

FORUM

Dreams and reality in the *tubuan* and the corporation

Keir Martin

Abstract: Beginning with a dream encounter with the *tubuan*, an ancestral spirit in Papua New Guinea, this article questions conventional anthropological framings that posit a sharp distinction between Western humanist ontologies and non-Western or indigenous ontologies. The article argues that non-human entities essential for human existence come in and out of being across stereotypical cultural divides and that the creation and acknowledgment of non-human agents is as essential for capitalist modernity as it is for any other form of human existence. Non-human “Objects” as diverse as *tubuans* and corporations are essential for the construction of human subjectivity as much as they are its outcome. The perspectival construction of such different kinds of object is a process by which humans continuously refashion themselves into different kinds of Subjects.

Keywords: capitalism, corporations, humanism, objects, Papua New Guinea

Back in the summer of 2002, during fieldwork in Papua New Guinea's (PNG) East New Britain Province, I dreamed I was back in Salford on the street that I used to live on in the late 1990s. In my dream I was in the alley behind my house, walking between the terraces. Suddenly, I observed a giant golden eagle, twice the size of a man, sitting on one of the red brick walls marking off a backyard, staring at me. It didn't need to move or act to fill me with dread. Like the wolves sitting in a tree in the famous dream analyzed by Freud, to be seen by the alien force was enough. Unlike Freud's patient, however, I instantly knew what the eagle was. I had just been through the first stage of initiation into the *tubuan* society, a secret men's society based around the “raising” of ancestral spirits, known as *tubuans*, from the “bush”. The *tubuan* is often

conceptualized as a bird, in particular a large eagle, and I had no doubt that the eagle in my dream embodied the *tubuan*, as had the masked man who administered the beating that had introduced me to the *tubuan* society.

Eighteen months later, and still in PNG, I had another, more disturbing dream experience. Again, I was back in England, not in Salford this time, but in East Anglia, a part of the country I had only visited once before on a weekend break. It was an unusual East Anglia, however, as in contrast to the famously flat East Anglia that I had visited in my waking life, this East Anglia had a huge stony mountain emerging from the otherwise plain landscape. Despite the fact that I was in the middle of a raging tempest in the darkest hours of night, I began climbing the mountain, as one inevita-



bly must in dreams of this kind. At the top, I reached a small house or cabin and on entering I found a room decorated with 1950s furniture, including one of those old wooden cabinet radios with dials and a display running from left to right showing the names of the various radio stations that one could tune into: Home Service, Luxemburg and so on. As I examined the dial, I saw one unusual option on the menu: a station named Radio Dukduk. The *dukduk* is a related spirit to the *tubuan*, the former usually (though not always) conceptualized as male and the latter as female. In my dream, despite a sense that what I was doing was unwise, I twisted the dial toward Radio Dukduk. As I tuned in to the station, I heard a voice calling my name from the darkened corner of the room. I awoke suddenly, and I was back in my room at the resettlement camp of Matupit-Sikut. And then to my extreme horror, I heard the voice call my name again—no longer asleep but definitely awake, alone in the middle of the rainforest, the spirit had escaped my dreams and was calling me in real life.

It's hard to put into terms now how terrifying the experience was. The object had escaped the internal world of my dreams and was calling me now from out there in the real world. Either that, or equally distressing, I was hearing things that were not really there. The experience disturbed me periodically for months afterward, only finally being settled to my satisfaction the following year. I was now living in San Diego, doing archival research, and I related the story to my roommate, a PhD student in physical anthropology. She laughed and told me that this was a commonly observed psychological phenomenon in which “the brain makes sense” of noises that it hears upon awakening in terms of what it had been dreaming before. So, in this case, I awake, there is an owl or a fruit-bat outside or a small rodent scurrying about on the balcony and “my brain” frames it as the *tubuan* that was speaking to me in my dream. I took this story on board instantly and with some relief. It seemed far more plausible, and reassuring, than accepting that there really was a *tubuan* out there, in the “real” world, beyond my dreams.

At this point, anyone familiar with contemporary conventional tropes of anthropological writing will already recognize the standard set-up line that I am laying down here. I still remained a sinner, clinging on to my rationalizing worldview, “explaining away” the reality of a phenomenon that I was unable to accept. And they will also already be anticipating the equally standardized punchline that is to come in which I eventually repent of my ontological imperialism and learn to “take seriously” the reality of that which I eagerly sought reasons to dismiss. A degree of reflection on the processes by which we come to experience or adjudicate some phenomena as real or not would strike most of us as an important aspect of our work. Whether or not the complexity of those processes are best understood through a radical reduction to an opposition between a “Western” naturalism and its indigenous Other is equally worthy of reflection, however. The movement between different appreciations of what really is might often be experienced or framed in such terms, but when it is, it might be best to reflect upon the circumstances that lead to that opposition seeming so salient in that moment. It does not have to be the assumed starting point and underlying opposition into which all analysis or understanding must be enfolded.

Iau ToMartin, ina talil mulai

For most of the people I was closest to in PNG, the first dream was immediately leaped upon as proof that the *tubuan* was real. My friend, To-Atun, who was heavily involved in ritual *tubuan* practices, told me that the *tubuan* had “come to visit me” in my dream, a phrasing that suggested that the *tubuan* did indeed have an existence independent of and external to me and that its appearance was an intrusion into my brain not an emanation from it. As we talked, we switched between our three languages of communication: English, *Tok Pisin* (the form of Melanesian pidgin commonly used throughout PNG), and *Kuanua*, the vernacular Tolai

language. “Go ra ririvon a ngala na magit” he informed me in *Kuanua*, “this dream; it’s a big thing”, before switching to *Tok Pisin*, “*nau yu save, dispela tubuan kam lukim yu tru tru*”, “now you know the *tubuan* really came to see you”. He and others were in no doubt that I should take the dream as proof that the *tubuan* was “real” (an English word that he used several times in the course of the conversation). And this conviction was shared by those who were less enthusiastic about the visit. My host family at Matupit were devout Seventh-day Adventists who had expressed muted concern about my decision to go through initiation in the *tubuan* society. This concern became considerably less muted after I had shared my dream experience with them. After my second dream and waking encounter with the *tubuan*, ToAtun became even more satisfied. “Now you really know it’s real,” he told me. Aware that my understanding of dreams might have led me to a different conclusion as to the *tubuan*’s “reality” than his, he took my second experience as proof that the *tubuan* had decided to return in a manner that demonstrated its own external reality in a manner that I could not dismiss.

There were other factors in the dreams that ToAtun found significant. The fact that they happened in England, where I was from, also meant to ToAtun that the *tubuan* had come to visit *me*. Most Tolai, including *tubuan* devotees, were happy to admit that although the *tubuan* had power, its range was limited essentially to the Tolai and neighboring areas. The only way in which it might ever have power elsewhere would be if groups of Tolai in that new area were to consecrate sacred ground to raise *tubuans* on. At the time of my research, there were members of the emerging Tolai elite, now resident in the national capital Port Moresby, who were making plans to buy land to do just that. They hoped to consecrate that ground to make a *tariau* or *tubuan* site that would be guarded by poorly paid private security guards from less economically developed ethnic groups living in Port Moresby’s teeming squatter camps. Such a process was unlikely to occur in England, meaning that

it was hard to imagine that the *tubuan* would ever visit me there in my waking life, but the fact that it visited me there in my dreams suggested to ToAtun that it had “really” visited me. I took this then and I take it now to mean that I was supposed to understand that the visit of the *tubuan* was not a game or simply part of research but a real thing and that I had met and encountered it as a person and not just as a researcher.

The precise words that the *tubuan* used were also held to be significant. Although everyone at Matupit knew my name was “Keir”, they all referred to me as ToMartin. “To” is an honorific, similar to “Mr” in English often put before men’s names. Keir was said to be difficult to pronounce, but more to the point, the most popular song in PNG at the time of my arrival was a song by the local artist Patti Potts Doi, titled “ToMartin.” It was enough of a coincidence that this song should be the most popular song in the region at precisely the time of my arrival. Even more striking then was the chorus: “*Iau ToMartin ina talil mulai uro kaugu gunan*” (“I am ToMartin and I shall return to my homeland”); a sentence that was felt to perfectly describe my situation. ToMartin I was then, for everyone except for the *tubuan*, who in my encounter repeated my real non-fieldwork name—Keir, Keir, Keir—both before and after I awoke. At the time, then, I had no doubt in my gut that ToAtun was right and that this was another indication of some kind of deeper power, whether that power was my unconscious or a “real” *tubuan*. The experience would have been disturbing enough if the *tubuan* had called out ToMartin to me—to call out with the name that meant that it was addressing me outside of the deep yet still separated out experience of fieldwork meant that it struck me at my core in a different manner.

I was not alone in struggling to make sense of the *tubuan*. Among Tolai themselves there is unending dispute over its nature and meaning. One could characterize these disputes as ontological clashes or ontological politics. They were arguments over what kind of entity the *tubuan* was and the extent to which it “really” existed independently of human belief or agency at all.

Although a Western versus Tolai opposition could be drawn upon in such discussions, this was fundamentally a political clash of ontologies between Tolai themselves about the kind of humans that they wanted to be and the entities with which they co-existed.

This does not sit easily with the conventional narrative that unites many “ontological” approaches in anthropology these days, namely that clashes of ontologies are to be largely seen as a clash between a Western naturalism that is imposed upon others as part of a singular and historically consistent colonial project, rather than as perspectives that come in and out of being, as people shift conversational and relational positions.

In what follows, I shall briefly outline this situation before exploring the seemingly unusual resonances between the *tubuan* and the contemporary corporation. As a starting point here, I shall take the point that, as a number of radical critics have observed, at least since Marx, it’s possible to present capitalist modernity as itself being built upon a celebration of non- or even anti-human agency. It is hard to imagine capitalist modernity as we have known it for the past century without the legal and social recognition of corporations as separate actors from the human actors who summon them into being through legal ritual and then have to interact with them, for example. Differences abound between *tubuans* and corporations, of course, and one could leap on these as the basis for once again rediscovering familiar kinds of “radical” difference between the West and the Rest. But does this have to be our default framing and contrast, or could we “take seriously” their similarities, their mutual entanglements, and their mutual constitution as a starting point, and then see if more genuinely surprising and unsettling contrasts and comparisons emerge?

Of clans and corporations

Elsewhere (Martin 2020) I have written on the political controversies surrounding the “reality”

of the *tubuan* among Tolai people, and rather than repeat that material at length, I will only briefly touch on it here. During my fieldwork, there was some controversy over a proposal made by some prominent *tubuan* leaders to “protect” the *tubuan* legally through state legislation designed to make insulting it or denigrating it a crime. Although, the purported rationale was to protect the *tubuan*, it was suspected by many that the real purpose was for the so-called Big Shots (Martin 2013), men made wealthy by careers in politics and business, to silence growing criticism of their alleged corruption and the way that their “money-power” meant that they increasingly controlled the *tubuan* and allegedly increasingly used it for inappropriate political and commercial purposes. This criticism was not limited to those Tolai who openly rejected *tubuan* on religious and political grounds. It was perhaps most marked among grassroots villagers who were heavily involved in *tubuan*, such as ToAtun, who feared the consolidation of the emerging elite’s power in the *tubuan* and across Tolai social life more generally. As I detail elsewhere (Martin 2020), proponents of the new law proposed it at least in part on the basis that the *tubuan* was a “real” thing that needed protecting, and ToAtun himself would not have challenged that underlying assumption as part of his opposition to the law. But many other opponents would, and elsewhere, I document some of the ways in which they did so. As one opponent bluntly told me, “*Tubuan I man, I no masalai*”. The *tubuan* is a man, not a spirit”, before going on to explain that it was now a means by which Big Shots hid behind masks in order to consolidate the wealth that new political opportunities enabled by independence and economic restructuring had made possible.

Tubuans are often associated with particular kinship groups, most commonly the groups bound together by ties of matrilineal descent known as *vunatarai* in Kuanua or as *klan* (clan) in Tok Pisin. There is a long tradition of contrasting these kinds of groupings with the social groups or organizations of modernity or capitalism. Chris Gregory (1980: 641), for example,

draws a contrast between the traditional gift economy of Papua and New Guinea that is to be understood, “with reference to clan structure and the principles governing kinship organization” and the modern commodity economy which should be understood in relation to, “class structure and the principles governing factory organization”. To the factory, we could add the plantation or the mine (more common sites for wage-labor relations in PNG), and also the corporate forms that most commonly own and organize these kinds of workplaces.

While Gregory’s distinction worked as a heuristic to explain the dynamics of social change in late colonial and early postcolonial PNG, in contemporary PNG, both poles of the familiar distinction between modern and indigenous distinction are blurred by actions such as the widespread legal registration of clan groupings into Incorporated Land Groups and other kinds of corporate forms, across PNG. The rapid expansion of this process in the past 15 years, noted by the likes of Colin Filer (2007, 2014), is part of a process in which land that cannot be legally alienated from customary control in PNG is leased to large multinational corporations for the purposes of logging or oil-palm plantations. This is a process that clans cannot always legally allow for, but that Incorporated Land Groups set up as separate entities that represent the clan (which itself now has to be constructed as a more unitary group-like entity than before in order to relate to its own representative) can do as their representative (see also Leaver and Martin 2016; Martin 2007).

Both *tubuans* and corporations are non-human actors brought into being as particular kinds of objects with a particular form of existence through human ritual.¹ Once evoked as particular kinds of objects, they become means by which humans’ relationships with each other, with non-humans and the satisfaction of their own needs become organized. We all, including most Tolai, live, eat, drink, sleep, defecate, copulate and speculate through the mediation of corporations. The *tubuan* also becomes established as an object by means of which wealth

and food and relationships between clans are channeled in a way that, for its advocates, is an essential part of them continuing to be the type of Tolai humans that they wish to continue being. And these two forms of object through which human subjectivities are made, are now themselves intimately entwined as *tubuan* ritual is now unimaginable without the use of all sorts of corporate products from tinned meat, land cruisers, or kerosene. Meanwhile, *tubuans* themselves appear at tourism festivals or on Japanese TV shows or online advertising campaigns for the international fashion house ICICLE in which, “devoted career professionals can enjoy the pleasant harmony between human and nature in the process of personal growth.” ICICLE promotes the *tubuan* as number 19 in its promotional series of “earthmen” from around different, “cultures, calling upon the power of nature to protect mankind”, in an eerie mimesis of Marisol De la Cadena’s (2010) depiction of the sacred mountains as examples of “earth-beings” whose power releases socio-natural forces for the benefit of humans who are willing to live in harmony with them.²

This collapsing of the nature/culture distinction by a transnational corporation looking to sell jeans to young career-minded professionals might unsettle the by-now familiar assumption that extractive and exploitative colonial-capitalist modernity is inherently built upon such distinctions. Even if we decry it as fake, insincere, inauthentic (in other words refuse to “take it seriously”), it might suggest that capitalist and colonial modernity and its associated inequalities and oppressions are not *inherently* based on such binaries and the “expulsion” of non-humans or the sin of “human exceptionalism”. Instead it might suggest that such binaries come in and out of view as they are useful or harmful framings to advance for particular agents in particular moments. Emphasizing such binaries or the unique capacities of humans might advance corporate interests in one context while their dissolution might be equally favorable in others.

When we read critiques of such modernist politics and the associated celebration of indig-

enous “ontological politics” as the privileged site of resistance to them, it is often non-human actors, such as states and corporations who are the main villains of the piece. At the same time we are told that the root of the problem of modernist politics lies with the West’s expulsion of non-humans from the political settlement at the heart of modernity. De la Cadena’s (2010) account of “indigenous cosmopolitics” provides a good example of this tendency. This article provides a powerful and welcome rebuttal to the marginalization of indigenous political claims and also provides an important starting point for a discussion of the ontological politics underpinning such marginalization. I return here to a piece that I have discussed before (Martin 2020) because of the power and clarity with which it sets out an important set of arguments that are underpinned by an admirable political advocacy of the rights of a marginalized group.

The lack of attention to corporations as non-human agents is striking in accounts such as De la Cadena’s, where the main villains of the piece threatening the earth-beings are other powerful non-human agents. In De la Cadena’s (2010: 355) own account, her key informant Nazario, sees a “consequential” difference between earlier forms of mining capitalism that, while often being destructive, still allowed, “for the continuation of relations with earth-beings”, and contemporary corporate driven mining, that, “destroys earth-beings themselves”. De la Cadena goes on to tell the reader that, “as lived from his world *corporate* mining ventures do not just encroach on peasant land and pollute the environment; they also destroy a socio-natural world” (ibid., emphasis added).

It is not mining per se that kills the earth-beings. It is *corporate* mining that destroys them. And this is not the result of the relentless expulsion of non-human actors by humans from the political economy but in fact is the result of the precise opposite process: the creation and insertion of powerful non-human persons into the heart of political economic processes.

If, as De la Cadena (2010: 356) argues, the “ontology” of the sacred mountains is central to controversies over the destruction wrought by corporate mining projects, then surely the ontology of those very corporations is itself of equal importance to understanding and contesting these developments. Particularly if, as she goes on to argue (2010: 357), it is corporations whose spreading power has not only been a potential existential threat to the earth-beings’ survival but has simultaneously been the cause of the earth-beings’ increased “public presence . . . in politics”, by virtue of the ways in which they are increasingly made visible by the collective resistance to their destruction, in what we can perhaps see as an ontological instantiation of Karl Polanyi’s (2001[1944]) famous “double movement”.

Capitalism—humanist and anti-humanist

Far from global capitalism being simply based upon the expulsion of non-human actors from the political economy, it is possible to critique it for being a profoundly anti-humanist state of affairs that takes human creativity and reifies it in non-human agents, such as corporations. This critique will be familiar to anyone who has skimmed the young Marx’s writings on alienation, and often (though not always) tends to come from a leftist and humanist position. It is a position that is often in its turn rejected by conservative or business-minded opponents as backward-looking and unrealistic. It turns out that when viewed from one rather important perspective, that of the boardroom and trading floor, to be modern involves evoking and defending non-human agency from backward-looking humanists. In a best-selling book, praised by the *The Economist* and the *The Financial Times*, John Micklethwait and Adrian Woodridge (2003: 2–3) stated that the corporation is “the most important organisation in the world. . . the basis of the prosperity of the west

and the best hope for the future of the rest of the world. The company is the key to productivity growth in the private sector. We are all richer as a result.”

Far from the expulsion of non-humans being the basis for a Western colonial-capitalist vision that seeks to impose itself as the future of the rest of the world, the problem with the natives, from the perspective of those who actually know a little about how capitalist enterprise operates, is that they accept the wrong kinds of non-human agents, such as the earth-beings and the sacred mountains, and reject the right ones, such as IBM and Rio Tinto.

Debates over the kind of legal recognition that should be given to non-human objects, such as *tubuans* or the earth-beings described in De la Cadena’s work, often hinge upon the question as to whether or not the earth-beings “really” are separate entities of a particular type that deserve a particular type of recognition or whether or not this is a mistaken belief. We see something similar at work in the idea that the recognition of corporations as particular kinds of entities is also based upon mistaken beliefs that misrecognize human agency in both the left- and right-wing critiques of corporate personhood. From the left, the activist group Reclaim Democracy (2023) argue that, making corporations legal persons constructs corporations “as though they were human”, signaling the underlying assumption that this is a mistaken belief not based on reality. From the right, no lesser figures than Milton and Rose Friedman (1980: 307), advocated amending the US Constitution to disallow personhood to corporations partly on the basis of the claim made earlier in their book, that to talk of corporate income is “figurative” speech, and that in reality “only people have incomes” (ibid.: 20).

As with the differing and shifting perspectives on the reality of *tubuans*, it is perhaps important not to divorce perspectives regarding corporate persons from the relational and conversational contexts within which they are developed. Even if I agree with Reclaim Democ-

racy and the Friedmans that “in the final analysis”, as they used to say, corporations are not “really” independent entities separate from the humans whose legal rituals give birth to them, I am forced to deal with them as such. I may disagree that the University of Oslo is ultimately an entity that exists as separate from me and the thousands of persons who come together in various relations to construct it as an entity, but by presenting itself to me as such when I sign contracts with it and accept money from it, it comes into being as such from my perspective whatever my underlying opinion on the desirability or ultimate source of its appearance.³ By appearing to me as an object, it becomes one to me in practice whatever my philosophical take on the issue, in the same way that Karl Marx was probably incapable of mystically deconstructing and perceiving the thousands of social relations that went into making the pint of beer he bought on Tottenham Court Road after a hard day in the British Library, despite having just developed a theory of commodity fetishism designed to do exactly that.

For Marx, it was the particular constellation of relationships which gave him or any other consumer a perspective that largely obscured those relations, and it is this that constructed it as an object of a particular type, that is a commodity, as such. Marx’s argument on commodities is often taken to be one in which he uses the theory of “fetishism” to expose the illusions that others suffer from. Fetishism is what enables subsequent Marxists to denounce what Lukacs was later to term the “false consciousness” of the commodity consumer. Is this concept not simply a means by which Marx and subsequent theorists in the Marxist tradition tell other people how stupid they are, as one anthropology professor suggested during the discussion of an early presentation of this article? The point is not the “stupidity” of those whose perspective at the point of commodity transaction highlights particular potential relations and obligations at the expense of others. The point is that a particular position in a network of relations makes

possible a particular perspective on those relations and the objects that emerge from those relations when viewed from that perspective. If we dropped the circular argument about whether or not that perspective is “false” and understood Marx as arguing that a particular position in a network of relations (in this case, engaging in commodity exchange) enables a particular perspective on those relations that highlights some and obscures others, then we have an eminently anthropological analysis that I suspect many anthropology professors would be able to recognize and endorse.

Marx’s point is not that the commodity as a pre-existing entity leaps on top of the social relations that made it in order to obscure them. It is that the commodity comes into being as this specific kind of object itself through that very process. This means that while, on the one hand, it can force us to relate to it as that kind of object regardless of our philosophical interests, on the other hand, it is always vulnerable to other perspectives from which its particular form of objectivity can be viewed as leaky or deconstructed as an artifice that dissolves back into the web of relations from which it is perspectively constructed. The same can be said of corporations, constructed as they are by legal ritual through the removal of particular forms of relationship from vision (that is the obscuring of debt through the limitation of liability) that then constitutes the very object (the corporation) that is intended to maintain the invisibility of a particular potential relation (the now erased obligation of shareholders to the corporation’s creditors) (Leaver and Martin 2021). This too is the creation of an entity or object through the very construction of a perspective that brings it into being by obscuring potential leakages between inside and outside. And just as Lukacs observed for the reification of commodities that the creation of a perspective from which they appear as objects can be shattered by the construction of other perspectives, so is this true of corporate objects as well. Let us not forget that “reification” is not necessarily an insult as authors such as Bruno Latour imagine it

to be, even if its use by authors such as Lukacs tends to carry a negative tone. If we are able to temporarily set aside the competing moral evaluations for the purposes of this conversation, then we can perhaps recover what is still useful in this earlier scholarship and take it primarily a descriptive term, literally meaning the creation of a thing or object.

Let me illustrate all of this with an example that is fundamental to the development of the global political economy in the past 125 years. One of the key moments in the development of the modern corporation was the legal hearing in the House of Lords in 1897, the culmination of the case of *Salomon v. A Salomon & Co Ltd* (1897). The outline of the case was the creation by a Whitechapel shoemaker, Aaron Salomon, of a limited company under the provisions of the *Companies Act of 1862*, which would henceforth be the owner of his business. Salomon incorporated the business using the minimum number of shareholders required under the Act. He owned 20,001 shares and the other six shareholders, his wife and five children, held a share each. When the company went bankrupt, the liquidator sued Salomon for the company’s debt, a decision that was upheld in the Court of Appeal with Lord Justice Lindley referring to the company as a “mere scheme” and Lord Justices Lopes and Kay going further, referring to Salomon & Co. as a “myth” and a “fiction” (see Martin 2012). This decision was overturned in the House of Lords, with Lord Halsbury pointing to a perceived inconsistency in the earlier judgment in which Lindley acknowledged that the corporation had been properly constituted under the provisions of the 1862 Act. Halsbury concludes: “Either the limited company was a legal entity or it was not. If it was, the business belonged to it and not to Mr. . . . Soloman. If it was not, there was no person and no thing to be an agent at all; and it is impossible to say at the same time that there is a company and there is not” (Halsbury in *Salomon v. A Salomon & Co Ltd* 1897: 31).

Halsbury, with the certainty of his claim that there is an entity or there is not and that

it is impossible to say that there both is one and there is not, was perhaps unsurprisingly a well-known supporter of the traditionalist wing of the Conservative Party. Unlike Lukacs, he is clearly no fan of Hegelian dialectics. But what his statement points to is the same kind of phenomena that Marx pointed to with regard to the commodity; a thing that, “appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” (1976 [1867]: 165).

Halsbury’s claim that a corporate entity either is an entity or is not might on the surface appear to simply be a statement of good old-fashioned English conservative common sense. And to an extent it is. But its very need of statement is a tacit admission that it is possible to view things another way (as indeed his esteemed colleagues seemed to have done) and that, in this context at least, that perspective needed to be delegitimized and guarded against. If it is acknowledged that from some perspectives the entity both is and is not, then the perspective that seeks to stabilize it as an entity independent of its human progenitors is weakened and the real existence of the entity itself is at threat. And this is a perspective that helped in no small part to recreate the very entity that it sought to describe. The *Salomon* case is a landmark judgment for the existence of corporations in the United Kingdom and its former colonies. If the earlier judgment had been left intact, corporations might well have taken on a fundamentally different, and perhaps more fluid character than that which they have had until recent years in which the emergence of new forms of divisible and repackageable debt has arguably begun to lead to an increasingly fragility of the perspective that constructs them as more-or-less discrete unified objects (Leaver and Martin 2016, 2021).

The creation of a corporate person out of a limitation of debt obligations is the central dynamic in this case, as was intended by the authors of the Act of Parliament that made it possible. This particular entity itself built on earlier innovations, such as the joint stock com-

pany; described by William Dalrymple (2019: 42) as, “one of Tudor England’s most brilliant and revolutionary innovations”. Dalrymple describes how one particular example of this earlier corporate form, The East India Company (EIC), changed the course of both British and Indian history, being fundamental to the growth of British political and economic power in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As with subsequent limited companies, the purpose of the incorporation was to establish, “one body, corporate and politick”, as the charter granted by Queen Elizabeth I that ritually summoned this new person into existence declared (Charter 43 Eliz 1:1600). As Philip Stern (2011: 7) observes, Tudor joint stock companies, like the EIC, themselves were innovations on earlier corporate forms that dated back to Roman law. Where the joint stock company differed from most of its antecedents is that it allowed for private financial investment in commercial enterprises by individuals who might be uninvolved in the running of the enterprise. Their role was simply to provide finance in the hope of a return on their investment. The joint stock company marked a radical transformation in the purpose and constitution of the corporation as a separate legal person, which had previously been a tool for ensuring the good governance of purportedly non-commercial enterprises (ibid.). This commercial transformation in its turn laid the foundation for the equally radical innovation of limited liability, three centuries later.

All of this might lead us to believe that the so-called perspectivism within anthropological theory that is described as being at the heart of a radically Other Non-Western ontology is at the heart of what we might describe as the most powerful social forms of so-called modern society. Indeed, we might take a look at the discussion of commodity fetishism in the opening pages of *Capital* and conclude that perspectivism has a longer theoretical history than we care to acknowledge and that Marx can be counted as one of its advocates. Indeed, we might go even further and observe that Marx’s perspectivism compares favorably to many current anthro-

pological instantiations in many regards, not least in its refusal to separate out the perspective from the ever-changing relational entanglements of its emergence, thus leading to the impression that an “ontology” is just conjured up out of and then hovers in some mysterious ideological ether systemically determining perspectives.⁴ By also suggesting, as a consequence, that some kind of perspectivism is an inherent feature of how we all live, it might encourage us to look more closely at its role in shaping an increasingly interconnected world in which new forms of difference and similarity come in and out of being, often in the most seemingly familiar places. This might be useful given the unfortunate ways in which a potentially radical questioning of the nature of the entities that we engage with has often become so associated with a parallel project that seemed designed to enable us to pretend that Said, Guha, Fabian, Clifford, Gupta, and Ferguson had never happened, so that anthropology could go back to what Arjun Appadurai (1996: 65) famously described 30 years ago as, “sightings of the savage”, as its default mode for finding difference that was good to think with.

Concluding remarks

What sense might we make of the existence of entities such as *tubuan*s or corporations? Let me begin by returning to the example of the *tubuan* that visited me in my dream. Did I create that *tubuan*? Absolutely, I maintain I did. Without my brain and my ears and my nervous system, it would not have been called into existence as that particular object in that moment. If we accept that, then there are still other questions to ask; does “the *tubuan*” as an abstract entity exist outside of our evocation of it, for example?

We could ask the same of course, of any such abstract entity that molds our relations and our existence, such as Unilever, that shapes how we distribute responsibilities and obligations among ourselves, as *tubuan* rituals do. If corporations are to be accepted as agents of a par-

ticular kind, modeled to an extent on the rights of personhood extended to most human adult citizens, we are forced to ask, where, if at all, should we refuse to extend those rights, and consequently, what kind of subjectivity do we perceive them as having? Those familiar with US politics will know that this is far from an academic question. They are fundamentally questions of the kind of world that we wish to live in and the kinds of human subjects that we want to be.

One of the landmark political controversies of recent years was the Citizens’ United judgment passed down by the US Supreme Court in 2010, that removed the cap on corporate contributions to election campaigns. This judgment was justified on the basis that corporations, like any other person, had the right to “free speech”. Such judgments raise questions of the extent to which corporations have intentions, values, and morals of their own as part of determining exactly what kind of entities they are. Other legal controversies raise the issues even more clearly: to what extent do “corporations” have the right to deny contraception to their workers under government-mandated healthcare plans on religious grounds, for example? Such claims lead to arguments in court or the academic literature over whether or not corporations can have a “conscience” (Goodpaster and Matthews 1982); or to open questioning of the famous early English judgment that corporations “have no souls, neither can they appear in person, only by attorney” (Coke 2003 [1612]: 1081; Rutledge 2014). Whether corporations have souls is a question at least as interesting but far less interrogated in anthropological excursions into ontological politics than whether such usual suspects as rocks or glaciers can listen to us or not.

Humans without such perspectively constructed objects are as unimaginable as such objects without humans. As the great German American psychoanalytic theorist Hans Loewald (1988: 77) argued, the human subject can be described as an agent “of spontaneous mental activity that is called into operation by and deals with a world of objects”. Those objects

may or may not be perceived simultaneously as fellow subjects or agents with intentionality, consciences and souls by the subjects who emerge from interaction with them, as an infant may or may not perceive the mother as a subject-object or mere object. Or as the aboriginal Australian may perceive the listening rock as a subject-object not the “mere” object that Western observers, even critical political economists among them are wont to do; with the exception, of course, of a small coterie of anthropologists (Povinelli 1995).

Tolai, as many of them understand and construct themselves, are unimaginable without *tubuans* and without the idea of “the *tubuan*” as a particular type of object. The *tubuan* as an abstract object is as indispensable for the construction of a particular type of Tolai human as they are for it. It’s perfectly possible to imagine the construction of human subjects without *tubuans*; the vast majority of humans have been constructed in interaction with other kinds of objects, but they would not be the particular kind of Tolai human subjects that many of my interlocuters wished to construct themselves as being. The raising of *tubuans* is a process only made possible through the circulation and exchange of Tolai customary shell-wealth known as *tabu* or *tambu* (see Martin 2018). Half a century ago, the Manchester anthropologist Bill Epstein (1969: 317) quoted a Tolai informant telling him, “If we didn’t have *tambu*, we wouldn’t be Tolai; we would be a different people.” *Tabu* is an object that only has value because humans create it and engage with it, and this object helps to make them particular kinds of human subjects in its turn. The same could be said of the *tubuan* as a related non-human entity (or “[subject]-object” in psychoanalytic terms) that only takes a particular form due to human intervention and without which those humans themselves would be differently constituted.

As long as an object exists, whether in the mind’s eye or in the form of a ritual mask, that can be recognized as “*tubuan*” by Tolai, we can say that a perspective exists from which both *tubuan* and Tolai in their current form still exist

in a process of mutual co-construction. If that ceases to be the case, then both *tubuan* and Tolai, in their current form at least, cease to exist, although it is always open to the people now known as Tolai to reconstruct themselves as humans in a different form in relation to other kinds of co-created objects. This is a process that a small but growing number of contemporary Tolai, such as evangelical Christians, seek to encourage. It is also a process that a larger number of Tolai fear is occurring by virtue of the *tubuan’s* nature changing into something less “real” as the ability to raise *tubuans* and conduct *tubuan* ritual is increasingly monopolized by members of the emerging elite who have the money to buy ritual prestige or by government agencies that organize *tubuans* for events such as tourism festivals (see Martin 2010). These changes threaten to turn the *tubuan* into, as one grassroots villager put it to me, “another Mickey Mouse at Disneyland”—an object that, from his perspective, was an object of a very different kind.

This kind of mutual interdependence of Tolai and *tubuan* seems to me to be marked in the ways that their more “traditional” advocates discuss them. Whatever the ultimate origin of the forces that give rise to *tubuan*, they only manifest in the form that Tolai experience them, becoming “raised from the bush” as the saying goes, as a result of human activity, such as the circulation of *tabu*. The extent to which they have a similar form or any form at all prior to this process is entirely unclear to me and I suspect to most of the *tubuan’s* devotees. Even if *tubuan* is a manifestation of something beyond the human, the extent to which it appears as the particular object known to humans as “*tubuan*” is absolutely reliant on human activity. They come into being as an object that humans can perceive at least in part as a result of human activity. From this perspective, humans and *tubuans* are part of an interdependent process of becoming; a perspective that is shared by both the *tubuan’s* advocates and its evangelical opponents, who see the *tubuan* as an object that creates humans in a particular manner that

entangles them with unnecessarily dark forces. This in turn is a perspective that is challenged by the perspective that the *tubuan* is simply a man with a mask. That perspective would appear to be a genuine clash of ontological politics of the kind proposed by writers such as De la Cadena. But this cannot easily be framed in terms of the indigenous resistance that encompasses non-human agency that is expelled by modernist, colonialist or capitalist forces. Instead, it expresses a largely subaltern perspective that sometimes sees claims to the semi-autonomous agency of *tubuans* as itself expressive of particular elite human forces that use the lie of *tubuan's* real semi-autonomous existence as a mask for their own particular very human interests. This is a position with some parallels at least to the criticisms of corporate personhood advanced by groups such as Reclaim Democracy in the United States. It suggests that battles over ontological politics are not always best framed as the struggle between an essential indigenous ontology and an equally essential Western modernity⁵.

As Marilyn Strathern (2020: 69) observes, talk of a clash of ontologies often problematically presents “ontologies” as if they were cultures in the old “strong” anthropological sense. Strathern approvingly refers to Kapferer’s emphasis on “the multiplicity of different—meaning diverse—ontologies as they emerge under specific, situated social circumstances across numerous spaces of social activity”⁶ (ibid.).

This is a position that might provide the basis for genuinely radical anthropological ontological politics. All it takes is to finally move away from us–them dualisms and sightings of the savage. Freeing ourselves from the shackles of this position would open up the possibility of exploring how the shifting and contested perspectival construction of objects with which we are interdependent marks a fundamental aspect of the human condition.

Keir Martin is professor of social anthropology at the University of Oslo, Norway. He conducted fieldwork in Papua New Guinea’s East

New Britain Province between 2002 and 2005, leading to the publication of his monograph *The death of the big men and the rise of the big shots*. He has since published on a variety of different topics, including the nature of the modern corporation. He is also a practicing psychotherapist and currently heads the Norwegian Research Council-funded project Shrinking the Planet, which ethnographically explores the creation of new psychotherapeutic subjectivities in urban populations in Russia, India, and China.

E-mail: k.j.c.martin@sai.uio.no

ORCID: 0000-0002-3157-0773

Notes

1. I use the term “object” in the sense that is broadly used in psychoanalytic literature, where it can be defined as anything to which a subject can relate. Such an “object” may therefore be ascribed subjectivity or intentionality or denied such a status by the subject thus relating to it. See St Clair (1986).
2. This was the wording on the ICICLE website when they were running the *tubuan* “earthman” campaign in 2019. At the time of writing, it has been replaced with the following wording that illustrates that the unsettling of “modernist” binaries such as nature/culture distinctions can just as easily be a tool for corporate extraction as the basis for resistance: “ICICLE’s philosophy is MADE IN EARTH, a caring, eco-friendly fashion approach seeking harmony between human and nature. In a minimal contemporary style, ICICLE enhances high-quality natural fabrics to meet the aspirations of a new urban generation that values comfort, elegance and ethical clothing. Our approach to sustainable fashion: feeling protected while protecting the Earth. As if the body, spirit and nature were all woven into one single natural fabric. As if clothes, humans and the environment were all one, revealing a contemporary elegance with respect for nature” (ICICLE 2021).
3. “Appearance” here should not be taken simply to mean how it looks but also the act of its emergence; that is, how it is that it comes to “appear” at all.

4. Hence modern “European ontology” is apparently the outcome of “the Cartesian break with medieval scholasticism” (Viveiros de Castro 2004b: 483). If only Descartes had stuck to maths rather than meddling in philosophy. Far from being a radical break in the structure of anthropological thought, this framing is, in its way, reassuringly reminiscent of the classics, in which the culture/social structure/cosmology/ontology (take your pick) of, for example, Hindu India is determined by a set of principles enshrined in a particular text, myth or document. A good example of this tendency is provided in Holbraad (2014).
5. A framing that is prevalent in the work of the “ontological turns” theorist-in-chief Viveiros de Castro (e.g., 1998: 471, 473, 476; 2004a: 3, 6, 7, 9, 15, 18; 2004b: 466, 467).
6. Or as Kapferer (2014: 396) puts it, “ontology” has a “situated nature” whose “logics” are “constituted through practice and are context dependent.”

References

- Appadurai, Arjun. 1996. “Global ethnoscapes: Notes and queries for a transnational anthropology.” In *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization*, 48–65. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Charter, 43, Eliz 1, 31 December 1600.
- Coke, Edward. (1612) 2003. “The case of Sutton’s hospital.” In *Selected writings of Sir Edward Coke volume 1*, 1020–1096. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.
- Dalrymple, William. 2019. *The anarchy: The relentless rise of the East India Company*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- De la Cadena, Marisol. 2010. “Indigenous cosmopolitics in the Andes: Conceptual reflections beyond ‘politics.’” *Cultural Anthropology* 25 (2): 334–370.
- Epstein, Arnold. 1969. *Matupit: Land, politics and change among the Tolai of New Britain*. Canberra: Australian National University Press.
- Filer, Colin. 2007. “Local custom and the art of land group boundary maintenance in Papua New Guinea.” In *Customary land tenure and registration in Australia and Papua New Guinea: Anthropological perspectives*, ed. James Weiner and Katie Glaskin, 135–173. Canberra: ANU Press.
- Filer, Colin. 2014. “The double movement of immovable property rights in Papua New Guinea.” *The Journal of Pacific History* 49 (1): 76–94.
- Friedman, Milton, and Rose Friedman. 1980. *Free to choose: A personal statement*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Goodpaster, Kenneth, and John Matthews. 1982. “Can a corporation have a conscience.” *Harvard Business Review*. January.
- Gregory, Christopher. 1980. “Gifts to men and gifts to God: Gift exchange and capital accumulation in contemporary Papua.” *Man* 15 (4): 626–652.
- Holbraad, Martin. 2014. “Revolucion o muerte: Self-sacrifice and the ontology of the Cuban revolution.” *Ethnos* 79 (3): 365–387.
- ICICLE. 2021. “ICICLE’S philosophy.” <https://www.icicle.com.cn/en/icicle-s-philosophy>.
- Kapferer, Bruce. 2014. “Back to the future: Descola’s neostructuralism.” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4 (3): 389–400.
- Leaver, Adam, and Keir Martin. 2016. “Creating and dissolving social groups from New Guinea to New York: On the overheating of bounded corporate entities in contemporary global capitalism.” *History and Anthropology* 27 (5): 585–601.
- Leaver, Adam, and Martin, Keir. 2021. “‘Dams and flows’: Boundary formation and dislocation in the financialised firm.” *Review of Evolutionary Political Economy* 2: 403–429.
- Loewald, Hans. 1988. *Sublimation: Inquiries into theoretical psychoanalysis*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Martin, Keir. 2007. “The chairman of the clan: Emerging social divisions in a Melanesian social movement.” *Paideuma* 53: 111–125.
- Martin, Keir. 2010. “Contested tourism authenticities.” *Annals of Tourism Research* 37 (2): 537–554.
- Martin, Keir. 2012. “Big men and business: Morality, debt and the corporation.” *Social Anthropology* 20 (4): 482–485.
- Martin, Keir. 2013. *The death of the big men and the rise of the big shots: Custom and conflict in East New Britain*. New York: Berghahn.
- Martin, Keir. 2018. “Tolai *tabu* as wealth and money: A shifting and unstable distinction.” *History and Anthropology* 29 (3): 392–406.
- Martin, Keir. 2020. “Subaltern perspectives in post-human theory.” *Anthropological Theory*. 20 (3): 357–382.
- Marx, Karl. (1867) 1976. *Capital: A critique of political economy*, vol. 1. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

- Mickelthwait, John, and Adrian Woodridge. 2003. *The company: A short history of a revolutionary idea*. New York: The Modern Library.
- Polanyi, Karl. (1944) 2001. *The great transformation: The political and economic origins of our time*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Povinelli, Elizabeth, 1995. "Do rocks listen? The cultural politics of apprehending Australian Aboriginal labor." *American Anthropologist* 97 (3): 505–518.
- Reclaim Democracy 2023. "Corporate personhood." *Reclaim democracy!* <https://reclaimdemocracy.org/corporate-personhood/>.
- Rutledge, Thomas. 2014. "A corporation has no soul – the business entity law response to challenges to the PPACA contraceptive mandate." *William and Mary Business Law Review* 5 (1): 1–53.
- Salomon v. A Salomon & Co Ltd*. 1897. AC22.
- St Clair, Michael. 1986. *Object relations and self psychology*. Salt Lake City, UT: Brooks/Cole.
- Stern, Philip. 2011. *The company-state: Corporate sovereignty and the early modern foundations of the British Empire in India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Strathern, Marilyn. 2020. "A clash of ontologies? Time, law and science in Papua New Guinea." In *Science in the forest, science in the past*, ed. Geoffrey Lloyd and Aparecida. Vilaça, 43–74. Chicago: Hau Books.
- Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo. 1998. "Cosmological deixis and Amerindian perspectivism." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 4 (3): 469–488.
- Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo. 2004a. "Perspectival anthropology and the method of controlled equivocation." *Tipiti* 2 (1): 1–22.
- Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo. 2004b. "Exchanging perspectives: The transformation of objects into subjects in Amerindian ontologies." *Common Knowledge* 10 (3): 463–484.