Making Meaning Present: Semiotics and the Ontological Life of Stones in West Africa

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Abstract

Semiotics, which is a foundational principle of scientific thought, has also shaped anthropology's understanding of live stones that serve as shrines in the savannah region of West Africa, such as in the Commune of Cobly of northwestern Benin. Semiotics either reduce live stones and other religious and ontological phenomena to a function of signification or they recast them as semiotic anomalies attributable to the Other. Either way leads to an epistemological paradox in which such phenomena can be rationally understood yet existentially denied. I propose to counter this by introducing a new type of entity, which I call the "onton." Building on the notion of presence and the anthropology of ontology, I understand ontons as indivisible and non-representational entities that cannot be broken down into different sign components. Ontons are more than meaningful; they are made present in the world when other entities relate to them through the process of presencing that shifts the focus from meaning to action. Presencing, which builds on semiotics, is guided by different practices, which, in turn, can account for ontological diversity and differentiation. I claim that presencing, which allows for ontonic entities, leads to a deeper understanding of ontology and human experience more broadly. Meaning as a basis for communication is thus extended to include presence as a basis for a wider engagement with the world, thereby breaking down difference between humans, animals and things.

Keywords: fetish, stone, ontology, epistemology, semiotics, materiality, mediation, presencing

1. Introduction

"Everything that exists is alive." This view of the world was sometimes expressed to me during fieldwork in the Commune of Cobly of northwestern Benin, West Africa, in 2011. If people say that they consider *everything* to be alive, they mean it. They say that not only people, animals, trees and plants are alive, but equally shrine stones, knives, calabashes and seemingly inanimate matter more generally—simply everything that exists. We are thus faced with a relational ontology that is not easily comprehensible through western epistemology. Indeed, since the Enlightenment social sciences and the humanities have continuously struggled with understanding various religious and ontological phenomena on their own terms, since underlying semiotic principles either reduced them to a function of signification or recast them as semiotic anomalies attributable to the Other (Fabian, 1983; Merz & Merz, 2017, p. 3).

Evans-Pritchard's (1937) study of Azande witchcraft is probably the best example of what came to be known as the "rationality debate" in anthropology. He masterfully rationalized seemingly irrational religious and ontological phenomena so that they became meaningful within the framework of western epistemology, yet he was unable to accept them for what they were in their own terms (Mills, 2013; see also Merz & Merz, 2017). Ultimately, this approach leads to an epistemological paradox that has troubled anthropology ever since the crisis of representation, which is associated with Clifford and Marcus' *Writing Culture* (1986). The recent anthropology of ontology was partly formulated in response to this problem and concerns "the investigation and theorization of diverse experiences and understandings of the nature of being itself" (Scott, 2013, p. 859). It advocates that different perspectives be accepted on their own terms and as a basis for theorization, an idea that goes back to Malinowski (Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017, p. 6) and that has been regularly advocated, for example by Stoller: "As anthropologists we must respect the people among whom we work [… by] accepting fully beliefs and phenomena which our system of knowledge often holds preposterous" (Stoller & Olkes, 1987, p. 229). So far, however, I do not think that ontological anthropologists have sufficiently addressed the epistemological paradox (see, e.g., Harris & Robb, 2012; Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017; Vigh & Sausdal, 2014), mainly due to their seeming reluctance to tackle the limitations of semiotics as an underlying principle in the social sciences and the humanities.

In this article, I argue that religious concepts, such as fetishes, are the direct result of this epistemological paradox of the rationality debate, which is based on the limits of semiotics as a foundational principle of anthropology. These limitations, I propose, have hindered the discipline from coming to terms with the more relational, religious and experiential sides of human existence and ontology. Developing Gumbrecht's notion of presence (2004) with the help of ontological anthropology and phenomenology, I seek to study the life of stones in the Commune of Cobly in novel ways.

People make such stones present in an experiential way that refutes the semiotic assumption of a dualistic or triadic difference within the structured sign, whether icon, symbol, or index. This is why I propose to understand such live stones as a new type of entity, which I call the "onton," and which extends and complements existing signs. The onton is not a sign as such, but an indivisible and non-representational entity that cannot be broken down into different components as signs typically can. Such ontic entities are more than meaningful; they are made present in the world when other entities relate to them through the process of presencing that shifts the focus from meaning to action. Presencing, I argue, relies on different identifiable presencing practices, which describe people's assumptions about the nature of the entities they experience and interact with. Presencing practices are neither stable, exclusive nor coherent and can be drawn on by people at various times and for different purposes or circumstances.

Through shifting my focus from meaning making to presencing I argue anthropology and the humanities more broadly can access better religious and ontological phenomena. They now become part not only of the everyday experience of human life, but also of anthropological theory and practice. In other words, by understanding live stones in terms of presencing processes that allow for ontic entities, I claim to debase the rationality debate of its epistemological paradox, which ultimately leads to a broader understanding of ontology and of what it means to be human. Meaning as a basis of communication and media is thus extended to include presence as a basis for a wider engagement with the world. This, in turn, removes categories of difference between humans, animals and things, or in Povinelli's words, it "shatter[s] the division of Life and Nonlife" (2016, p. 18).

2. The Semiotic Problem of Shrine Entities

The word *ditenwɛnde* in Mbelime, the predominant language of the Commune of Cobly that is spoken by the Bebelibe, is usually translated as *fáiche* in French. These shrines come in different types, shapes and sizes, and they can be found in various locations. The most common shrine is known as *ditade*, which means "stone," but can also be referred to as "snake," since people often identify pythons with stone shrines (Huber, 1973, pp. 380-382). The word "stone" refers to the "irreducible materiality" (Pietz, 1985, p. 7) of a stone that people consider alive and a being in its own right. Indeed, for many people everything that exists, including stones, necessarily brings together a material body (*ukuɔnu*), an identity (*mtakimɛ*) and an animating force (*kɛbodikɛ*). The resulting indivisible entity is, in Pels' words, "too powerful a presence to be a mere re-presentation of something else" (1998, p. 113). Such stones are thus more than shrines. People understand them as identifiable beings with names that are alive, that can be related to and that themselves seek to relate to people. These beings, like everything else that exists, populate the world and interact with other beings and entities as part of relational ontology. This is why I call them "shrine entities."

Shrine entities in the form of stones are typical of the wider savannah region of West Africa (see, e.g., Dawson, 2009, p. 8283; Goody, 1956, pp. 91-99; Lentz, 2009). In the Commune of Cobly, they usually consist of a single stone, which people surround by a varying number of other neatly arranged stones in the shade of a tree, both to protect the shrine entities and to mark their presence (see also Lentz, 2009, writing about the Dagara of Ghana).

There are 23 patrilineal Bebelibe communities, which are predominantly exogamous. Each community has at least one communal shrine entity that goes back to the communities' origins and their installation in the area (J. Merz, 2017, pp. 7-15). They are integral to each community's history and are usually found in groves or on mountains. People say that, together with the help of ancestors, each shrine entity chooses its priest from the community by communicating through a diviner. Sometimes a shrine entity also takes on the form of a python and pursues the chosen person. As intermediaries between people and *Uwienu* (Supreme Being, God), shrine entities are relationally and ontologically responsible for the general protection and welfare of the community, as well as fertility and the perpetuation of life. People thus see them as an essential part of the various and extensive relationships that humans maintain with each other and with nonhumans, including *Uwienu* and thus life more generally.

Communal shrine entities can reproduce and spread alongside the communities' descendants both patrilineally and matrilaterally. When sons move away from their home in search of new land, they sometimes carry a descendant of their community's shrine to their new location (see also Lentz, 2009, writing about Dagara earth shrines). As for daughters, a shrine can request through a diviner to be installed for a daughter or her descendants at her virilocal residence (Huber, 1973, p. 381). This saves her from having to travel back to her location of origin to relate to the shrine entity.

The community priest ensures the shrine entities' reproduction by either placing a stone by the original shrine entity for a certain period of time or he simply takes one of the stones from those already surrounding the main stone. Either way,

the new stone has spent some time with the entity and has now absorbed its vital traits (see Goody, 1956, p. 95; Lentz, 2009, p. 126). It thus realizes its potential for life through contagion with an existing shrine entity and becomes a specific being in its own right. The community priest then takes the new stone entity to the new location where he installs it below a suitable tree near a new settlement or close to the daughter's home.

Many people's understanding of materiality already implies that stones are alive in a general sense and have the potential to become identifiable beings in their own right. There are different ways for this to happen. Huber (1973, p. 380) states that the first stone entities came from the sky or the ground, just as the first Bebelibe arrived either in a closed house that descended from the sky or they came out of holes and caves (J. Merz, 2017, p. 12). Later migrants joined the already resident communities, sometimes bringing their own stone entities with them. This implies that at least some of the shrine entities have always existed as such and their lives have been entangled with those of the people since the beginning.

There are also stories of people who have found new shrine entities in the bush and of visitors to houses who mysteriously disappear but leave a stone behind, suggesting that a stone entity has visited people in human form. The stones thus left behind are usually identified and treated as shrine entities. Some even say that the potential life of stones can be realized simply by treating a stone as a being in its own right, for example by talking to it and by presenting it with offerings.

Shrine entities, then, are part of the everyday lives of many people in the Commune of Cobly even though they pose a semiotic problem in anthropology, as Pels (1998) has also addressed in detail for fetishes more generally. The way people accredit life the to the seemingly dead matter of shrine entities and fetishes is—from a western epistemological perspective—simply wrong. Such anthropomorphism, according to Guthrie, is "by definition… mistaken, but it also is reasonable and inevitable" (1993, p. 204). In order to try to address this issue, some anthropologists have sought to characterize fetishes and similar things in terms of collapsing the sign with its referent or as being identical with its meaning or its concept (Bille, Hastrup, & Sørensen, 2010, pp. 8-9; Ellen, 1988, pp. 226-227; Henare, Holbraad, & Wastell, 2007, pp. 3-4; Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017, pp. 199-241; Pietz, 1985, p. 15). They thereby acknowledge that current anthropological frameworks, which build on semiotics, cannot sufficiently address the problem of fetishes and that semiotics may thus be too limited to understand fully how humans experience the world they inhabit. On the other hand, such scholars seem neither able or willing to go beyond semiotics, nor have they seriously questioned its assumed universal validity. The invariable result is that fetishes and similar things come to stand for semiotic anomalies that are largely restricted the Other (Fabian, 1983).

Consequently, I find that religious and ontological difference cannot always be apprehended through the representational and semiotic framework that underlies anthropology without being reductionist. Recasting fetishes, shrine entities and other live things as semiotic anomalies still questions their validity on rational and empirical grounds (Merz & Merz, 2017, p. 3). Since this approach makes the observed submit to representational semiotics, often through a negative argument, it invariably reduces religious and ontological difference to a function of signification (Marshall, 2009, p. 22).

In order to analyze and explain this in more detail, I need to start with semiotics following Peirce (1940), who distinguishes between three basic sign types—the icon, the symbol and the index (Engelke, 2007, pp. 31-32; Knappett, 2002, pp. 102-106; Kohn, 2013, pp. 31-33; Short, 2007, pp. 214-222). These sign types are defined according to the relationship between the sign's components, especially in relation to the referent that a sign represents. From a semiotic perspective, the stone of a shrine entity is clearly not an icon, because it does not resemble the being identified with it, as a stone cannot be a living being. Neither can a shrine entity easily be characterized as a symbol, since the direct and determined identification of stone and being is neither conventional nor arbitrary. In semiotics, symbolism is typically attributed to language. For most people in the Commune of Cobly, even though a shrine entity can also manifest itself as a python, its stone cannot be exchanged for any other material object. In a visceral manner people know that the stone is the entity.

Indexes, in the paradigmatic Peircean sense, always refer and point to something else (Short, 2007, p. 219). They have an actual but dynamic connection through contiguity with the referent, which manifests itself in one way or another in the index. This connection is shaped by logical-causal inferences that are open to some uncertainty (Chua & Elliott, 2013, p. 8; Gell, 1998, p. 13; Keane, 2005, p. 190; 2007, p. 22). An example of an index is a footprint in sand that refers to the person who walked there.

Even though Gell (1998, p. 13) presents the index as natural, he nonetheless acknowledges that indexical forms are based on "traditional knowledge" (1998, p. 29). Indexes, then, are also culturally determined, even if only partially (Knappett, 2002, p. 104). The strength of the index is that it is particularly suited to account for the agency of material things (Gell, 1998; Keane, 2005; Sansi, 2011, p. 31). Such agency, however, remains indexically linked to humans and is the consequence of their actions, even if it is understood as distributed and as part of elaborate networks or

assemblages. For shrine entities, then, indexicality only goes so far as it limits the shrine entity's agency to either the result of human actions, or to contagion by other shrine entities, whose agency ultimately also depends on human action (see Chua & Elliott, 2013, p. 14; Henare et al., 2007, p. 17; Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017, pp. 204-205; Knappett, 2002). Indexicality, however, cannot account for agency that people experience as intrinsic to shrine entities and that are not dependent on human action, or in other words the life that is inseparably part of the material stone.

The problem of the epistemological limits of semiotics, then, consists in the model not being able to describe sufficiently the religious, ontological and human experience of stones as live entities, as Kohn (2013, p. 94) implicitly acknowledges. Consequently, an icon, symbol or index, or a combination of the three, cannot adequately account for how people in the Commune of Cobly experience shrine entities. Of course, it remains possible to analyze live stones exclusively in semiotic terms, as well as other religious phenomena, which in turn is based on the positivist premise that humans cannot directly experience the supernatural world (Leone & Parmentier, 2014, p. S2). While such a view may be consistent with the tradition of anthropology as an academic discipline that builds on Enlightenment thought, however, it reduces shrine entities from live relational entities to material stones that index or symbolize spiritual beings, thereby failing to understand fully what they are for people who relate to them. For many people in the Commune of Cobly stone entities have an intrinsic life and agency that necessitates them being understood as beings in their own right that exist alongside and independently of humans. Applying the semiotic idea of a differentiation between sign and referent, or spirit and matter, even in the negative terms of their apparent non-distinction, leads to an anomaly that continues to be accounted for within the epistemological limits of semiotics. This is why I conclude with Sansi (2011, pp. 32-33) that fetishes, shrine entities and similar live things escape semiotics as a representational and mediating practice, rendering them virtually unintelligible in Enlightenment terms.

3. Ontology, Phenomenology and Semiotics

Building on Viveiros de Castro's (1998, 2004) ideas, ontological anthropologists address the problem of shrine entities by problematizing representational—and thus semiotic—practices. Like more semiotically orientated anthropologists, they have found that it is not always possible to distinguish different sign constituents for entities such as the stone shrines of the Commune of Cobly, since "meanings are not 'carried' by things but just *are identical* to them" (Henare et al., 2007, pp. 3-4, emphasis in original; see also Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017, pp. 199-241; Ishii, 2012, p. 379; Vigh & Sausdal, 2014, p. 61). These anthropologists advocate that we need to shift our attention from an epistemological preoccupation with knowledge to studying ontology, leading to the acceptance of different perspectives on their own terms, which then should provide a theoretical basis for anthropology.

Viveiros de Castro's polemic plea to "put epistemological questions to rest" (2004, p. 484; see also Henare et al., 2007), however, risks dichotomizing between representational and non-representational ontologies and more generally the idea of radical alterity and incommensurable multiple ontologies. This, in turn, increases the possibility of essentializing ontology at the cost of an epistemologically and methodologically shared human commonality (Vigh & Sausdal, 2014, p. 54), thereby questioning the validity of ethnographic encounters and the possibility of successfully doing anthropology: "How the proponents of the ontological turn are able to connect to incommensurable worlds, and translate them into understandable anthropological text, remains a mystery" (Vigh & Sausdal, 2014, p. 57; see also Harris & Robb, 2012; Scott, 2013).

As Holbraad and Pedersen (2017) have more recently acknowledged, ontological anthropologists never meant to discard epistemology. On the contrary, Holbraad and Pedersen now view the ontological turn as "a methodological project that poses ontological questions to solve epistemological problems" (2017, p. 5, see also pp. 173-174). In order for the turn to ontology to be productive, then, it should also lead to deep engagement with epistemological questions. It is only then that anthropology's most fundamental question becomes pertinent: "How do I enable my ethnographic material to reveal itself to me by allowing it to dictate its own terms of engagement, so to speak, guiding or compelling me to see things that I had not expected, or imagined, to be there?" (Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017, p. 5). Holbraad and Pedersen (2017, p. 194) continue to stress that the hurdle to achieve this is not with the people we engage with, but rather how we as anthropologists and scholars present what people do and say. This essentially epistemological problem then necessitates us to question the hitherto largely unquestioned semiotic epistemology that has invariably underpinned anthropology as an academic discipline to the present day.

Semiotics have supplied a foundational principle that lies at the core of scientific thought since Plato and Aristotle. Following the Greek philosophers, western science built on the assumption that representation and signification are part of universal conditions (T. Mitchell, 1991, pp. 14, 22). Accordingly, anthropology has been working on the premise of a human observer of on objective world, which is split into two parts, namely the material "reality" and its representation or its meaning. This "dualist ontology" (Henare et al., 2007, p. 10) thus became the basis on which academic anthropology developed in the late nineteenth century.

Saussure built his semiology on the dualistic distinction between signifier and signified. Such dichotomization of the sign inevitably leads to a structuralist dead end (Engelke, 2007, pp. 29-31; Keane, 2007, p. 22; Viveiros de Castro, 2004, p. 467). This is why poststructuralist semioticians have shifted their attention from Saussure to Peircean semiotics, which are more pragmatic and which propose a triadic sign (Posner, 2011). Peirce maintained that sign structures are complex and developed an increasingly intricate and atomistic taxonomy of signs, which he never finished (Short, 2007, p. 207). Although his approach also carries the risk of structuralism, a crucial aspect that distinguishes Peircean semiotics from its Saussurean counterpart is its processual approach, which, going beyond linguistics, allows signs to be seen as intrinsic to social practice (Hodge & Kress, 1988), as part of the material world (Engelke, 2007; Gell, 1998; Keane, 2005), and as existing beyond humans (Kohn, 2013). In doing so, signs become embedded in everyday life and sign processes come to be identified with life as such, so that, as Kohn claims, "all life is semiotic" (2013, p. 16; see also Povinelli, 2016, pp. 145-149). Current trends in semiotics, then, recognize that the complexity of signs does not only stem from their internal structure, but also lies in how they relate to and interact with one another, as well as with the wider world.

Anthropologists who draw on phenomenology, which focuses on action, practice and processes are often more skeptical towards semiotics. For example, Marshall (2009) begins her study of Nigerian Pentecostalism by claiming: "Whether religion is seen as symbolic, metaphoric, or metonymic, or even in terms of an imaginary, it is more or less reduced to its function of signification, forgetting that it is, perhaps above all, a site of *action*, invested in and appropriated by believers" (Marshall, 2009, p. 22, emphasis in original). This more phenomenological approach tries to abandon semiotics by shifting its attention from meaning to practice (Ingold, 2000) or to ontology (Ishii, 2012), with the implicit aim of addressing the epistemological paradox of the rationality debate.

These more practice-focused approaches, however, just as ontological anthropology more generally, neglect to address the semiotic basis of the discipline, which continues to linger often undetected in the background. More generally, Posner (2011, pp. 23-24) implies that poststructuralist approaches never actually challenged structuralism, but rather shifted the focus of semiotics from sign structure to the process of signification or meaning making and from code to discourse. The semiotic premise of anthropology is thus either too easily taken for granted or abandoned and ignored too quickly, while its limits are not questioned enough (see Tomlinson & Engelke, 2006). Whether they problematize, deny, affirm or implicitly ignore it, current ontological, semiotic and phenomenological approaches do not seek to address semiotics as an underlying principle.

4. The Onton and Presencing beyond the Limits of Semiotics

Literary critic Gumbrecht (2004) is so far the most promising scholar to dispute the exclusive reign of meaning in western epistemology, and thus of semiotics. He does not question the validity of semiotics as such, but finds that meaning is not sufficient to convey everything there is to life and of "being-in-the-world" (2004, p. 66). Drawing on Heidegger's notion of Being, he argues that meaning needs to be complemented by the notion of "presence" in a more ontological sense. For Gumbrecht, the idea of presence is largely spatial and physical: "What is 'present' to us… is in front of us, in reach of and tangible for our bodies" (2004, p. 17). He thus distinguishes "presence" from "meaning," which he identifies with interpretation, semiotics and thus epistemology.

Based on my ethnographic understanding of how people in the Commune of Cobly understand a stone that is an independent and live shrine entity, Gumbrecht's rather categorical differentiation between meaning and presence does not seem to be justified. He acknowledges that "we need a different sign-concept" (2004, p. 110) in order to accommodate his ideas about presence. So far so good. He then suggests that the structuralist sign according to Hjelmslev could be coupled with the more material Aristotelian sign that is composed of substance and form. In doing so, however, he hardly breaks free from semiotic ideas and comes close to current semiotic views of materiality that build on Peircean semiotics (Engelke, 2007; Gell, 1998; Keane, 2005, 2007). Entities for which an ethnographic distinction between sign and referent is unfounded both in terms of epistemology and ontology do not submit to either Peircean or Aristotelian semiotics without being reductive. This is why I have to take Peircean semiotics further. Building on Gumbrecht's basic argument I need to venture into largely uncharted territory, notably by calling for a new sign type, or more precisely entity type, even if this seems radical at first sight.

In bringing the main concerns of ontological anthropologists, most notably Henare, Holbraad and Wastell (2007) and Holbraad and Pedersen (2017), to semiotics and thus epistemology, I suggest calling this new entity type the "onton." An onton is a live being that exists in the world marked by relational ontology and that cannot be divided into components. It is thus an entity rather than a structured and abstract sign, nor is it a material thing, or a manifestation that points to, or represents, something else. Rather, it is a non-representational entity that is identical to its meaning and thus cannot be divided into components. An onton is thus an experiential being that is alive bringing the material and spiritual inseparably and indistinguishably together into an agentive and relational entity that necessarily interacts with other entities that populate and constitute the world. All things that exist can thus be described as ontons, thereby

removing the distinction between human, animal, spirit or thing (Merz & Merz, 2017, pp. 12-13) and between Life and Nonlife (Povinelli, 2016).

Introducing the onton to semiotics, however, means that the very idea of the structured semiotic sign, as well as other related terms, becomes too restrictive. An onton is more than abstract representational meaning and this is why I propose to use the wider notion of an "entity" to take the place of, and encompass, what semioticians call the sign. Entities are not only meaningful, they are also present as they populate and constitute the world in a more ontological sense. People identify them not so much through the process of meaning making or signification, but rather by making them present through a process that Gumbrecht (2004) calls the "production of presence," or, as I prefer it, "presencing" that goes beyond signification.

The idea that people make things present is not limited to Gumbrecht (2004). It was—as far as I know—first raised by French scholars under the term of "*présentification*." Kerchache, Paudrat and Stéphan (1988, p. 151), for example, make brief reference to the possibility of an African portrait *being* an individual. The historian Vernant (1991) is more elaborate in his view of presentification. For him, the process encapsulates the idea that the invisible is being made present in what he calls "idols": "The task is to make the invisible visible, to assign a place in our world to entities from the other world" (1991, p. 153). Although he uses semiotic language to describe this for the example of Greek *xoanon* idols, he makes it clear that presentification is not representational. Rather, "the idea is to establish real contact with the world beyond, to actualize it, to make it present, and thereby to participate intimately in the divine" (Vernant, 1991, p. 153). Vernant (1991, pp. 154-155) shows that in presentification the form of the idol, that is its iconicity, is not important, but that it is rather ritual action that defines material presence. He implies, but fails to make it explicit, however, that presentification is not semiotic in nature.

Spyer (2000, pp. 237-238) develops Vernant's presentification for the annual cassowary play on the Aru archipelago. According to her, the cassowary spirit becomes present in an effigy made from palm fronds through the ritual action of the men who dance with the effigy. It seems crucial that before the dance these men hunt a cassowary in the forest and return with its spirit to animate the effigy through ritual action to the extent that the cassowary, its spirit and the men become at least partly identified with each other, which, in turn, becomes manifest in the effigy's dance. Presentification, or presencing, is not a process that simply happens, but is based on human actions and interactions with each other and with other entities, whether animals or things. Presencing beyond the epistemological limits of semiotics, then, is an essentially relational activity.

More recently, Engelke has discussed the idea of making present what is immaterial and absent as a "problem of presence" (2007), taking a more explicitly materialist approach. More generally, anthropologists have noticed and examined the problem of material presence as one of absence (Bille et al., 2010; Buchli, 2010). A common denominator of such materialist approaches is that when talking about absence, whether in the form of deities or the dead, absence usually only exists in relation to what is materially present, thereby reifying immateriality by indexically locating its absent agency within the material world. While such materialist approaches succeed in diffusing the material/immaterial dichotomy, they continue to draw on materialist semiotic analysis by making the absent and immaterial accessible through materiality, thereby stressing the presence of material at the expense of the immaterial.

This materialist approach to presencing has much in common with the recent discussion of media and material religion that has come to anthropology through religious studies (see, e.g., Eisenlohr, 2009; de Vries, 2001; Engelke, 2007; Meyer, 2011). Accordingly, mediation is always part of religion in the sense that religion itself becomes "a practice of mediation" (Meyer & Moors, 2006, p. 7). Meyer recognizes that media "'vanish' into the substance that they mediate" (2011, p. 32), thereby making the immaterial accessible to people in an immediate and experiential way. Questions of immediacy and mediation, however, remain thoroughly semiotic in nature (Eisenlohr, 2009; Kohn, 2013, pp. 30, 61; Leone & Parmentier, 2014), since they continue to make a difference between the medium and what they mediate. If the ontic entity of a live stone as found in the Commune of Cobly, for example, is seen as a material medium for the being with which it is identical, it already ceases to be an onton and is turned into a structured semiotic sign and fails to capture what people understand it to be. The current idea of mediation, then, is merely a practice of semiotic representation that stresses the material.

The materialist approach to presencing with its focus on mediation is certainly important for the idea of presencing, but it does not go far enough, since it reduces the immaterial to material practice in line with recent developments in Peircean signification. The onton, as I define it, on the other hand, allows the immaterial to be indistinguishably identified with the material. A stone that is alive can thus be analyzed as an ontonic entity not because it materially mediates the immaterial or spiritual, but because it identifies the two. Presencing, then, needs to go beyond questions of mediation in order to account also for ontonic entities that populate and constitute the world.

5. Presencing as Experience and Action

Presencing always relies on the interpretation of sensory perception (Buchli, 2010, p. 187) as well as a direct and active engagement with the world (Gumbrecht, 2004; Spyer, 2000). More broadly, such interpretive perception and resulting action depends both epistemologically and ontologically on the human experience of, and interaction with, the wider world (Ishii, 2012), which establishes that something is present. In practice, and as part of presencing as characterized so far, people in the Commune of Cobly visually perceive a stone or a heap of stones at the foot of a tree or in the mountains. That these stones are not merely stones, but rather constitute shrine entities in an ontonic sense, not only stems from their prior knowledge and experience of such stones, but also needs to be experientially established through action.

It is not uncommon, for example, for a woman to present a petition for a child in front of a stone. For this to happen, her husband and the priest in charge of the shrine entity need to be informed, but she then goes on her own to see the stone. If she becomes pregnant within a certain amount of time, people will ascribe this to the shrine entity having acted on her petition and the husband and the priest will need to thank the stone by offering an animal as a conventional and thus symbolic action. The stone is expected to share this offering with *Uwienu* (Supreme Being, God) as the ultimate giver and sustainer of life. For the woman and her husband, the stone has demonstrated that it is efficacious and that it is indeed a live and agentive ontonic entity in its own right and not just a lifeless stone. They will consider the shrine entity to be serious and accept the pregnancy as an index of the stone's agency and good character, and thus of its ontonic life. The stone listened to the woman's petition and brought it to *Uwienu* who then acted, just as the woman hoped when she initially presented her petition.

If the request does not lead to a testable positive result, however, the woman and her husband will begin to doubt the efficacy of the particular stone she had approached. The negative result could then be explained in purely semiotic terms as an index of the stone's lifelessness. There are indeed some Bebelibe who have become disillusioned with shrine entities and simply abandoned them, since for them stones are neither alive nor efficacious. On the other hand, a petitioner will likely interpret the stone's failure as indexical of its corrupt and negligent character and thus still take its ontonic life for granted. People do not elevate the morality and character of shrine entities above the ones of humans and other ontonic beings. Everything that is alive is entangled in relationships and is thus potentially fallible and corruptible. A stone could simply have a questionable character and be unreliable, for example, by not always passing petitions and offerings on to *Uwienu*. Furthermore, it could bear a grudge against the petitioner, her family or their ancestors and refuse to act because of it. There are many possibilities that explain why a specific stone seems inefficacious without questioning its ontonic life. The couple will probably consider seeking alternative solutions to their problem, such as consulting other shrine entities that have a good reputation, including other types of shrines, or a Pentecostal church or a hospital.

Based on the discussion so far, presencing not only attributes semiotic and representational meaning through perception and interpretation, but also makes entities present and accessible in the world through action and interaction (Ishii, 2012). People in the Commune of Cobly, for example, see stones on a regular basis. Simply seeing stones in a meaningful way does not necessarily mean that they are made present. Rather, presencing happens when stones become relevant to people in a practical, relational and experiential way, for example by somebody recognizing the beauty of a stone or needing it as a tool. Such recognition then leads to action, for example by the stone being picked up and used, thereby leading to a relational and experiential engagement between human and stone. A stone can now become a sign that can be iconically, symbolically or indexically analyzed, for example as a symbolic hammer, taking on a mediating role between human agent and a nail. Or, in line with shrine entities, a stone can be presenced ontonically as an entity in the form of an onton that helps to constitute the world, thereby identifying the spiritual with the material. Since meaning based on perception and presence based on action are not exclusive notions (Gumbrecht, 2004), I propose that presencing can offer the possibility of moving beyond the epistemological limits of semiotics.

The experiential process of presencing, then, results in meaning being made present and accessible in the world. The resulting entities do not only come in the form of signs that describe, represent and mediate the world, but also as entities that actually constitute the world as part of relational ontology. Such experiential entities always depend on other surrounding entities for their presence and existence and are constantly adapting as they interact with each other. Entities are thus inherently dynamic and unstable as they are intrinsically, relationally and ontonically entangled in ideas, actions, life and the world, with which they come to be identified at the same time.

Expanding the process of signification or meaning making to one of presencing by introducing the onton allows various religious phenomena, such as shrine entities, to become accessible to anthropology not only on a descriptive level, but also theoretically in terms of how people themselves understand them. This has been advocated by ontological anthropologists, and fulfills Mills' (2013, p. 31) condition that we must take the people we study seriously in all respects in order to assure the validity of the social sciences and the humanities more broadly. The importance of

ontonic presencing is that it contributes to dissolving the epistemological paradox of the rationality debate and opens the door for anthropologists whose epistemologies go beyond the limits of semiotics to make potentially pertinent contributions to the discipline (Stewart, 2001; Merz & Merz, 2017, p. 13).

While presencing as discussed so far may help to account for shrine entities found in the Commune of Cobly, it can also lead to a catchall notion that tries to account for at least two epistemologically different ways in which people engage in processes of presencing, which so far, I have referred to as semiotic and ontonic. Widening meaning making to presencing, then, also necessitates its narrowing by elaborating different practices that characterize different ways in which people make things present and how these things come to function and act as entities in the world.

6. Presencing Practices

I adapt the notion of presencing practices from Keane's "semiotic ideology" (2005, 2007) that he developed as a material extension of "language ideology" (Woolard, 1998). Stressing the need to go beyond linguistic analogy by including both words and things, Keane characterizes semiotic ideology as "people's background assumptions about what signs are and how they function in the world" (2005, p. 191). In other words, semiotic ideologies can account for signifying practices, which describe how people understand the relationship between signs and what they refer to in their environment as perceived by their senses. Semiotic ideologies explain how people view themselves in relation to each other as well as to words and things in a broader sense. This includes the materiality and immateriality of people and things and how agency works out in their interactions, but also creates an analytic distance that is typical of semiotics and the rationality debate.

By introducing the notion of presencing practices I shift the focus from ideology to ontology and both broaden and limit Keane's use of semiotic ideology. Through presencing practices, I extend the main idea of semiotic ideology also to account for ontonic entities that people do not experience as structured signs, just as presencing processes become crucial in moving beyond the epistemological limits of semiotics.

I characterize presencing practices as describing people's assumptions about the nature of the entities they experience and how they engage and act in the world by making various aspects of it present. They describe more or less specific constellations of how people apply iconic, symbolic, indexical and ontonic principles in presencing, which, in turn, can manifest themselves in more or less ontonic, semiotic, scientific or Pentecostal presencing practices, for example, as I elaborate below.

This means that I also understand presencing practices as more limited than an overarching semiotic ideology, since they describe various possibilities that can co-exist and interplay with other practices. People can be described as using different presencing practices both exclusively and simultaneously, depending on situations and circumstances. People constantly reconfigure the interplay of the different presencing practices by altering their range, and maybe more importantly, by diminishing and increasing their importance and frequency of application according to specific situations and needs.

Returning to the people in the Commune of Cobly, those who consider shrine entities as live beings that are part of relational ontology mainly draw on what I could call an ontonic presencing practice to make stones present. Indexicality and symbolism also have their place in this, as people indexically assess the shrines' efficiency and by presenting symbolic offerings. Iconicity, on the other hand, remains negligible. This fairly specific presencing practice is favored by those people in the Commune of Cobly who consider everything alive, as well as by others who presence certain things at least sometimes as being alive. This kind of primarily ontonic presencing practice is largely based on action and results in indivisible entities that relationally, experientially and existentially depend on other surrounding entities. It is a crucial notion that provides the language to talk about entities that cannot be sufficiently analyzed by strictly semiotic and representational presencing practices, which describe the immaterial as being made present in, or mediated by, a material object.

The idea of presencing practices, that express different constellations and interplays of semiotic and ontonic processes, has the potential to account for various other processes of presencing, whether they are more or less representational or semiotic, more or less ontonic, or more religious or scientific, thereby potentially accounting for a whole gamut of human experience in its various facets. People rarely have only one presencing practice that they draw on exclusively and within a single society or even family it is even more likely that different presencing practices, even if they are inconsistent with each other (Harris & Robb, 2012, pp. 671-672), are operational at any given time, both synchronously and diachronically.

In a similar way that Naveh and Bird-David (2014) describe changes in the ontological status of animals among the Nayaka of southern India, I have observed an ontological differentiation of stones. In the Commune of Cobly, such changes in ontological status lead to an increased diversity of presencing practices, which explain the different ways

that people characterize the life of stones. Especially, but not exclusively, people who are younger, more educated, and Christian tend to separate the material form (*ukuɔnu*) of the stone from its identity (*mtakimɛ*) or immaterial life. Accordingly, *mtakimɛ* is no longer solely a necessary component of life, it is also sometimes seen as an entity of life itself that can exist independently of a material body. *Mtakimɛ* is thus deprived of its necessary relational and ontonic existence and material form, and its ontonicity takes on a distinct consciousness, if not a personality, thereby ontologically differentiating it from material things. This ultimately leads to a possible distinction between the categories of spirit and matter in which the material body (*ukuɔnu*) and spiritual identity (*mtakimɛ*) are split from each other. A church leader confirmed this by explaining that for him: "An evil spirit [bad *mtakimɛ*] doesn't have a house. It roams around and will always return to where people do sacrifices" (personal communication, February 2012).

Some People in Cobly thus also describe shrine entities through more representational and semiotic presencing practices. The material aspect of the stone, viewed through a Peircean slant, becomes a shrine that symbolizes a disembodied spirit that may be associated with it and may be either present or absent. Furthermore, a spirit is no longer necessarily limited to a stone as its material abode, but has a more arbitrary and conventional relationship to it, since it can move between different material objects and, more importantly, also enter people. In Cobly, such intrusive possession is itself a relatively novel idea that complements the more ontonic view of possession as external and relational encounters between ontonic entities, such as humans and bush dwarfs (S. Merz, 2017, p. 126). Even though it is possible to use semiotics to analyze shrines and spirits, I maintain that ontonicity continues to play at least a certain role when it comes to presencing spirits as independent beings, which stresses the importance of talking in terms of presencing that adds ontonicity to semiotics. Ontological diversity can be explained well by a varying application of either more representational or more ontonic presencing practices. Indexicality and symbolism clearly become more prominent, especially when people in Cobly attribute agency to the material shrine in a Gellian sense. At least in the case of stone shrines, iconicity remains negligible, even though it is quite possible that more iconic representations are becoming linked to spirits and other immaterial beings as well, for example in the case of Christian images of Jesus (Meyer, 2010).

By separating spirit from matter, it is now feasible to speak of "a spirit made to reside in matter" (Pels, 1998, p. 94, emphasis in original; see also Ellen, 1988, p. 214), something that would not be possible for predominantly ontonic presencing practices. For the Commune of Cobly, I could call these more representational presencing practices either modernist, or in a more Christian sense, Pentecostal. They differentiate from a primarily ontonic practice mainly by shifting the focus from an ontonic to representational and symbolic presencing practices. This leads to a world that is characterized by categories of humans, animals and things, as well as the newly added disembodied spirits, which no longer share in relational ontology.

Ontological differentiation means that the people in the Commune of Cobly now have a complex and diversifying repertoire of presencing practices to draw on depending on their experience and interaction with other entities, whether they are people, animals, things, spirits or institutions. Returning to the woman who seeks to have children, so far she sought help from a stone shrine, largely drawing on ontonic presencing practices. Should she decide to seek help through prayer at a Pentecostal church, she would be exposed to modernist Pentecostal presencing practices that stress a more symbolic and representational view of materiality and disembodied spirits, while a visit to a hospital would expose her to scientific presencing practices in which a body becomes a functional machine devoid of ontonicity (Harris & Robb, 2012). Her actions lead her to engage with people and institutions that apply different presencing practices, which she herself may slowly absorb to various degrees and then begin to draw on in different situations she encounters in her daily life, thereby altering her actions. This potential diversification of presencing practices does not exclude her from maintaining ontonic presencing practices as a preferred way of making meaning present in her life. Through the introduction of presencing practices, then, I can account for the considerable complexity of presencing that is currently observable in the Commune of Cobly.

Presencing practices in various orientations are neither stable nor exclusive and they are central to what it is to be human. We all draw on different identifiable practices at different times or for different circumstances and to different extents. W. J. T. Mitchell (2005) asserts that people maintain what he calls a "double consciousness" (2005, pp. 7-8), which they apply towards images and pictures, also including various objects and fetishes, such as the stones of shrines. Mitchell sees people's attitudes to representations as "vacillating between magical belief and skeptical doubts, naïve animism and hardened materialism, mystical and critical attitudes" (2005, p. 7). In doing so Mitchell acknowledges that what I call different presencing practices remain as important today, also in the west, as they were in the past and refers to them as "a deep and abiding feature of human responses to representation" (2005, p. 7) and, I hasten to add, to presencing more broadly.

7. Conclusion

In this article, I propose to introduce a new type of entity that I call the "onton." This indivisible and non-representational entity cannot be broken down into different components. The onton complements the semiotic

signs of icon, symbol and index and provides the means to account for a wider variety of human experience beyond semiotics, such as seemingly inanimate stones that people consider intrinsically alive. By drawing primarily on Gumbrecht (2004) I also introduce presencing, which takes meaning making a step further. Presencing is a highly dynamic process of constant reconfiguration and interplay of various practices that people draw on to experience the world we share and act in. The result of presencing are entities that populate and constitute the ever-changing world, whether they are humans, animals, things and disembodied spirits.

By introducing the process of presencing and the practices that describe it, I can counter the epistemological paradox of anthropology's rationality debate. Stones that are inherently alive become logically comprehensible and coherent entities of life to the extent that I, as an anthropologist and outsider, can accept them as true beings in their own right. This is possible thanks to the epistemological and ontological ambiguity, uncertainty and potential for plurality that is part of presencing and that I believe is essential for taking difference seriously. At the same time ontonicity addresses at least some of the critique of ontological anthropology, such as the essentialization of ontology and its dualizing tendencies.

By proposing the onton as a new type of entity, I provide a different and broader epistemological perspective that includes non-western ontological thought and that can account for things that are alive and present to varying degrees in different circumstances. A major trait of an ontonic presencing practice is that it attributes life to everything that exists. It may also continue to exist as part of more semiotic presencing practices, at least minimally. It is maybe only in strict scientific presencing practices that ontonicity ceases to play a role, even though it hardly can be eradicated from the lives of even the most positivist scientists, who are likely to understand and experience their human body at least in some circumstances as the seat of the self (Harris & Robb, 2012).

Ontonicity, I claim, is an integral part of the human ability to presence, as well as to experience life and act in the world we share. By recognizing this, I propose that various religious and ontological phenomena, such as fetishes or shrine entities, are not an attributable state of otherness that can be reduced to semiotic significance, but become an integral part of what it is to be human. Introducing the onton and ontonic presencing takes the anthropology of ontology a step further by allowing the religious to impact the foundations of anthropological theory. Presencing processes that go beyond the limits of semiotics by including the possibility of ontonic entities, then, pave the way for anthropology to come to terms with the more relational, religious and experiential sides of human existence and ontology.

Acknowledgements

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