analyse the novel elements in the village that had become so important in everyday life? Studying the various component parts of Warao household practices drew my attention to the hybrid composition of things. For example, how would I go about explaining the concept of *natural* appearing in the production of hammocks, affecting its very composition? Moreover, how can we explain changes in Warao society and material culture on their own premises, thus taking indigenous worldmaking efforts seriously?

When addressing the question of what type of analytical strategy might be helpful in understanding the material culture and indigenous identities in the 21st century, and the effects they generate, I turn to assemblage thinking. A central reference is the philosophy of Giles Deleuze and his co-writer Felix Guattari. In *A Thousand Plateaus* (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004) they conceptualize existence as a product of mutual becoming, rather than as a phenomenon arising from a being reaching out into the world. Deleuze frequently used the Wasp-Orchid assemblage as an example (see for example Deleuze and Guattari, 2004: 238). Some orchids look like wasps and thereby attract wasps who try to copulate with them and in the process spread pollen as they move on to the next orchid. These entities are in a process of mutual becoming, and their existence is a product of mutuality. Another assemblage is the nomadic warrior. Combining man, horse, and steel weapons creates an effective warrior assemblage enabling the occupation of vast territories (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004: 399). In this relational ontological perspective we do not analyse the phenomenon of *agency* as an exceptional property of people or things individually (Haraway, 2008). Rather, the locus of agency is always a human-nonhuman working group (Bennett, 2010; Latour, 2005), where the component parts are co-operating and unfolding in *surprising trajectories*. According to Els Lagrou, the opposition between 'objects' and 'subjects' paves the way for world-conquering machinery. In her critique of the modern capitalist enterprise and its ensuing environmental destruction, she suggests that we need to give attention to a relational aesthetic. 'The hubris of Modernist ontology needs to be corrected by taking conscience of the process of sympoiesis of our creative becoming in symbiosis with other species' (Lagrou, 2018: 135). At the same time, tourists and missionaries certainly are 'others' effecting change in Warao aesthetics, and thus assembling entities like chemical colours, palms, fibres, knives, machetes, traders or missionaries in their hammock-making practices becomes part of Warao wordings.

The Amerindian literature has been central in developing the turn to ontology (Descola, 1994; Viveiros de Castro, 1998). Though there are many meanings to this turn to ontology (Kohn, 2015; Lagrou, 2018; Pickering, 2017), a central feature is the symmetrical perspective where the human condition becomes, enmeshes and mutually entangles with its nonhuman surroundings. The turn to ontology in the humanities and social sciences has brought about theoretical, methodological and analytical challenges. For example, in the Amerindian literature there has been substantial interest in how non-humans like animals and spirits take part in the fabrication of bodies (Fausto, 2007; Vilaça, 2005). Drawing attention to nonhuman objects, *The Occult Life of Things* (Santos-Granero, 2009) explores the questions of material culture, personhood and indigeneity in Amazonia. The contributors are interested in the hidden, obscured and extraordinary meanings of objects and the role objects play in people's lives. The ontological status of the object, however, seems to remain unchallenged. Commenting on this publication, Elisabeth Ewart presents an alternative for overcoming the fixity of material things, where she wants to give attention to 'the role of productive processes in the making of objects' (2012: 178). That is, we need to give attention to processes of fabricating things as well as bodies. It is unclear what an object is in the Amazonian setting, Ewart says, where the 'objectness' is rather concerned with the process of fabrication, creation, transformation or destruction than with the object itself.

Similarly, my concern in this paper is to bring to the forefront nonhumans (Marres, 2010) and the assembling practices that sometimes are placed backstage in ethnographies of Amerindian societies, thus emphasizing the ethnography of the everyday and the 'ordinary' (Overing and Passes, 2000). In this *ordinary life of things*, I am interested in the mundane, visible and everyday household practices involving the hammock and other household items. My argument resonates with the article 'Scattered Things: Virtue Ethics and Objectness in Indigenous Amazonia' (2020), in which Amy Penfield criticizes Amazonian scholars' tendency to subjectify manufactured goods and new materialities among indigenous Amazonians. Penfield draws on ethnography from the Venezuelan Sanema and the importance of electrical generators and beads in their moral and social life. In her analysis she draws on material semiotics, thus demonstrating how manufactured goods enter into a web of connection between people, information, and energy that gives shape to ethical relations (Penfield, 2020: 11). Although I wholeheartedly agree with Penfield on the need to give attention to the nonanimated, nonhuman, and new materialities that confront contemporary indigenous Amazonians, I am less sure about her remedy, suggesting the concept of objectness in order to reinstate a dualism where objects can be objects (Penfield, 2020). My suggestion is that conceptualizing assemblages as wholes whose properties emerge through the interaction of their parts (DeLanda, 2006: 5) provides us with the tools to understand what happens when a component part like colours is taken out and a concept like natural is introduced. Descola points out: 'A practice is thus an organic totality, in which material and conceptual aspects are closely interwoven' (Descola, 1994: 3). Assemblage thinking resists the idea of organic totalities. However, giving attention to the entwinement of external materials and concepts in composing householding practices and the everyday seems to me to be an important strategy for taking indigenous worldmaking efforts seriously. Traders advising Angelica not to add colour to the hammock, and using information that tourists

want *natural* things, altered the production process and the thing itself. She was assembling the hammock in a different way, as a white hammock. When I asked about the meaning of *natural*, Angelica explained: ‘Completely white hammock, no green, no dark, completely white’ (*Ha hokowittu, hebura ekida, ana ekida, hokowittu*). As I pressed the question why, she shrugged, raised her arms with palms outwards, and said: ‘I don’t know’ (*naminana*). For Angelica, as for many other Warao, the wants and desires of the tourists were often a mystery. However, now she did not need to buy chemicals or do the extra work in dyeing the fibres saving time and money. She later declared joyfully that I would get colours on my hammock. The general opinion among the villagers was that colours add to the aesthetic qualities of the hammock.

The concept of assemblage functions as an analytical nexus bridging human and non-human component parts and does not predetermine their ontological status. Giving ethnographic attention to processes of assembling, reassembling, and disassembling of artefacts directs our attention to how indigenous people like the Warao entangle ways of worlding (Blaser, 2014). In this paper, I will address different assemblies by following the hammocks to trace their entanglements with the household, market and museum. First, I show how hammocks mediate relations between household members and others, assembling various entities into its midst and potentially creating new households. Next, I try to show how markets in various ways influence Warao hammock making as well as other handcrafts. Lastly, I reflect on the ethnographic museum and how its conservation practices actively expunge unwanted travellers from the hammock (like bacteria and vermin), even though such beings are integral to hammock’s in the Orinoco Delta.

## Household assemblage: The ‘hammock place’

Apart from the stilted houses along the river’s edge and the canoe, hammocks are perhaps one of the most prominent items of Warao material culture. In fact, the Warao word for house is *hanoko*, literally translating into ‘the place for the hammock’ (*ha* is hammock and *noko* is place). The word for ‘village’, *hanokosebe*, simply means ‘many houses’. Whenever travelling past a village you will notice the thatched roofs, canoes tied to the walking bridge and hammocks hanging from the roof beams. Entering a household, you often can locate a woman sitting on the palm-stemmed floor with her loom (*hawaka*) either weaving or twinning cords (*hau tibaraya*) for the hammock. The cords (*hau*) come from the fibres of the *ohidu* palm leaves. Many of the rituals associated with the *ohidu* palm, *Maurita flexuosa*, have disappeared. However, the various uses of the palm, like providing materials for hammocks, still have a central role in householding practices. From the *ohidu* palm the Warao make palm bread (*ohidu aru*) and spears for fishing, and they gather fruit, larvae and fibres to make cords, *hauanona*, from the palm leaves. As a form of subsistence, palm starch’s importance has faded. Today, the root *ure*, introduced by Asian indentured laborers in the early 20th century and spread by Capuchin missionaries, is the major source of subsistence for most Warao living in the southeastern corner of the Delta.

The *ohidu* palm among the Warao is semi-cultivated, and villagers often encourage its growth in their gardening activities (Heinen and Ruddle, 1974). Whenever Angelica

started to plan a hammock, her husband Emanuel needed to plan to gather palm leaves from the forest I would often travel with Angelica and Emanuel to their gardens across the river from our village. Here we entered a small channel used by Angelica and other members of her family for gardening as well as for fishing. Though there is no official ownership involved, convention dictates that a family's cultivation over time gives rights. Usually we travelled when the tide was rising so that we could travel inland with the current. Smaller *ohidu* palms decorated the fringes of the gardens, and some were growing large enough for harvest Emanuel climbed the tree trunks with surprising agility, cutting down the tube-like leaves with several segmented layers, and Angelica would gather them and place them in the middle of the canoe. At the same time, we would gather some *ure* and other fruits from the garden and place them in the bow. Arrival back in the village would be calculated at high tide so that the load could be transported with the canoe directly to the kitchen floor. (During low tide, we would have to push the canoe across the muddy grounds outside the village). During my last visit in 2017, when I interviewed Angelica and she talked about 'natural' hammocks, two of her daughters came over to help make a hammock for me. Making hammocks is part of the socializing of females (Lafée and Wilbert, 2001). When we unloaded our goods, her daughters were there to receive the palm leaves. By the time we had bathed and washed off the mud from our gardening work, her two daughters were already in the process of removing the delicate film on top of the palm leaves in order to isolate the cord fibres. Sorting out all 15 leaves we had collected took 2 days. The leaves were then cooked and beaten with a wooden club to soften them, dried, and then twined into threads. Angelica also coloured a range of the textiles. The entire process took weeks, and even though Angelica was short of fibres, she managed to borrow some finished *hau* threads from a neighbour. While the women were occupied with making the threads for the hammock, Emanuel mounted a loom (*hawaka*) consisting of four pillars attached to the floor and roof beams. Here he stretched a cord on two sides, from which Angelica started weaving the hammock.

Hammocks are not just a matter for women, but are also relevant for kin and other members of society. As mentioned earlier, the household of a man and a woman make up the smallest, though most important, organizing unit of Warao society. A typical household has three structures, *hanoko* (hammock-place), *hisabanoko* (food-place) and *ibomanoko* (women-place). The Warao generally refer to the household simply as *hanoko*, and this is the assembly place for most social activities, household chores and sleeping. The positioning of household members indicates social positioning, where the household owner, *hanoko arotu*, has their hammock in the back, towards the forests. The youngest children sleep with the parents, while older children are farther out toward the *hoisi*, which is the walking bridge that connects all the households (and thus the young members can more easily sneak out at night). Everyday household tasks are immersed in ordinary life, and all members participate. The female *hanoko arotu* is responsible for ensuring that the household members have hammocks. The Warao have an Iroquoian-type of kinship system with an uxorilocal marriage pattern (Heinen and Henley, 1998–1999). Men who do marry into new villages often become outsiders with few allies, relying on their in-laws for support. Though there is a stern taboo on contact between mothers-in-law and sons-in-law (Lafée and Wilbert, 2001:

153), the mother-in-law is required to provide a hammock to her new son-in-law, indicating the importance of the hammock among the Warao.

The hammock, a place for sleep and rest, is a uniquely adapted technology. It provides airflow around the body in the warm, tropical weather and keeps one off the ground when sleeping. Alongside its use value, it has an exchange value in that can also take on commodity form. Distributing hammocks to other members of the household, as well as other households as gifts, the thing becomes a source of care for other people. The hammock makes peoples sociable and relatable. For example, coming back from a fishing trip a group of women were standing around tinkering with my hammock when I entered the house. This had happened several times before. Sometimes it was my foster mother, sometimes one of my sisters, other times it was women visiting and their daughters. They were discussing hammocks, and I thought that they were fixing some loose threads. However, this time I decided to take a closer look. They were using their fingers to dig into the texture of the fibres to dig out, to my surprise, tiny insects. They were squashing them with their nails, and blood squirted out. My foster mother laughed and said: *Imaya hi hotu hobia Kri* – ‘at night they drink your blood’. Because I had no wife or children to take care of the insects, and I did not notice them at night-time, they decided they would help me out. This aesthetic of interpersonal relations in everyday life (Overing and Passes, 2000) points us toward the ordinary rather than the extraordinary, to the unremarkable rather than the remarkable:

... an ethnography of ‘the ordinary’ and the local, a grassroots ethnography. To reach the goal of an everyday, we are here paying attention to the relations of aesthetics to virtues and affective life in Native American (and mainly Amazonian) cultures, and the ways in which such a relation itself becomes constitutive of indigenous social ethics, and ‘everyday’ sociality, conviviality and practice (Overing and Passes, 2000: 8).

When documenting the process of assembling things, relations between aesthetics play an important part. Women’s social positioning and standing in the village also connects with the ability and knowledge to weave hammocks. Just as I many times heard men discussing a canoe carpenter’s work, praising or ridiculing their skills, women would do the same thing concerning weaving. In the Amerindian literature we find a connection between mastering techniques like making hammocks and becoming a certain type of being, thus emphasizing the knowledge of making things (Lagrou, 2009). For Warao women, social ethics and everyday life are entangled with the making of hammocks. Creating relations with kin through giving hammocks as gifts, or their ability to sell hammocks in the market to earn money and contribute with food and other goods, also reflects their involvement in the process of assembling households.

Though previously surrounded with elaborate rituals, currently the importance of the *ohidu* palm has faded. For example, during a New Year’s Eve party at my house I saw a short burst of the *noara* dance, a fertility dance associated with the *ohidu* festivals (called *nahanamu* in the Central Delta). The younger generation crowded the dance floor, dancing two and two, moving their hips to the joropo or the salsa music. All of our hammocks had been either stowed away or placed over the roof beams, except some hammocks to rest for the very young or very old. Suddenly the generator broke down, and

all the young people left the house to scatter into the dark to hook up. Some of the elderly villagers, somewhat inebriated, started to organize some of the women, and Anton, a neighbour, and the anthropologist, into two lines. The young people seemed utterly uninterested in participating. I had never myself seen this ritual performed except in tourist settings. The dancers stamped their feet, organized by the singing of Aurelia. Aurelia directed the movement while the other dancers made up the chorus. The lines moved opposite each other in a straight row, at the same time moving around in circles, around their own axis. However, just as Anton and I started to get hold of the rhythm of the dance, the generator started working. The joropo started and hordes of young people invaded the dance floor. Exchanging the 'mating' ritual of *noara* with the ritual of salsa did not seem to meet much resistance. In general, whenever I have been doing fieldwork, the salsa and joropo parties are quite popular. The new dance seems to be doing some of the same work of allowing a space where young people could meet and potentially participate in the reproduction of village life and new households.

Of course, assembling salsa parties require new creative material engagements. For example, in our house we had flat floorboards instead of the *anare* palm stems that would be almost impossible for joropo or salsa dancing. Similarly, the government-built *hoisi*, the walking bridge that connected the households, was also a possible, though hazardous, dancing spot. New festivities, like Christmas, New Year's Eve and Easter celebrations have for the most part repressed or replaced the previous *noara* rituals. Courtship has changed with new types of music and dancing. The practice of courting through salsa music and dancing creates another ambiance than the *noara*. Clothes, body techniques, movements, sounds, music, bodies, and touching enact a different kind of intimacy and way of expressing affection. The *noara* dance separates men and women, organizing them into two different rows. In salsa, men and women dance, touch and mingle. When the dance is over and the youth leave the dance floor, females and males tend to congregate in separate groups. A new set of elements are enacted in the salsa parties that are absent in the *noara* rituals, including generators, stereos, CDs, clothes, sugar cane spirits and dance moves. Even though some changes in patterns of interactions happen, others are perpetuated, including divisions of gender and generations, where women and men tend to congregate separately and where the young need to demonstrate respect for their elders, providing services if asked. Although household assemblages are composed differently, where the *ohidu* palm becomes less central than previously, there are elements of continuation alongside these changes, and hammocks are still central to the process of assembling households, creating relations with kin or engaging with markets.

Another interesting new creative field of material engagement is in the making of *hauanona*. *Hauanona* are small baskets weaved with the same types of fibres from the *ohidu* palm used for hammocks. I was surprised when I found that some of the craft makers were weaving strips of coloured plastic into certain baskets. Plastic circulates and entangles new and surprising relations in the Anthropocene, having a substantial afterlife in the wake of being manufactured goods (Liboiron, 2016: 103). Electrical generators, salsa dancing, and the introduction of plastic in handcrafts are some of the effects generated by the new materialities confronting contemporary indigenous Amazonians, thus entangling everyday moral and social lives. A thing like an



electrical generator can provide light after sunset, enabling activities like weaving or grinding an axe, and the generator can enable music and parties or provide viewings of movies starring Bruce Lee or Jean Claude Van Dame. In her ethnography from the Sanema, Penfield reveals how entangled a generator is in village life. As she struggles to arrange a movie night in her village, which requires a generator, she finds that various parts like circuit breakers, spark plugs and starter cords are scattered around among different households and owners. As she investigates, she discovers a complex web of negotiations behind each movie viewing that also reveals how village cohesion centres not just on the body – as much of the Amazonian literature suggests – but also ‘on non-corporeal materiality, and on newly introduced manufactured items at that’ (Penfield, 2020: 2). Penfield’s ethnography resonates with the Warao situation, and our movie nights, where we needed to assemble a generator, movies, DVD player and gasoline, and the ongoing negotiations playing out during these sessions. What is evident is that the Orinoco Delta setting that the Warao inhabit, engaging external markets and their things, has transformed their everyday lives. Being ethnographically attentive to the processes of assembling things like a generator gives insights not just into a movie night, but also into processes of worlding among the Warao. What is just as interesting as the scattering is the process of assembling things because things are wholes whose emergent properties are produced through the interaction of their parts. And even though the household assemblage emerges differently through the interaction of new component parts, like electrical generators, salsa dancing, and the introduction of plastic in handcrafts, the process of assembling households continues, albeit somewhat differently.

### **Market assemblage: missionaries, traders and tourists**

Angelica’s decision to stop using colours and to make the hammocks ‘natural’ was part of a strategy on her part to seduce potential buyers at markets in order to get the best possible price. Angelica was well versed in trading and understood that in the market there was competition based on supply and demand, which sets the price. Villagers would discuss current market prices all the time, and I would constantly get the question *bitu amoara* (what is the price). Knowing the price of a thing seemed to be a way of grasping its meaning. However, as Stephen Hugh-Jones notes in relation to Amerindians’ preoccupation with consumer goods, we cannot reduce Amerindians to passive victims of a capitalist system (1992). Rather, the goods themselves, as well as the sociality that the exchange relations might bring with them, create bonds with White people and are part of these creative experiments (Hugh-Jones, 1992: 67). The Warao, similar to the Piaroa farther up the Orinoco, experience visits to market towns and shops as a pleasurable ‘adventure of wandering’ (Overing, 1992). Joanna Overing says that when the Piaroa are shopping, they perceive themselves as engaged in an act of production rather than exchange. While production activities like gathering and hunting involve ‘going wandering’ in the forest to see what might be found in terms of fruits and berries, the same type of phrase is used when going to markets to find machetes or fishhooks (Overing, 1992). Similarly,

the Warao word for shopping and gathering, *nisakitane*, translates as ‘collecting’ or ‘picking up’.

However, although I would agree that the Warao understand shopping and gathering as production activities, they do not seem to have such a clear contrast to exchange as the Piaroa. The word for selling, *wabikitane*, carries a connotation of treason (Barral, 2000), and the Warao certainly have an ambivalent relation to the *Wabimo*, the traders, who traverse the delta selling their goods. The *Wabimo* are traders who can be either indigenous Warao or Hotarao, the White Creoles. For most of the time the villagers express substantial suspicion toward these traders, sometimes accusing them of being evil-minded (*obono sabana*) shamans, cheating or lying concerning the value of goods. At the same time, the Warao are eager to enter into exchange relations. Wandering around in Tucupita, even though some locals express distaste for the presence of the Warao (Briggs and Mantini-Briggs, 2003), is something Warao themselves take great pleasure in doing. For example, Plaza Bolívar in Tucupita is a favoured meeting place for Warao. Here people meet up to discuss shopping, politics, and local affairs farther down the delta. In this hub, you can get a lot of information about how to navigate the city, where to make a good buy, or how to arrange transportation. The city fascinates the villagers, and because Tucupita offers the possibility for economic exchange relations, the city offers, construes, and constitutes Warao social relations. Frank Cochoy points to the game of attraction and seduction, which is part of markets and commodity exchange, where the players are ‘drawn by the hope of either gain or satisfaction depending on which side they are on, but also by the search for perhaps fragile relations of trust, of sociability’ (Cochoy, 2007: 16). Positioned in the Orinoco Delta, the Warao have through history been engaged in extensive trade relations with other people (Heinen and Henley, 1998–1999). The adjustments the Warao have made to their handcrafts is one way of attracting others into their midst, to ‘play the game’ and to ‘seduce’ tourists to buy their handcrafts.

The Warao’s attempt to enter this game of mutual attraction and seduction by adapting their hammock production to the tourist market involves several interests. Trying to make money to buy various household necessities is one thing. However, other stakes are also in play, as Overing points to. During my last fieldwork in 2017, I struck up a conversation with Onorio, one of the elders in the village, concerning a trip he had taken to Volcan. The hyper-inflated economy of Venezuela made pricing almost impossible because prices would change day by day. At the same time, the tourist market was almost eradicated. Onorio had decided to take the trip anyway, selling four hammocks his wife had made. Volcan is the port closest to Tucupita, and the administrative centre and capital of the state of Delta Amacuro, through which most people entering or leaving the delta travel. He sold the four hammocks for 15,000 Bolívares each. I asked what he had done with the money from the sale, and he said sodas, gasoline and chicken. It was all spent there, and he had no money left. When I asked him if he was depressed about the situation, he said the trip had been fun and gave the impression that he was satisfied. His wife, however, said it was bad (*asidawitu*). The value of her work with the hammocks had disappeared in this hyperinflated economy, and she was not pleased.

When I commissioned items for the Historical Museum in Oslo in connection with my PhD, I became victim of one of the consequences of this ‘game of seduction’, though in a

quite different manner. I had asked some villagers to bring me crafts to take back to the museum for an exhibition. However, items like canoe paddles, sieves, and manioc presses were arriving at my house miniaturized (Sørhaug, 2019). When I asked one of the elders (*aidamo*) about this, he said that tourists preferred these sizes and that they would more easily fit in my luggage. In the beginning, these items filled me with unease. Should I bring these 'fakes' back to the museum? Later, though, I came to realize that the miniatures were an opportunity to describe and analyse contemporary, global realities from a Warao perspective. While tourists rarely visit the village (in a total of almost 2 years fieldwork I observed tourists arriving only twice), and intermediaries mostly buy their handcrafts, tourism do have a profound impact. The intermediaries offer advice on how things should look, and the villagers experiment with the crafts they sell, as well as visit surrounding towns to sell their handcrafts. Some integrate plastic into the things they sell instead of adding colours. Some mimic teacups and dishes or make imitations of handbags. Some miniaturize items. The Warao's engagement with miniatures and tourists provides evidence for how this indigenous group creatively reassembles their crafts in order to reposition themselves in a global situation.

The most important catalysts for change and for building global connections in the delta, apart from the Warao themselves, are the Capuchin missionaries. Capuchin missionaries have been active in the delta since the 1920s cooperating with the Venezuelan nation state and encouraging citizenship for the Warao (Rodriguez, 2008). Warao entanglement in market relations should be understood against the background of the Capuchin civilizing mission. The interconnectedness of conversion and civilizing brings up issues of the aesthetics of everyday life and is concerned with what the Warao eat, what types of clothes they wear, and how they speak, all of which are elements of what it means to be a good Christian. Christian conversion, then, is also a matter of converting to a certain consumption pattern (Meyer 2008) and has major impact on the very organization of everyday household practices. For example, the Capuchin, and especially the nuns, have been eager to educate the Warao concerning handcrafts. One strategy the Capuchin have used is internment. Stories of internment, removing Warao children from their homes to be educated in the missions, are difficult. Though most people I talk to about their times at the missions express anguish, distress and dissatisfaction with the arrangement, Angelica expresses satisfaction with her time with the nuns. One of the things she was satisfied with was how the nuns educated her in making different types of *hauanona*, as well as how to speak Spanish, how to count, and how to trade with other people.

Missionaries and traders make up the external relations affecting Warao ordinary life and the process of assembling things, which is the focus of this article. For example, the *turistatuma* engage Angelica's process of assembling hammocks, playing into her ambition to trade with others. Angelica with a white hammock travelling up the river in a dugout motorboat to trade is another assemblage. Given that the properties of an assemblage emerge from its interacting parts, the adding or extracting of component parts from the assemblage will influence the properties of the assemblage. Angelica enacts another reality through the decision to avoid adding colours, and this changes the provisional integrity of the hammock as well as the production process. Angelica and other Warao's willingness to alter the production process of hammocks (or other artefacts)

in order to accommodate tourists is not simply an act of subordination, but rather reflects a desire for engagement. Villagers would often proudly don their handcrafts and brag about who was willing to buy their products. Entering into exchange relations requires a willingness to enter into a dialogue. In the theoretical perspective of the relative native and Deluzian philosophy (Viveiros de Castro, 2013), the parties involved in transactions mutually become together. Making *hauanona* into chic bags for women or even creating cups and plates imitating a tea set is about creating attractive items for tourists.

### **Museum assemblage: The end of things?**

Part of my research project was to collect material objects from the Warao and to make an exhibition of their material culture. Although I thought gathering the things would be what constituted my fieldwork, it dawned on me that the very process of transferring the ethnographic items to the museum would itself be interesting ethnography on how the object/subject distinction was created. If modern worldmaking rests on a strict divide between object and subject, then the museum is a central institutional site for building this divide. When I handed the ethnographic items over to the museum's conservators, they greeted me with white gloves. The items were placed on white tissue paper, processed through heat and cold chambers in order to get rid of any vermin or bacteria, stored, and given a museum number. Museum conservation practices strive to halt decay, to stabilize and fix the status of the object, and to present the items for visual consumption by human subjects. However, such staging behind the vitrines creates estrangement. When school classes visited the museum, I would give tours and talk about the Warao and their lives. During these tours, I felt somewhat estranged and alienated from the items now that they were isolated behind the vitrines. The vitrines themselves build up a distance (Taussig, 2004: 221). Previously I had a close relation with the items. I had participated in and observed the process of assembling the things from plants taken from the forest, crafted in the village and stored for many months in my household; some of the items had even travelled with me in my bags from the delta to the museum. The practice of conserving the items was a practice of disassembling them from my person. Museums are, as Michel Foucault writes, a defining trait of our modernity, and place where we mirror ourselves in relation to the past (Foucault, 1986: 26) The obsession with gathering all things, all times and all places into one place, into one general archive, is a peculiarity of the modern condition.

As such, we can see the ethnographic museum as participating in creating a one-world world (Law, 2015), a world that subsumes all other types of worldings within its own. The one-world worldview hinges on the nature/culture divide. The Anthropocene, either criticized by environmentalists or encouraged by the extraction industries, operates with a particular hegemonic conceptualization of nature as a taken-for-granted entity that we cannot argue beyond (De La Cadena and Blaser, 2018: 2). One way of dealing with Angelica's use of the concept of 'natural' is to say that she does not understand its true meaning, though in time she will develop a better understanding by becoming more modern. However, to paraphrase, my misunderstandings are not Angelica's misunderstandings (Viveiros de Castro, 2013: 480; Wagner, 1981). Angelica's world is quite

different from my own. My first attempts at understanding Warao material culture worked along this divide. However, spending time together, I have acquired a somewhat better understanding of how Angelica and other Warao conceptualize their worlds (though I still find myself misunderstanding all the time). As I see it, a relational ontological approach is about exploring the ‘possibility of a world where many worlds fit’ (De La Cadena and Blaser, 2018: 15) thus disrupting the nature/culture divide upon which the Anthropocene and its accompanying destruction hinges. This requires a critical examination of practices that might reproduce such distinctions, even when they ‘work as tolerance to what is not itself’ (De La Cadena and Blaser, 2018: 15). Although ethnographic museums certainly want to create tolerance and understanding of others, we still need to be critical of some of its underpinnings that close the possibility of presenting different wordings that might not resonate and conform with the one-world world.

Assembling things are practices that constantly give a temporary configuration to heterogeneous sets of humans and nonhumans. Things in this perspective have no essence, rather, they are historically contingent gatherings in a continuous process of assembling, disassembling and reassembling. Assembling things is a perspective in which the artefact is ‘a material form bound into continual cycles of articulation and disarticulation’ (DeSilvey, 2006: 335). The suggestion from Appadurai and Kopytoff that things have social lives and biographies was a radical idea. Turning our gaze to the ordinary life of things in Amazonia draws our attention to the processes of how things assemble alongside everyday activities, refusing a ‘... grammar that separates humans and universal nature ...’ that does not travel well in these parts of the world (Tsing, 2005). The ‘radical scientist’ who works from a relational ontological approach seeks to destabilize bifurcations like nature and culture and to draw the analytical gaze toward the entwinement of matter and action (Liboiron, 2016). As such, I am sceptical of Penfield’s suggestion to reinstate objectness in order to counter the lack of interest in new materialities in Amazonia. Where Penfield stops short of a ‘flat ontology’ (2020: 5), I see this type of symmetrical anthropology as opening up ethnographic investigations into how indigenous Amazonians continuously become with nonanimated nonhumans, be they generators, plastic or hammocks without chemical colours. In this perspective, hammock weaving practices, and consequently the hammock-thing, are historically contingent assemblages of human and nonhuman entities in a continuous process of assembling and disassembling in village everyday life. Anjelica’s hammocks occupy households, markets and now even museums. The deterritorialization of hammocks by tourists to a global tourist market both ensures the continued making of hammocks through sales, as well as enabling adaptations like dropping colour in the hammock in order to make it appear more ‘natural’. Natural in Angelica’s case has nothing to do with the bifurcation Whitehead deplors. Rather, it is a going on with everyday life. Contemporary Warao are becoming with tourists, something which impacts their wordings. This does not imply they are becoming modern, rather, it means they are adapting and finding new ways of becoming Warao.

As I mentioned in the introduction, this is an ontological as well as a political issue. Framing changes in Amerindian societies as either appropriation or resistance traps the anthropologist’s understanding (Gordon, 2010), thus perpetuating the world-conquering machinery (Lagrou, 2018), and locks our analytical possibilities into an all-encompassing

modernity (Blaser, 2013). The ‘countless agents, agencies, actants, actors, acts, phenomenon, or however else one may wish to call them are automatically enlisted into the Gaia War’ (Viveiros de Castro and Danowski, 2018: 188) in uncertain ways participate in various collectives and are of vital interest for understanding Amerindian lives as well as the modern constitution. Giving ethnographic attention to practices of assembling ordinary, mundane and apparently insignificant things, like beads (Ewart, 2012) or hammocks without chemical colours, is also part of taking indigenous wordings seriously. Mutual entanglements and processes of becoming with things and ‘others’ like traders and/or whites can be understood as sources of difference propelling community life into the future (Kelly, 2011: 221) and as resources for maintaining identity (Walker, 2012: 156). A relational ontological perspective, where the process of assembling things unfolds with the mutual becoming of people, interethnic trade, and contact with whites, provides an analytical resource for understanding the ongoing recomposing and revitalizing indigeneity. This strategy of reframing and decentring the analysis, I would argue, is fruitful because we can obtain insights into the overlapping and interconnected character of our contemporary worlds, things and people.

### Acknowledgements

Thanks to Olivier Allard, Sidsel Mæland and Michael Hundeide for commenting on a previous version of the paper. I am grateful to Østfold University College for financing my follow-up fieldwork 2016/2017 that made up the basis of this paper.


### Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

### ORCID iD

Christian Sørhaug  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7618-2267>

### Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

### References

- Allard O (2012) Bureaucratic anxiety: Asymmetrical interactions and the role of documents in the Orinoco Delta. *Venezuela. HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 2(2): 234–256.
- Allard O (2020) Fuites frontalières entre le Guyana et le Venezuela : Migrations et contrebande dans un village amérindien. *Cahiers des Amériques latines* (93): 29–48. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/cal.10523>.

- Appadurai A (1986) *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Barral BMd (2000) *Diccionario Warao – Castellano: Castellano – Warao*. Caracas: Universidad católica Andrés Bello; Hermanos Menores Capuchinos.
- Bennett J (2010) *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
- Blaser M (2013) Ontological conflicts and the stories of peoples in spite of Europe. Toward a conversation on political ontology. *Current Anthropology* 54(5): 547–568.
- Blaser M (2014) Ontology and indigeneity: On the political ontology of heterogeneous assemblages. *Cultural Geographies* 21(1): 49–58.
- Briggs CL and Mantini-Briggs C (2003) *Stories in the Time of Cholera: Racial Profiling During a Medical Nightmare*. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press.
- Brightman B, Fausto C and Grotti V (2016) *Ownership and nurture: studies in native Amazonian property relations*. New York: Berghahn
- Cochoy F (2007) A brief theory of the ‘captation’ of publics: Understanding the market with little red riding hood. *Theory, Culture & Society* 24(7–8): 203–223.
- De La Cadena M (2010) Indigenous cosmopolitics in the Andes: Conceptual reflections beyond “politics”. *Cultural Anthropology* 25(2): 334–370.
- De La Cadena M and Blaser M (2018) *A World of Many Worlds*. In.
- DeLanda M (2006) *A new Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*. London: Continuum.
- Deleuze G and Guattari F (2004) *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London: Continuum.
- Descola P (1994) *In the Society of Nature: A Native Ecology in Amazonia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- DeSilvey C (2006) Observed decay: Telling stories with mutable things. *Journal of Material Culture* 11(3): 318–338.
- Ewart E (2012) Making and unmaking Panará beadwork—or, how to overcome the fixity of material things. *Anthropology and Humanism* 37(2): 177–190.
- Fausto C (2007) Feasting on people: Eating animals and humans in Amazonia. *Current Anthropology* 48(4): 497–530.
- Foucault M (1986) Of other spaces. *Diacritics* 16(1): 22–27.
- García-Castro A (2000) Mendicidad indígena: Los warao urbanos. *Boletín Antropológico: Centro de Investigaciones Etnológicas y el Museo Arqueológico de la Universidad de Los Andes (ULA)* 48: 79–90.
- Gordon C (2010) The objects of the whites: Commodities and consumerism among the Xikrin-Kayapó (Mebengokre) of Amazonia. *Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America* 8: 2.
- Graeber D (2001) *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of our own Dreams*. New York: Palgrave.
- Haraway DJ (2008) *When species Meet*. Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press.
- Heinen D and Henley P (1998-1999) History, kinship and the ideology of hierarchy among the Warao of the central Orinoco Delta. *Antropologica* 89: 25–78.
- Heinen D and Ruddle K (1974) Ecology, ritual, and economic organization in the distribution of palm starch among the Warao of the Orinoco Delta. *Journal of Anthropological Research* 30(2): 116–138.
- Hugh-Jones S (1992) Yesterday’s luxuries, tomorrow’s Necessities: Business and barter in north-west Amazonia. In: Humphrey C and Hugh-Jones S (eds) *Barter, Exchange and Value: An Anthropological Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 203 s.

- Kelly JA (2011) *State Healthcare and Yanomami Transformations: A Symmetrical Ethnography*. Tucson, Ariz: University of Arizona Press
- Kohn E (2015) Anthropology of Ontologies. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 44: 311–327. DOI:10.1146/annurev-anthro-102214-014127.
- Kopytoff I (1986) The cultural biography of things: Commoditization as process. In: Appadurai A (eds) *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, XIV, 329 s.
- Lafée AC and Wilbert W (2001) *Hijas de la Luna: Enculturación Feminina Entre los Waraos*. Caracas: Fundación La Salle de Ciencias Naturales.
- Lagrou E (2009) The Crystallized memory of artifacts: a reflection on agency and alterity in cashinahua image-making. In: Santos-Granero F (ed) *The Occult Life of Things: Naative Amazonian Theories of Materiality and Personhood*. Tucson, Arizona: Univeristy of Arizona Press.
- Lagrou E (2018) Copernicus in the Amazon: Ontological turnings from the perspective of Amerindian ethnologies. *Sociologia & Antropologia* 8: 133–167.
- Latour B (1993) *We Have Never Been Modern*. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Latour B (2005) *Reassembling the Social: An introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lavandero Pérez J (2004) *Documentos Para la Historia Deltamacureña Casas Misón de Barima Y Amacuro*. Caracas: Universidad Católica Andrés Bello.
- Law J (2015) What's wrong with a one-world world? *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory* 16(1): 126–139.
- Liboiron M (2016) Redefining pollution and action: The matter of plastics. *Journal of Material Culture* 21(1): 87–110.
- Marres N (2010) Frontstaging nonhumans: Publicity as a constraint on the political activity of things. In: Braun B, Whatmore S, Stengers I, (eds) *Political Matter: Technoscience, Democracy, and Public Life*, NED - New edition ed. Minneapolis: Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. DOI:10.5749/j.ctttv6sg.
- Meyer B (2008) Commodities and the power of prayer: Pentacostalist attitudes towards consumption in contemporary Ghana. In: Rosaldo R and Inda JX (eds) *The Anthropology of Globalization: A Reader*. Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 247–267.
- Overing J (1992) Wandering in the market and the forest: An Amazonian theory of production and exchange. In: Dilley R (eds) *Contesting Markets: Analyses of Ideology, Discourse and Practice*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, x, 302 s.
- Overing J and Passes A (2000) *The Anthropology of Love and Anger: The Aesthetics of Conviviality in Native Amazonia*. London: Routledge.
- Penfield A (2020) Scattered things: Virtue ethics and objectness in indigenous Amazonia. *Ethnos*: 1–18. DOI:10.1080/00141844.2020.1830823.
- Pickering A (2017) The ontological turn: Taking different worlds seriously. *Social Analysis* 61(2): 34.
- Rodriguez JL (2008) The translation of poverty and the poverty of translation in the Orinoco Delta. *Ethnohistory (Columbus, Ohio)* 55(3): 417–438.
- Santos-Granero F (2009) *The Occult Life of Things: Native Amazonian Theories of Materiality and Personhood*. Tucson, Ariz: University of Arizona Press.
- Sørhaug C (2014) Foraging for love. In: Steyn J and Stamselberg N (eds) *Breaching Borders: Art, Migrants and the Metaphor of Waste*. London: I.B. Tauris, 137–158.
- Sørhaug C (2016) The hold of life in a Warao village : An assemblage analysis of householding practices. In: Bertelsen BE and Bendixsen S (eds) *Critical Anthropological Engagements in Human Alterity and Difference*. Cham: Palgrave, 137–158.



- Sørhaug C (2019) Composing warao indigeneity and miniatures: A human-nonhuman working group. In: Davy J and Dixon C (eds) *Worlds in Miniature: Contemplating Miniaturisation in Global Material Culture*. London: UCL Press.
- Strathern M (1990) Artefacts of history: Events and the interpretation of images. In: Siikala J (eds) *Culture and History in the Pacific*. Finnish Anthropological Society: Helsinki (Vol. 27, pp. 282 s.).
- Taussig MT (2004) *My Cocaine Museum*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Tsing AL (2005) *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Vilaça A (2005) Chronically unstable bodies: Reflections on Amazonian corporalities. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 11(3): 445–464.
- Viveiros de Castro E (1998) Cosmological deixis and amerindian perspectivism. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 4(3): 469–488.
- Viveiros de Castro E (2013) The relative native. Translated by Julia Sauma and Martin Holbraad. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3(3): 469–502.
- Viveiros de Castro E and Danowski D (2018) Humans and Terrans in the Gaia War. In: de la Cadena M and Blaser M (eds) *A World of Many Worlds*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Wagner R (1981) *The Invention of Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Walker H (2012) Demonic trade: Debt, materiality, and agency in Amazonia. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 18(1): 140–159.
- Whitehead AN (2006 [1919]) *The Concept of Nature The Tarnier Lectures Delivered in Trinity College, November 1919*.

## Author Biography

Christian Sørhaug is Associate Professor at Østfold University College, Faculty of Health, Welfare and Organisation. I wrote my phd concerning material culture and change among the indigenous Warao of the Orinoco Delta, Venezuela. In our Social Work Research Group, I am currently investigating the effects of digitalizing the Norwegian welfare infrastructure and services in the project: 'Lost in digital translation: Ethnographic studies of welfare state assemblages in practice'. My theoretical interests are science and technology studies, assemblage theory, material culture and posthumanism.