



“Efficacious intimacy” and the making of embodied worlds through belief practices

A “intimidade eficaz” e a construção de mundos corporificados através de práticas religiosas

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Abstract: This article is written from an anthropological perspective that emphasizes making and motion in material culture studies as ways to understand the embodied, social aspects of religion. It summarizes key aspects of the ‘efficacious intimacy’ framework as developed by the author over the last decade, linking the bodily-and-material to subject, object, and worldmaking processes, affects and effects, and emphasizes the relevance of these ideas for the interdisciplinary study of material religion. The author draws extensively upon her previous publications and collaborations to trace the development of her ideas from ethnographic fieldwork on Hindu devotionality in India to the creation of a global digital platform, dedicated to innovation in material religion studies. In addition, belief practices from Brazil, Indonesia, and the U.S. are presented in contexts of decolonization, heritage, and care, suggesting other possible applications of the efficacious intimacy framework in the future. This article argues for a more rigorous and diverse theorization of embodiment in material religion that pays attention to context, interpretation, and the inclusion of scholars’ positionalities.

Keywords: Embodiment. Bodily-and-material. Making. Efficacy. Hinduism. Umbanda.

Resumo: Este artigo foi escrito a partir de uma perspectiva antropológica que enfatiza a produção e o movimento nos estudos da cultura material como formas de compreender os aspectos sociais e corporificados das religiões. Ele resume aspectos-chave da estrutura de ‘intimidade eficaz’ desenvolvida pelo autor ao longo da última década, ligando o corpóreo-e-material ao sujeito, ao objeto e aos processos, afetos e efeitos da criação dos mundos religiosos, e enfatiza a relevância de tais ideias para o estudo interdisciplinar da Religião Material. A autora baseia-se extensivamente nas suas publicações e colaborações anteriores para traçar o desenvolvimento das suas ideias, desde o trabalho de campo etnográfico sobre a devoção hindu na Índia até à criação de uma plataforma digital global, dedicada à inovação nos estudos da Religião Material. Além disso, relaciona comparativamente as práticas de crenças do Brasil, da Indonésia e dos EUA apresentando-as em contextos de descolonização, herança e cuidado, sugerindo outras possíveis aplicações do conceito de intimidade eficaz no futuro. Este artigo defende uma teorização mais rigorosa e diversificada da corporeidade na Religião Material que considere o contexto, as interpretações e a inclusão das posições dos estudiosos em relação a seus objetos de estudo.

Palavras-chave: Corporeidade. Corpóreo-e-material. Prática religiosa. Eficácia. Hinduísmo. Umbanda.

Introduction: A *jugaad* approach to theory

This article centers embodiment as a practice of making, experiencing, and sustaining religious worlds whether of interlocuters or researchers. As an anthropologist

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who has studied belief practices among maker groups in India, Indonesia, and the U.S (Mohan 2018, 2019, 2023; Mohan ed. 2024), I developed the concept of ‘efficacious intimacy’ to interpret my interlocutors’ worldviews and connect them with the shaping of religious subjectivation and sociality. By approaching religion as an embodied form of belief that engages the “bodily-and-material” (Mohan; Warnier 2017) and through it, social relationships, I used a specific theoretical and analytical path to expand material religion studies. Understanding religious practices as ‘belief-in-motion’, that is, interactions that affect and effect things at various scales, spaces, and times allowed for the study of affect and agency in personal and cosmic, formal and informal, and institutionalized and unorganized spaces.

Many languages use the same term for ‘making’ and ‘doing’, indicating an etymological link between the two states. In French and Portuguese, the same word is used to denote both making and doing, *faire* and *fazer*, respectively. Western scholarship on the aesthetics and techniques of making as craft and art (Ingold 2013, Sennett 2008) connects the shaping of the object and to a certain extent the shaping of makers to process. However, a view of religion as ‘made’ through embodied practices requires insights from other disciplines as well. For ‘efficacious intimacy’, I draw broadly on the anthropological emphasis on context (Dilley 1999), the sociological emphasis on religion as collectivity (Durkheim 1997[1893], Santore 2008) and bodily techniques (Mauss 1973), the religious studies/art historical approach to felt belief (Morgan 2010), and the historical approach to power and subjectivation (Foucault 1982).

The efficacious intimacy toolkit also invokes a position on how scholarship is generated in the spirit of the South Asian term *jugaad*. In India, the Hindi term *jugaad* refers to an innovative solution that bends the rules or the use of a quotidian idea/object in a new way. It is a term most often associated with frugal innovation, drawing our attention to the risk and precarity of creating with limited resources and power, and navigating life through the materiality of class, caste, etc. *Jugaad*-like practices of bricolage, making do, and improvisation exist in socio-cultural repertoires around the world but I use the concept specifically to promote and support the study of ‘material religion’ or more generally, the fraught process of how people build connections between materiality, experience, and belief. Extending this to include researchers as practitioners highlights the practices that scholarship itself is built upon.

Making subjectivities through belief-in-motion

An emphasis on making and practices offers a way of understanding how religious worlds are generated through interactions. This is a mobile view of the world where things acquire different contexts and values through movement – actions by them or on them. Within the biographical approach (Kopytoff 1986) some object states are temporary and others are recurrent but all states are implicated as potential value in networks of circulation. With an emphasis on exchange as the basis for relationships, anthropological concepts of how things move and transform as social entities explore both what those things may be (images, objects, bodies, values, beliefs) as well as what

happens when they are set in motion. Thus, theories around the movement of objects and subjects, humans and non-humans, power flows, and actions can be applied within the study of material religion to how relationships are engendered between the mundane and spiritual, worldly and otherworldly, in order to access what people may consider as supernatural, magical, mystical, ancestral, divine, etc. The mediating element across diverse contexts is belief. When belief is not approached purely as a cognitive state but as a practice of what is made, felt, and embodied to attain efficacious results then materiality ‘on the move’ yields new pathways for the study of religion. Beliefs as sensory, experiential, and emotional states lead to the making of certain relationships over others via practices, and the study of how effects are generated through intimacy can reveal who or what is considered socio-culturally efficacious.

People depend on beliefs to respond and shape flows of power. Belief is often opposed to rationality, but on a cognitive level, human risk calculation, evaluation, and decision-making regarding complex personal and societal problems rely on emotions and feelings (Damasio 1999; Leroi-Gourhan 1993, pp.130-131). It is emotions and the ways in which they are manifested and regulated as feelings, both together forming autobiographical memory, that guide decisions and responses and determine the value of something as positive or negative, desirable or undesirable. Belief as value-laden emotions translates into feelings and practices to assist with predicting and planning actions and futures (Damasio 1994, p.xiii, p.191). Combined with the habitus as “schemes of perception, thought, and action” (Bourdieu 1977, pp.17-18), feelings and beliefs are a real and potent part of life, and regarded as efficacious when they “produce an intended or appropriate effect”. For our purposes, both process and effect are explored as forms of intimacy or what a closeness of knowledge, observation, familiarity, or connection can do.

In material culture studies, objects may often be studied as metaphors or symbols – that is, their representational and symbolic value is at the forefront. However, the nonverbal materiality of the medium is of central importance (Tilley 2006) and language, representation, and symbols are not the best means to study artifacts (Gell 1998, p.6). Extending Gell’s (1998, p.74) proposal of “technologies of enchantment” helps us explore how material and social agency are intertwined to help fulfill aesthetic goals as social goals and vice versa. Human and artifactual agency may be interconnected and transformative but one must pay attention to their specific properties and how they come together. Therefore, the separation of human and artifactual or the bodily and the material at an initial stage may help us to focus on them independently as well as relationally. The subject as being and having a body is a key element in the *Matière à Penser* (MaP) school of thought, which draws upon the ideas of Mauss, Schilder, Foucault, and Bourdieu, among others, to enhance the anthropological study of embodiment, practices, techniques, materiality and power (Warnier 2021). In collaboration with the French anthropologist Jean-Pierre Warnier, my initial work on material religion as subjectivation (Mohan 2015, Mohan; Warnier 2017) drew on the phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty (1962) who, working against the Cartesian mind–body split, considered the subject and the world to be joined in the fleshiness and carnality of perception. His theory of subjectivity was grounded in the feeling body and its interaction with

the world and others, and allows us to combine the lived body with the acting body, with action as the basis of engagement with the world.

My recent work, an edited volume, (Mohan ed. 2024) is a conscious attempt at interdisciplinarity in belief studies and highlights scholars as practitioners and vice-versa. It introduces and combines lineages of objectification and subjectification from material culture studies under the theme of worldmaking, and anchors belief practices within diverse life worlds, cosmologies, and value systems. The various chapters deal with how subjective worlds are made through embodied attachments and different contexts evoke different nuances. For instance, artist Claire Le Pape (2024, p.84) uses sociologist Marcel Bolle de Bal's (2003) concept of *reliance*, a term that unlike the English word implies a kind of dependency as re-linkedness or re-connection. Le Pape (2024, p.84) is concerned about the delinking effect of modern societies, and situates her weaving and performative artwork as a response to the break of fundamental human social links. Her desire is for societies and humans to reconnect and this, following a praxeological logic, lies in the movement between linking and un-linking. Thus, the exact dynamic that making implies is contextual. For instance, a concept that is familiar in Hindu philosophy is the creation-destruction cycle of the cosmos through time (Sanskrit: *kala*) and epoch (Sanskrit: *yuga*), categorizing actions in the macrocosm through phases of creation, maintenance, and destruction. The *yugas* move in a cycle of repetition and progressive degeneration, with the current age of *kali* representing the most chaos and loss of coherence before the beginning of a new cosmic cycle. *Kali yuga* also distances the devotee from deity, causing ontological disturbance and grief for the former – Hindu devotees relate to macrocosmic time through practices such as chanting on prayer beads (Mohan 2019, 60). The point to be made here is that theorizing making whether in the context of an artist-medium or a devotee-chanter can be related to the way our interlocutors perceive, philosophize, and enact their concepts of the world.

Connecting interiors and exteriors: Devotion in Hindu *bhakti* and Umbanda

My entry point into material religion was through the study of how Vaishnav devotees (worshippers of Vishnu) in India are 'made' through loving service (Sanskrit: *bhakti seva*) for the deities in the missionizing Hindu group 'International Society for Krishna Consciousness' or ISKCON. Within Hindu belief, dharma (Sanskrit for individual and cosmic duty, responsibility, rights, laws) invokes an actual way of living where the subject is actively engaged in choosing certain exchanges and relationships over others. Embodiment involves exchange between corporeal interiors and exteriors, and the devotee is a fluid, loosely bounded 'dividual' whose concerns with regulating interpersonal transactions are part of a constant negotiation of biological instability and moral risk. The devotional self-subject is both agent and object of transformation, where practices of right eating, worship, dressmaking, chanting, and so forth, constitute appropriate conduct or *achara* (Marriott; Inden 1977, p.231).

The ideas of nineteenth-century religion scholars and Indologists, such as Max Müller, influenced the way Hindu belief was perceived with the sacred located not only along an evolutionary scale of religious thought and practice but also via what may be termed more broadly a “surface-depth ontology” (Miller 1994) emphasizing inner reality as spiritual essence. In keeping with perceptions of sacredness developed by Protestant Europeans in the nineteenth century, Müller incorporated a Christian goal of inward spiritual development into his studies of India and searched for an authenticity that was to be found in text and the knowledge of Brahmins (Waghorne 1994, pp.88-89). However, what he ignored was that material entities can be regarded as embodiments of divinity and means of transcendence and not merely representations, and Hinduism “postulates no absolute distinction between human and divine beings” (Fuller 2004). In such a system, idea and action, interior and exterior, and the bodily and material are continuities activated through interactions.

In my ethnographic research in India, I chose to focus on something that was vital to the temple’s worship experience but invisibilized for most – the routine by which professional embroiderers and lay members made dresses for the deities all year round. While this was a highly-regulated environment, I was able to form relationships with women and girl devotees, and focus on how devotees attached meaning to their actions phenomenologically/praxeologically, negotiating values through materials. I was able to study both the orthopraxy of deity dressing and situations of change where innovation revealed conflicting responses and desires. Through the ability of deity clothing and devotees’ own clothing to shape self-subjects, I contextualized clothing practices as ones that shaped devotional life through their ‘efficacious intimacy’ (Mohan 2019).

In acknowledging the ambitions and practices behind theorizing, we recognize our intellectual pursuits and desires as embodied ones with real effects on ourselves and others. For instance, the desire to understand alternative ways of living underlies Brazilian scholar Patrícia Rodrigues de Souza’s work in material religion. Souza draws from her years of experience among practitioners of the Afro-Brazilian religion Umbanda to explore how she made a devotional object, analyzing it as a way of “praying through the hands”. She observes:

Being raised as a Catholic and getting in touch with Umbanda (a religion originating in African oral traditions), a lot later, made me experience a change in my own religious sensorial patterns. The hearing of mass sermons changed to the sound of drums and indigenous war cries; sitting on benches was replaced by standing, dancing and clapping; receiving Eucharist became food offerings to a pantheon of nature Gods (Souza 2024, p.43).

Based on her own experience of making a black porcelain doll as an offering to an *orixá* (general name for Yoruba deities, worshiped in Afro-Brazilian religions) in a temple in Brazil, Souza shows how acts of crafting a religious object are also acts of crafting a religious subject. She notes that the standard Durkheimian view is one that emphasizes modes of acting, thinking, and feeling as external to the person. By contrast, she uses the concept of efficacious intimacy as one of the ‘internal’ and the ‘external’, relating the creating of devotional objects and subjects in the Afro-Brazilian religion, Umbanda.

Umbanda involves all the senses where rituals require people to be barefoot and where spiritual guides embodied in mediums perform healing practices using herbs, tobacco and ‘personal’ objects related to the spiritual lineage manifested during a given ceremony. Souza is intimately connected to Umbanda’s rituals through social relationships built on “physical closeness, personal gestures, touch and sharing of the spiritual guides’ objects” (2024, p.45). These relationships guide her decisions, helping her tap into a creative flow and perceive the doll offering she makes as real and agentive. Because Souza is fulfilling a sacred task, one that she has been asked to perform by the spirit medium, she is sure that she can make the porcelain doll. “My body knew how to make the doll, and I believe this is part of what is comprehended as mediumistic processes...my body became a ‘medium’ for something” (Souza 2024, p.54).

Issues of religious subjectivation and efficacy invoke the question of power of the entities involved. For Souza (2024, p.43), writing on the topic of making a doll offering was an attempt to “turn down the volume” of religious discourses in Brazil, a Catholic country, and look at things and bodily practices such that “Amerindian and African heritages start to show up in Brazilian religious bodies.” With the temples and objects of African cults in the country frequently attacked by radical Pentecostals, and a global modernizing emphasis on text-based authority, the efficacy of purely performative modes in oral traditions of devotion is marginalized. Souza (2024, p.43) observes how “Brazilians tend to carry Christian, rationally construed moralities mixed with African/Amerindian bodily conducts.” For instance, a person who is ostensibly Catholic may carry an amulet related to a deity from the Yoruba pantheon, and this mixture of efficacies is not seen as insincere or inauthentic. The seeming paradox only appears when the researcher applies categories that are solely based on their reality and not that of their interlocuter.

Culture, reality, and the politics of representation

The strength of ‘efficacious intimacy’ is that it connects small, intimate acts to wider forces that shape how worlds are understood and represented. Under modernity (Appadurai 1996), cultural images are created both by “imagined communities” (Anderson 1991) as well as the French “*imaginaire*” (Appadurai 1990) as a constructed landscape of collective aspirations. People creatively, but not always consciously, believe in some things and not others through the use of images that mediate the real-unreal. De Certeau (1987, p.57) writes about the compelling power of narratives in historiography to institute and not just document reality. He states that narrative inserts itself into the events of which it claims to be the interpreter, gaining an authority or power that is based on the reality it is supposed to declare. Similarly, one can think of how belief practices rely on forms of representational power, which have their own bodily-and-material effects, to assert the reality of some worlds vis-a-vis the unreality of others.

In response to new efficacies, challenges, and possibilities, the process of making, as the movement between action and its representation, comes up against concepts,

such as ‘tradition’, that imply stasis. Suggesting timelessness or something that is slow to change, the word tradition is related closely to an evolutionary and chronological view of culture (Kahn 1995, Mallon 2010) that denies the creativity and adaptability of Indigenous practices to new contexts. For instance, cultural issues can be navigated through the Polynesian concept of *talanoa* as “talking critically yet harmoniously” (Academy and Consultancy 2021, p.110). Simultaneously, Indigenous theorizing of reality has made it possible to turn Indigenous ideas into portable concepts that can be performed in new places, thus, animating and extending their reach (Refiti 2017, 267).

The culture of the island of Bali, Indonesia is regarded as a “timeless, harmonious synthesis of religion, custom and art” (Vickers 1989/2009, pp.4-9) and is testimony to the work done by religio-cultural imaginaries – co-produced by foreigners and Balinese – for nearly a century (Mohan 2022). The performance of a cycle of rituals, as well as various traditional dances and artforms are the basis of Bali’s heritage and tourism industry. The reframing of a religious practice as ‘cultural’ or vice versa indicates the need for a different kind of efficacy. On the island of Lombok, disputes between Sasak Muslims and Balinese Hindus at the multi-religious Lingsar festival are held at bay by accepting the presence of the ‘other’ at the event as part of the logic of cultural performance (Gottowik 2019, pp.65-66). Sometimes the scientific and the spiritual also come together as in the case of sacred *pusaka* (Bahasa Indonesia: heirlooms) stored in museums in Indonesia, and people in royal as well as provincial museums have taken on the roles of traditional caretakers and ritual specialists (Kreps 2003, p.320). While the need for certain spaces and entities to be demarcated or set aside as sacred may remain, various levels of sacrality may co-exist with actions and meanings adapted to new contexts and purposes.

If we approach belief as an embodied affective and psychological state, a material religion approach connects belief to what people perceive as real or unreal. Under this rubric, events, such as the Covid-19 pandemic (Mohan 2023), can also be studied through practices of belief and care. The making-unmaking of sociality in the U.S. through different kinds of contestations of the virus’ existence took place in both religious and non-religious spaces. A crisis of movement became a way to observe how circulation and motion, as a condition of sociality and belief, was the very topic of concern when goods and people were temporarily immobilized, and the multiple subjectivities of people were revealed in their containment and connection.

Conclusion: Moving between the proximate and distant

Material religion scholarship depends on the existence of phenomena, circulation of ideas, theoretical fashions, and social and institutional structures, among other factors. What we value and come to know as knowledge is co-created by scholars-practitioners and interlocuters-practitioners and is a result of practices and epistemologies that keep some people and ways of living close and sense-able while others are distant. Fed by anthropology’s eclecticism and ability to bring in diverse ‘subjects’ as persons and themes, efficacious intimacy draws our attention to how the closeness-distance dynamic

shapes the boundaries of our phenomenological horizon and, thus, our sociality. It also deals with how we care and what we care about. Because of its sheer ubiquity, we often overlook the bodily-and-material being engaged in acts of revealing-concealing, opening-closing, and giving-taking.

Efficacious intimacy deals with how embodiment is integral to worldmaking. In a religious context this is both how closeness and contact is efficacious as well as how that closeness transcends through practices and values in exchanges with the invisible and otherworldly. Through a heightened attention to how subjective worlds (and their objects and values) are made, the theorizing and themes of material religion can be focused in new ways on what our interlocutors care about, in all its complexity. Scholars-practitioners can extend their use of embodiment theory from the necessary first step of aligning sensoriality with orthopraxy to grappling with absences and gaps engendered by different registers and modes of learning. For instance, Le Pape (2024), when conducting a weaving workshop for elderly people with Alzheimer's disease, noted her collaborators' weakening verbal expression as part of the loss of symbolic language that takes place after memory loss and disorientation. She used weaving "to solicit tacitility as well as procedural memory of gestures", integrating her previous learning on techniques as well her awareness of the cognitive gap between procedural (knowing how) and verbalized (knowing what) forms of knowledge (Mohan; Warnier 2017, p.370).

I started this article by invoking the centrality of making to embodiment studies. I end by emphasizing how the socio-cultural aspects of research and dissemination also require due consideration as they anchor interpretative connections (Dilley 1999) in material religion studies. There is a creative, perceptual and ethical dimension to how knowledge disciplines place boundaries around things. These limits can be explored, thoughtfully, by incorporating our own positionality as researchers as well as taking more seriously, theory and scholarship generated by our interlocutors. My digital educational initiatives, *The Jugaad Project* platform, started in 2019, and the podcast *Embodied Worlds*, introduced in 2024¹, have been effective in growing material religion studies by considering various topics from healing to work. By juxtaposing and connecting worlds in an eclectic manner, it is hoped that the experimental connections created will generate new ideas in the field of material religion.

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1 These two digital initiatives can be viewed at www.thejugaadproject.pub and www.thejugaadproject.pub/podcast, last accessed June 5, 2024.

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