



**Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute**  
**Instituto Smithsonian de Investigaciones Tropicales**

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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**The Occult Life of Things**

Take another look at your car, your fork and knife, your personal digital assistant. Is it possible that "inanimate objects" have a life of their own? Fernando Santos-Granero, STRI Staff Scientist, is organizer of "The Occult Life of Things," a symposium at the International Congress of Americanists in Seville, Spain on 17 July, 2006. Natives of the Amazon region consider animals, plants and objects as subjectivities that have lives of their own and are essentially social beings.

This 'animist' vision of the world goes hand in hand with a 'perspectivist' vision in which all beings and things view 'self' as human and 'other' as non-human. The focus of the symposium is an analysis of these occult lives; occult not only in the sense that the lives of things are supernatural, but also because the human essence of things is not normally visible.

"The Yanasha of eastern Peru believe that pan pipes are animated by the Sun God, the Creator," explains Santos-Granero. "Before playing the pipes, Yanasha men offer fermented manioc drinks, coca leaves or tobacco juice to 'raise its spirit'. When they play the flute, the life-giving force of the Sun God is broadcast to all nearby beings and things."

The symposium will gather linguists and anthropologists from Europe, South America, and the United States who are specialists on Native Amazonian societies. Participants will address three major aspects of the life of things.

- the subjective aspect of objects. How do Amerindians mark the difference between "animate" and "inanimate" things? Do all things have a subjective dimension? How does the subjectivity of things manifest itself?
- the social aspect of things. In what contexts does the relationship between people and things become inter-subjective? Do things have social or historical agency? Are the relationships between people and things conceived of as power relations?
- the historical aspect of things. The high value as ritual objects, prestige goods, or family heirlooms, invests some things (e.g. magical stones, masks, flutes, feather headdresses) with a historical trajectory. Is it possible to reconstruct the social histories of highly valued objects? Can we write the biographies of things? How are new –modern- things incorporated into native Amazonian animist and perspectivist ontologies?

The International Congress of Americanists was founded in 1875 as the Société Américaine de France, to contribute to ethnographic, linguistic and historical studies of the Americas, especially those which illuminate the times before Columbus discovered this New World.

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Meetings are held every three years. The site of the meeting alternates between the Old and New World. Presenters represent the fields including Anthropology, Archaeology, Art, Law, Economics, Education, Philosophy, Geography, History, Linguistics, Sociology, Urban Studies and Human Rights.

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The Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute (STRI), a unit of the Smithsonian Institution, headquartered in Panama City, Panama, furthers our understanding of tropical nature and its importance to human welfare, trains students to conduct research in the tropics and promotes conservation by increasing public awareness of the beauty and importance of tropical ecosystems.

Photo caption:

Flauta.tif Pan-pipes thought to be imbued with the soul of the Sun-God Credit: Marcos Guerra, STRI