

## AMULETS AND CHARMS INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THE PITT RIVERS MUSEUM: THE ANTHROPOLOGY WE MAKE AND THE CRITICISM OF CONTEMPORARY HEGEMONIES

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### ABSTRACT

This article presents reflections from an ethnographic research on amulets and charms at the Pitt Rivers Museum and criticizes the production of knowledge. I describe the challenges and practices of contemporary anthropologists in the management, study and display of amulets and charms from other societies. I highlight the constant notion of transformation in the history of the museum. Following, I record reflections on unexpected research experiences: i. recent research result by the museum staff ii. movements of an ethnography in groups of songs; which suggest investigation around contemporary amulets and charms. I conclude by briefly calling for the potential of ethnography performed in the practice of singing collectively. I stress the importance of a critical attitude towards analytical categories and assumptions reproduced by anthropology that are allowed by the position occupied by the discipline and its alliances - often silenced - with the hegemonic practices of knowledge production.

### KEYWORDS

Ethnography;  
amulets; charms;  
song; criticism.

## 1. INTRODUCTION: THE CHARMING PITT RIVERS MUSEUM

The depiction of the Pitt Rivers Museum (hereinafter PRM) as ‘fabulous’ sustains itself both by its history—which is part of the history of anthropology—, and by its collection composed of Achuar’s shrunken heads from Peruvian and Ecuadorian Amazon, Benin’s bronze plates and accoutrements of ex-colonized societies, alongside witch bottles and other amulets and charms of the ex-colonial metropolises. The collection was formed by the general and collector Pitt Rivers between the 50s and 80s of the 19th century.

Pitt Rivers—who, not accidentally, had begun his collection motivated by his military experience and influenced by the Universal Exposition of 1851—delivered to Oxford University (hereinafter OU), in 1884, about twenty thousand objects. Upon the delivery he requested: 1) that a position of collection researcher be created; 2) that the collection be kept as he had organized, by function and type; and 3) that a museum be built under his name.

Today the PRM has a collection of almost 500 thousand items, divided into: objects, photography, manuscripts, audio, and movies. The museum also integrates a course in the Visual, Material and Museum Anthropology graduate program of the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, that is part of the School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography (Same), inside the Social Sciences Division of OU.

Despite its constant transformations of spaces and meanings, registered in O’Hanlon (2014), most of the collection exhibition remained designed by function and type; all of the exhibition space continues into the Museum of Natural History, where it was inaugurated, and the entrance still carries Pitt Rivers’ name<sup>1</sup> (Figure 1).

Considering the PRM, side by side with the Parisian *Musée du quai Branly* and the Berliner Humboldt Forum, its appearance (name changes, architecture and exhibition layout) may indicate that the PRM, unlike other European ethnographic museums, remains unchanged. Research on the collection of amulets and charms from other societies made clear that the museum is the result of the modern English society, and its history is full of changes and ambiguities. Also, it is now responding to the challenges of contemporary criticism that explicit, to all ethnographic museums, the inconvenient colonial past.

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1. Here we have an interesting chapter of the donation story of this collection to the museum. According to historians of the collection (Chapman 1985, O’Halon 2014), Pitt Rivers could build this significant collection, besides a second one that isn’t unified, due to an inheritance. This inheritance not only changed General Augustus Henry-Lanne Fox’s destiny, but also his name. The parent who recognized Fox as heir, leaving him a significant amount of land and income, had no sons and demanded that his heir adopt the name Pitt Rivers. The then General Augustus Henry-Lanne Fox Pitt Rivers left nine sons, heirs who bear his name until today.



FIGURE 1  
Inside of the  
Natural History  
Museum building  
that gives access  
to the Pitt Rivers  
Collection Portal.

Recently, the museum's research team discovered that the PRM maintains a significant collection of English amulets and charms, stimulating a series of relevant researches.

Regarding my research, this discovery suggested a review on a debate about notions of reality,<sup>2</sup> truth and knowledge production in 1940s England, and provided organization hypotheses to practices and relationships I had been experiencing with choirs and singing groups outside the university. This experience, associated with an old literature review and the systematic visit to the museum, helped compose a first approach to an old debate, between the university and the non-university town (*town and gown*) in Oxford. A first approach based on dispersed data that includes the everyday of the research and studies on conflicting versions about amulets and charms, inside and outside the charming PRM.

These conflicting versions contribute to an agenda, inspired by Asad (1993), which investigates the particular conditions of how the difference between the secular and religious organizes the contemporary knowledge production in the academic field. This article represents an effort in this direction, intending to reveal the significant role of the ethnography with singing groups. A group's effort to sing in unison creates the opportunity for relating ideas and practices, including those often silenced in conversations.

<sup>2</sup>. Understood according to Overing (1995).

Organized in two central parts, the article discusses the inside and the outside of the PRM, although both spaces intermingled during the research. The first part focuses on my research on amulets and charms of ex-colonial societies and how the museum's anthropology deals with the enchantment of its collections and the museum itself, suggesting an analysis of the ambiguous character of modern science in its relation with Christianity. Whether in its modern or contemporary period, the museum curatorship had to answer to the enchantment of some of its objects. In the second part, I present the research *The other within*, where the museum analysed its relevant collection of English objects, among which amulets and charms that came to the museum between the end of the 19th century and the 50s of the 20th century. Then, I present an initial organization of research data collected outside the academic space in its relation with the PRM research. Reflections based on the relationships I have established with choir groups on the outskirts of town suggests ways to inquire on one of the contemporary aspects of the *town and gown* tension. The article concludes with appointments about the relation between knowledge production and the naturalization of category analysis.

## 2. AMULETS AND CHARMS OF OTHERS IN THE PRM

Amulets and charms belong to the collection *Magic, ritual, religions and belief*, almost all of them gathered at the museum first floor.<sup>3</sup> The collection comprises six thousand amulets and charms, defined on catalogues and visitor guides as: "The underlying theme that unites all amulets and charms is that the people who created and used them believed in them; almost any object may become a charm or an amulet, so long as someone believes it has the power to affect or alter the world around them."<sup>4</sup>

My investigation in the PRM centred on how anthropological research in ethnographic museums—since the latest epistemological criticisms—is related to the power attributed to amulets and charms. My intention was to observe the PRM daily routine, observing the relationships both visitors and museum workers established with the collection, in addition to studying the documentation of some of those objects and reviewing their respective literature.

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3. The museum's amulets and charms are exhibited inside the collection *Magic, ritual, religions and beliefs*, divided on eleven glass sections: 1. Magic and witchcraft; 2. Religious figures; 3. Religious figures and artefacts; 4. Amulets, charms, and divinations; 5. Amulets and charms; 6. Sympathetic magic; 7. Magic and trial by ordeal; 8. Votive offerings; 9. Amulets, cures, and charms; 10. Charms against the evil eye; 11. Divination. On the website, the collection on amulets and charms is the *Small Blessings*. On the search menu you can find English amulets and charms by searching for "The other within".

4. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2zd9tjl>.

Initially, I intended to identify records inside the museum (displays organization, specific care for its maintenance) and situations related to objects (curious, specific, alarming or risible stories) that recognize and deal with the agency assigned to them.

The research started by a literature review on amulets and charms in the two formative moments in the history of ethnographic collections: 1) the armchair anthropologists; 2) the creation of modern scientific anthropology. My intention was to investigate the current moment, post-1980s, when anthropological theory was challenged to reflect on the problems that the cosmology of societies not fully modernized brought to contemporary thought.

#### 2.1. RELATIONS WITH CRITICISM ABOUT THE OTHER'S COLLECTION

Based on the assumption that organized modern anthropology (as a scientific production) was strongly shaken by critical observations from multiple places produced since the 1980s, my own reflection was particularly nourished by the intriguing research projects of contemporary ethnography about Amazonian (Viveiros de Castro 1992, Overing 1995, Fausto 2001), Melanesians (Strathern 1992), and African (Fabian 1986, Comaroff and Comaroff 1992, Sarró 2008) societies and other groups resistant to the modern logic (Fonseca 2004, Sáez 2009). These studies fuel anthropological criticism and underline the naturalization of scientific thought on knowledge production, revealing the links between knowledge production and statements of established powers.

Overing (1995), for example, discuss the political reasons that have ensured, since the end of the 16th century, the gradual constitution of a unique conception of truth, supposedly devoid of temporal, practical, local and moral interests. The author states that confronting the question “how should we interpret statements by those who manifest a strong belief that gods and demons not only exist, but are effective beings?” requires considering the limits of the modern rational perspective, shaped by the restricted opposition between nature and culture, magic and rationality.

John and Jean Comaroff (1992), in turn, compare the enchanted organization of modernized life, based on the fetishism of money and fair price, with the notions of immortal soldiers in South African civil wars, highlighting the silenced limits of Western production of truths and their links with the establishment of capital violence.

My research question, inspired by these anthropological criticisms, was how these theoretical reflections influenced the relation that the discipline establishes with objects ascribed with the power to affect or change the world around them, when they are inside the museum.

Specifically, how these reflections impacted the belief that, once inside museums, these objects are subjected to the cosmology of their collectors.

I even extended this general question to encompass the European objects which, as will be discussed later, are a significant part of the PRM collection. Regarding objects from other societies, the museum's answers overcome the post-980s period. From the literature review and the museum's daily routine, I observed contemporary practices and modern records on the relationship with amulets and charms.

The literature read during the research showed a number of complexities about the formation processes of anthropological collections worldwide, between the late-19th and early-20th century (Bouquet and Branco 1988, Karp and Lavine 1990, Price 2000, O'Hanlon and Welsch 2001, l'Estoile 2007, Broekhoven, Buijs and Hovens 2010).<sup>5</sup> As Kaarp and Lavine (1990) write in their inventory, the PRM has been avant-garde in its responses to the challenges of postcolonial criticism. O'Hanlon (2014), its penultimate curator<sup>14</sup>, registered some important challenges faced by the museum research team.

Besides this more general literature, I found research by the museum staff and documentation on contemporary challenges in dealing with objects imbued with power. These studies contain information about the history of the collection, the history of its main curators and collectors, general characteristics of the collection (such as statistics of its origins), particular characteristics of some specific collections (such as the biography of objects before they arrived at the museum) and specific analyses of some collections and objects.<sup>6</sup> Below I present two examples illustrating practices employed by the PRM when dealing with amulets and charms. Although challenges concerning the agency of the objects seem restricted to the contemporary period—specially based on claims from ex-colonized societies—the museum had already responded to the enchantment of objects in the collection in the modern period.

#### 2.1.1. The Burmese guardian-figures: modern relations

Although modern anthropology conceives that objects have magic efficacy only in their context of origin, some records recognized the agency of certain objects inside the museum already in the modern period.

The arrangement of two pieces of the guardian-figures of Burmese Buddhism, opening the collection since the first curators—Balfour

5. Preparing the research, I had already reviewed: Sansi-Roca (2007), Goldstein (2008), Demarchi (2012), Brulon (2013) and Poussamai (2010).

6. Information on the finished studies and the ones in progress at the PRM are available at: <https://bit.ly/2TuWiB7>.

(1863-1939)—organization, is an example. I found no historical study about this display, but its documentation shows that its placement has remained the same throughout the museum's history. The 2016 audio tour explains its location in the museum by referring to its agency, which would be homologous to its original context: "This figure comes from Burma, whose actual name is Union of Myanmar. It was acquired by General Pitt Rivers, probably at an auction, at some moment before 1884. It is carved in wood teak and the two pieces are in opposite positions at the platform. Together they guard the entrance of the PRM, as they used to do in its original context."<sup>7</sup>

This apparent lapse of modern anthropology, that despite its scientific pretension preserves here an enchantment, is not an isolated practice. Other academic museums have exhibited ambiguous relations, since the modern period, with the protective power of such objects. A Brazilian example concerns the history of the collection of African objects at the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology of the University of São Paulo (MAE/USP). When Marianno Carneiro da Cunha organized, in 1980, what was the first African Art Exhibition of MAE/USP, he positioned two *Exús* at the entrance, establishing a connection with the *orixás'* place in the Afro-Brazilian cosmology. Marta Salum<sup>8</sup> registered this choice when describing the history of the collection layout at MAE:

At the entrance of the exhibition, Marianno determined the placement of a pair of iron *Exú*, in which one of these binary oppositions would be identified, considering the role that *Exú* plays in the opening of ceremonies in Afro-Brazilian cults (in *candomblés*), that is, of a deity, among men, who "opens the way" to the spiritual world.

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7. The sources of these texts work only in the internal environment of access to the collection. In such a way that they are not public. That is, to have access to the original text you must be inside the museum or with access to its collection.

8. Marta Salum "holds a bachelor's degree in Artistic Education by Armando Álvares Penteado Foundation (1975-1979), and a postgraduate degree from the Faculty of Philosophy, Languages and Human Sciences of University of São Paulo, having obtained a master's degree (1990) and a PhD degree (1997) in Science (Social Anthropology)." She was "professor [...] at MAE/USP, related to the African Ethnology area, since 1998. Is professor of the Postgraduate Program in Archaeology (USP) since 2002" (information available at: <https://bit.ly/2WZWGd3>)—comments on researchers/professors Marianno Carneiro da Cunha and Kabenguele Munanga, her predecessors in the organization of the MAE/USP collection.

As posthumous publication of Marianno Carneiro da Cunha (1985): "Marianno Carneiro da Cunha (1926-1980) studied philosophy at the University of São Paulo and held his PhD on the religious tough of Babylon at the *École des Hautes Études* of Paris. Developed his studies on Africa at the Archaeology and Ethnology Museum of USP. He also taught at the University of Ifé, Nigeria."

The Peoples Museum informs that: "Kabenguele Munanga was born in the Democratic Republic of Congo [...] on November 19, 1942. He was the first anthropologist of his country, leaving for the first time to acquire a master's degree in Belgium. He arrived in Brazil by a friend's invitation, finished his PhD degree and returned to Congo. In 1980 he returned to Brazil to take up the chair of Anthropology at the University of Rio Grande do Norte. After one year he moved permanently to São Paulo, having as home the University de São Paulo." (available at: <https://bit.ly/2WUtMLh>)

That is the widespread explanation for the Exú pair at the entrance of the exhibition, since its inauguration in 1980. Such was the importance Marianno attributed to it, that they remained in the same position in Kabengele's installation. (Salum and Ceravolo 1993, 174)

The *Exús* continued welcoming visitors of the MAE/USP collection until its closing for renovation in 2010. If they return to occupy the same place at the new MAE/USP, just as the Burmese guardian-figures, they can be understood as examples of the contemporary response anthropologists and other researchers of ethnographic museums find themselves compelled to provide.

However, the *Exús* display at MAE and the Burmese guardians, from the first PRM exhibition to the present date, can also serve to criticize the reductionist opposition science x religion, evidencing one possible articulation of these domains in the modern public space of ethnographic museums. This anthropological ambiguity when dealing with these objects also provides clues about conflicting practices and discourses about reality, truth, and knowledge production.

Modern attitudes and practices towards objects imbued with the power to affect or change the world around them, took place at a time when European ethnographic museums were unchallenged by the societies from which such objects were removed. Distinct problems and solutions started to arise when these societies were recognized as having the right to claim their pieces.

#### 2.1.2. The Zuni god of war: contemporary relations

The contemporary literature I found explicitly discusses issues related to objects imbued with power from others societies, such as the publication of PRM last former curator, Michael O'Hanlon.<sup>9</sup>

O'Hanlon (2014)<sup>10</sup> reported that the museum staff reallocated the Zuni god of war Ahayu:da from the display to the technical reserve following the claiming process initiated by the Zuni people of New Mexico/USA, in 1999. For the Zuni, this object—even though it is a copy made by an

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9. Laura van Broekhoven replaced O'Hanlon as the PRM director in 2016, while I was living in Oxford. Previously she led the curatorial department of the National Museum of World Cultures (Amsterdam, Leiden and Berg en Dal) and was a lecturer in archaeology, museum studies and indigenous heritage at the Faculty of Archaeology at Leiden University. Her regional academic research has focused on collaborative collection research with Amazon (Suriname and Brazil) indigenous peoples, Yokot'an (Maya) oral history, Mixtec indigenous market systems and Nicaraguan indigenous resistance in colonial times (available at: <https://bit.ly/3e4LLnY>).

10. Michael O'Hanlon was director of the PRM from 1998 until 2015 and is now emeritus curator. A historian and later anthropologist by training, he undertook long-term fieldwork with the Wahgi people in highland Papua New Guinea. Following his appointment as assistant keeper at the British Museum, his interests expanded to include museology and the history of collecting (available at: <https://bit.ly/3cWm8Rs>).

anthropologist—should be in their temple to be prayed for. Left in an inappropriate place, it can cause earthquakes, fires, storms, and wars. As the object was a reproduction made by Frank H. Cushing of the Washington's Smithsonian Institution, donated to Taylor in 1911, the request for it to be sent to New Mexico was denied by the University.<sup>11</sup> However, respecting the considerations brought forth, the museum curatorship understood that the object should remain in the reserve.

Jeremy Coote and Isaac (2011)—in an unpublished text of restricted circulation at PRM Balfour Library—detailed the situation involving this request. What is interesting here are the conflicting understandings: O'Hallon and the University (owner of the objects) denied the Zuni's request based on the object being considered a replica made by one anthropologist who would have donated it to another, who in turn donated to the PRM; however, Coote (2011) and Isaac (2011) point out, the Zuni delegates argued that, in their culture, the possession of an object is not related to the hands that carved it, but to the knowledge involved in its production.

Letters from the Zuni delegates stated that the anthropologist Frank H. Cushing made the god of war from the knowledge he obtained from the Zuni people, using parts of another object exposed in a Zuni temple. Since the object was made from Zuni knowledge, they explain, it is a Zuni object. Coote also declares that, as the piece is a god of war, it needs to receive proper prayers in Zuni temples and cannot be exhibited in a museum:

An Ahayu:da that is not in its proper shrine at Zuni will cause the world harm. We pray on a daily basis for order and prosperity for the whole world. The Ahayu:da in your collection can do harm to you and to world order by being outside of its proper place. It should not be there. It should not be seen by the public. It is not a museum artefact. It is a religious being and it belongs here. (Coote 1997)

Removing the object from the display is, first, an attitude of respect for the society that conceives it as part of its cosmology. But more than recognizing a compensation from the museum, it is interesting to underline that the debate around the object within the collection arises some relevant questions for a research trying to reflect on how anthropology is affected by beliefs that refuse the modern science assumptions.

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11. "Frank Hamilton Cushing, (born July 22, 1857, North East, Pa., U.S. – died April 10, 1900, Washington, D.C.), early American ethnographer of the Zuni people. Cushing studied the Zuni culture while making a five-year stay with the tribe, during which he was initiated into the Bow Priest Society. Many of his findings are summarized in *Zuñi Folk Tales* (1901), *Zuñi Creation Myths* (1896), and *My Adventures in Zuñi* (1941), as well as in his treatises on native technologies, such as *Zuñi Breadstuff*. He was an authority on the processes by which artifacts are made, having practiced the aboriginal arts until he mastered them. Cushing studied natural science at Cornell University. He was employed by the Smithsonian Institution's Bureau of American Ethnology from the age of 18 until his death" (available at: <https://bit.ly/3e9jgW9>).

This example illustrates multiple questions and answers, all complex, that have been given by the anthropologists and curators of the PRM, when dealing with the agency of certain objects. At the beginning of the research, I observed practical measures, related to the museum's daily routines, as well as conceptual and methodological elaborations with several repercussions in the displays and in the advances of anthropological literature.

This brief first discussion highlights the abundant contemporary literature focused on the diverse answers that teams of anthropologists from museums, as the PRM, have been giving to the challenges of managing collections of objects with agency. So much so, that, were it not for the continuous flow of perceptions, relations, and concerns, typical of ethnographic research, my first research question would have been answered at the end of the second month of field.

However, the relations I had been establishing with three choir groups in the city of Oxford, showed me signs of existing contemporary relations with objects imbued with power in the ex-colonial metropolis. These signs were gradually valued when I realized that, in the PRM, the collection *Magic, religion, Belief and Ritual* encompassed several English objects, including some from the city itself.

### **3. ENGLISH AMULETS AND CHARMS IN THE PITT RIVERS MUSEUM: THE OTHER WITHIN**

I was surprised and intrigued to discover that the PRM keeps an important collection of English objects. Unknown by the museum's anthropologists, this information resulted initially from the research *The relational museum*—completed in 2006—which continued in *The other within* (2006-2009). Both concluded that the PRM is not limited to a large collection of exotic objects from ex-colonized societies. Such characterization populates the literary imagination on the subject, including George Stocking Jr (1985, 12), who affirms that in the 1980s “characteristically, these objects of material culture are the objects of the others—of human beings whose similarity or difference is experienced by alien observers as in some profound way problematic.” Recent research, however, indicates that:

The PRM at the UO is one of the foremost ethnographic museums in the world. It is known for having many thousands of objects on display from all corners of the globe, and from all periods of history. However, it does have surprisingly large collections of artefacts, photographs, and manuscripts from England. During the Relational Museum project, that team discovered that there were many more English objects in the PR Museum than one might expect given the public perception of the Museum as a place for exotic specimens, specimens brought to England from abroad.<sup>12</sup>

12. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3ebsyB2>.

The museum, which crossed its first century of existence as a museum of the others, enters the first decade of the 21st century knowing itself and announcing itself as an important museum of oneself. “The public reputation of the Pitt Rivers Museum (founded in 1884) is perhaps as a home for the exotic. However, the Museum has some 44,015 objects and 6,593 photographs (and an unknown quantity of manuscript collections) from England and this collection is part of the broader concern for what it meant to be English.”<sup>13</sup>

The project provided publications on the gathering of various objects in use in Oxford until the first half of the 20th century, now part of the collection *Magic, ritual, religion, and belief*. A specific literature was and is being produced and published on the research website, focusing on some specific pieces. As soon as I discovered their existence, I focused on Oxford’s collection of amulets and charms.

Presented as belonging to the English past, such pieces are described and analysed in their entry records, in the first half of the 21st century, as practices already meaningless to the, by that time, modern Oxford. Similarly, contemporary studies on English amulets and charms do not expect to hear appeals from users of such objects, as it occurs with artifacts from ex-colonized societies. I found no reflections about the inappropriate display of English pieces and/or indications of treatment changes with a specific piece due to the demands of English users. Different from what has been happening with artifacts from ex-colonial societies, whose contemporary leaders demand new curatorship behaviours, the English objects remain unclaimed by contemporary people due to their agency. Everything suggests that the other from within is an inanimate object inside the PRM.

However, a master’s thesis on one of the museum’s most popular objects—the witch in a bottle—led me to suspect the consensus on the practices, religious and secular, that constituted modern Oxford in the 40s. The hypothesis of this debate, involving Evans-Pritchard in the 40s, offered meaning to some of the challenges I was facing in the research-field, with people who were not regulars of the PRM or other academic spaces.

### 3.1. EVANS-PRITCHARD, ELLEN ETTLINGER AND MARGARET MURRAY: A DEBATE ON “A COUNTRY AS FULL OF STRANGE UNRECORDED FACTS, BELIEFS AND CUSTOMS”

Barnes’ master’s thesis, defended in 2000, analyses the life of the witch in the bottle before it arrived at the museum. The study also cites the

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13. The sources of these texts work only in the internal environment of access to the collection. In such a way that they are not public. That is, to have access to the original text you must be inside the museum or with access to its collection.

emergency of folklore studies in the early 20th century as important to understand the efforts of collecting and guarding objects like this. The works of Ellen Ettlinger and Margaret Murray, about folklore and anthropology, exemplify these efforts.<sup>14</sup>

Ellen Ettlinger (Germany, 1902 – England, 1995; journalist) and Margaret Murray (India, 1863 – England 1963; egyptologist) were contemporary and colleagues of Evans-Pritchard (England, 1902 – 1973; anthropologist) at Oxford. They did not occupy university positions but circulated in these spaces and interacted with the PRM and the anthropology course at the UO, where, between 1941 and 1950, Evans-Pritchard (hereinafter, EP) was professor of Anthropology.

Margaret Murray appears in the PRM research material as a “controversial folklorist”.<sup>15</sup> It was her who donated, in 1926, the “witch in a bottle”: “it is not recorded how she obtained the artefact or why the old lady from near Hove was so willing to get rid of such a dangerous artefact. It is implied (but not confirmed) that Murray obtained the bottle at first hand”.

The museum’s documentation suggests that Murray’s classification as controversial concerns not only her interest in objects that have agency, but also her criticism of the dominant interest and funding for studies outside England. In her 1954 speech—*Presidential Address to the Folklore Society about “England as a field for folklore research”*—Murray complained about the lack of interest in English folklore, denouncing English government’s spending on research on other societies in detriment of local research:

Many men and women, trained at great expense, go abroad to look for folklore, and when they come back they write large volumes of peculiar rituals, of marriage customs, of curious beliefs, of folk tales and folk medicine, with tabulated lists of kinship systems, of agricultural systems, of trade systems, and so on. Yet here, under our very noses, is a country as full of strange unrecorded facts, beliefs, and customs as any land overseas. England is in many ways the great Undiscovered Country (Murray, 1954).

Murray’s work had a strong impact, especially for the lay public. According to Barnes’ research (2000), Murray became popular for her work on witchcraft, in which she re-evaluated the witch hunt trials of the early modern period. She defended that witches could be understood less as satanic agents and more as pre-Christian fertility worshipers, arguing

14. To think on the repercussions of Murray’s research for the debate on sorcery in English History and Anthropology, cf. Ginzburg (1991).

15. In *Analysing the English Collections at the Pitt Rivers Museum England: The Other Within: Margaret Murray* by Alison Petch, Researcher ‘The Other Within’ project (available at: <https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/englishness.html>).

that the practice of witchcraft belonged to a long-standing tradition that persisted in the modern society.

Murray's argument led me to consider that characterizing witchcraft as a pre-Christian practice could be alternatively understood as anti-Christian, to the extent that the process of consolidating a single truth—mentioned in Overing (1995)—is taken as still open.

In Ellen Ettlenger's biography, PRM researcher Alison Pecht presents Ettlenger's activities as member of the Folklore Society and reveals her links with the OU. Pecht indicates that, on November 2, 1939, two years after EP's *Witchcraft, oracles and magic among the Azande* (2005), Ettlenger made a speech in the Anthropological Society.<sup>16</sup>

Her text *Documents of British superstition in Oxford*, published in *Folklore* (1943, vol. 54, no. 1: 227-249), described and classified preserved objects in the PRM (1884) and Ashmolean Museum (1683), and in the OU colleges collections, among which: witch in a bottle, stones for animals protection, objects of sympathetic magic, ex-votos and evil eyes. Ettlenger asks which magical properties directed to good and evil were attributed to these objects in medieval times and in an even more recent past, the last world war. The document tries to describe the dynamics of the relationships established between people and objects considered powerful.

The synchronicity between *England as a field for folklore research*, by Margaret Murray, *Documents of British superstition in Oxford*, by Ellen Ettlenger, and *Witchcraft, oracles and magic among the Azande*, by EP, suggests a debate around English witchcraft at a time when, according to the most important modern anthropologists, there were no more witches in England.

EP's book is a mark in the history of anthropology, showing that witchcraft refer to a system of rational and coherent thought. Through contrasting comparisons, EP equals the witchcraft rationality of colonized societies to the metropolitan rationality, more specifically to English rationality. For the propose of this article, however, EP's understanding of English rationality takes precedence over the impact of this homology between English rationality and Zande rationality to understand the Azande.

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16. "Founded in 1909, the Anthropological Society works to promote an interest in anthropology and to support students and researchers in anthropology at Oxford University. We are run by and for both students and staff of the School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography. For the past century, the Society has formed a central part of Oxford anthropology" (available at: <https://bit.ly/3ghx6HS>).

In the text “Some reminiscences and reflections on fieldwork”,<sup>17</sup> EP discuss the problem he was facing, “as an anthropologist, a religious and rational man of science, and a believer of God” (2005, 244), when dealing with Azande witchcraft. The reflection concerned the complications related to participant-observation—an activity which, according to EP, puts the researcher to “live the life of the people he is studying” (2005, 243).

After describing the practices and materialities that attested his intense coexistence with the Azande (hunting, fishing, consulting oracles, building houses and stables), EP considered the limits of attempting to “live like the natives”, affirming that: “One must recognize that there is a certain pretence in such efforts of participation[...] It is impossible for the anthropologist to truly become a zande[...] Perhaps it is better to say that the anthropologist lives simultaneously in two different mental worlds, built according to categories and values often difficult to reconcile” (2005, 246).

Witchcraft appears as such an instance of difficult conciliation, as ideas and practices about witchcraft—different from ideas and practices about god or soul—, says EP, would be unfamiliar to his contemporaries. He, who introduced himself as a Christian, observing that his contemporary anthropologists were either Christians or atheists, emphasized: “Witchcraft is, nowadays, inexistent in our culture” (2005, 247).

This statement about witchcraft “in our current culture” suggests that western culture understood witchcraft in other periods. After all, the modern and contemporary memory of Western English society recognises the pagan beliefs of the old continent. However, these are ancient beliefs: the brumes of Avalon, the legend of King Arthur, the thaumaturge kings and objects associated would be kept inside museums for the English to remember their past.

This modern understanding of English science is therefore linked to producing objective knowledge about a single reality, supposedly disconnected from time, place, and practices. The modern English anthropology that emerged, among other practices, 1) in the disputes over its name, made by EP for example, as well as 2) in the organization, classification and interpretation of the collection of material culture of non-modernized societies, in institutions such as the PRM, was linked to the objective and single rationality that was being superimposed on other rationalities, among them, that of witchcraft.

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17. This text was published as “Algumas reminiscências e reflexões sobre o trabalho de campo” in the 4th appendix of the Portuguese edition of 2005. The text would have been based on lectures given at the Universities of Cambridge and Cardiff, in the 1940s, when EP was a professor at Oxford.

It is curious that EP's statement, presented in the name of modern science, suffered no embarrassment when describing himself as a Christian, while refusing to recognize any reality to the English witchcraft of the 1940s.

### 3.2. THE CHRISTIAN RATIONALITY OF THE ENGLISH WITCHCRAFT

The naturality with which EP presented himself as a Christian in the text that refused any reality to the English witchcraft (in opposition to the Zande witchcraft), despite having colleagues who researched its signs, finds a similar behavior in the Brazilian human sciences. From its conception, the field of African studies in Brazilian anthropology broaches the relation between scientific production on Afro-Brazilian religion and the fact of the researcher being or not initiated—while the Christian bonds of many Brazilian intellectuals remain unquestioned.

We must consider, then, that the tacit acceptance of Christian intellectuals as neutral—when compared with those identified with Afro-Brazilian religions, or witchcraft, regarding contemporary EP researchers, considered controversial—illustrate how modern universities separate the religious from the secular.

This separation in the OU is particularly interesting, and specialized literature on this theme—also contrasting European and non-European examples—is easily accessible. Although describing the conditions under which the English Christian Church and the OU have separated is outside the scope of this article, comparing the Brazilian and English experiences indicates some contemporary bonds, objectified in everyday practices common to the reproduction of the OU and the Oxford Anglican Church, which accommodate the University's worldview in the dominant Christian cosmology.

This brief discussion on some aspects of the relation between the religious and secular in the daily routine of OU is a first effort to systemize the data collected during field work and reserved because of their contrast with university experiences I had in Brazil, Mozambique, and South Africa. Observations that could have stayed scattered in the field notebooks, were it not for me discovering the English amulets and charms collection and, as a result, having revisited the polemic about witchcraft in the 1940s. From this first organization, I intend to raise initial questions about biased silences in knowledge production.

From the point of view of a Brazilian researcher, graduated in secular, public and gratuity universities, attending OU, secular but private, was an everyday experience of strangeness.

OU increasing privatization, since Margaret Thatcher's government, is shocking. Different from Brazil, where any visitor interested in reading documents or books—or simply visiting the library environment—can access the building and its digital databases, library consultation in the impressive and rich libraries of the OU is paid for.

However, the greatest point of contrast is in the forms of separation between the secular and the religious. Christian signs, images, sounds, practices, and concepts are mixed with the day-by-day of the OU and the city surrounding it.

First, we must recognize that a considerable part of the buildings that constitute the OU are inherited from the first Christian colleges—at least since the 13th century—, origin of the English higher education.

In the modern period, when the university was implementing a secular curriculum in existing courses or creating new ones—such as Anthropology—, a bible-selling campaign was carried out to raise funds to finish constructing the buildings that, articulated, guard the collections of the Natural History Museum and the PRM—still presented, respectively, as a collection of objects made by God and a collection of objects made by man.

Classrooms, academic seminars, and university life operate today in many pre-modern buildings. Images and hagiography occupy, with pomp, classrooms, corridors, halls, bedrooms, dining rooms, refectories, and other living spaces.

In 2016, the prestigious *Evans-Pritchard lecture* took place in the noble hall of All Souls College, built in 1430. OU, as other medieval colleges, have one among the many chapels that offer daily religious services and receives frequent visits from students, the local Christian population, and tourists.

The bells of different churches of the group of colleges ring day after day, also the organs regulating students' routines and guiding the city surrounding the university<sup>18</sup>. Sport practices and healthcare take place in church halls; charity stores are spread throughout the city; healthy and education agents (doctors, psychologists, educators, musicians, social workers, art educators) are employed by Christian associations.

The city's streets, bridges, and buildings hold names of patron-saints of academic and non-academic institutions. Many people know the saints' biography and tell them without any embarrassment.

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18. The call to religious services in Oxford often led me to the sound of the organ that called for religious services, just when Virginia Woolf (1985) cursed the "famous library" in those two days in 1928 that preceded the preparation of *A room of one's own*.

For a Brazilian, visiting an Anglican church is strange in many aspects. All of them keep saints' images and other devotion objects—rosaries, paintings, furniture, etc.—that, at a first glance, give the impression of being in a Catholic church. The vicars explain that the catholic saints were appropriated in the 16th century, when the Anglican church occupied the buildings, lands and other possessions of the Roman church. Other saints from other churches represent Anglican history, between the 14th and 19th centuries.

These aspects, observed in 2016, reminded me of Murray's appeal for registering and studying the "strange facts, beliefs and costumes" that comprised the *Undiscovered England* in the 1940s. To the point where practices I observed while conducting my field-research outside the PRM, at first disconnected fragments, began to take shape inside a Christian cosmology, even though they seemed to remain unnoticed in the daily life of the OU and its surrounding city.

#### 4. OTHER AMULETS AND CHARMS: ON CRITICISMS OF THE COLLECTION OF WHAT IS INSIDE

In Brazil, Mozambique, India, and South Africa, where I studied and researched before Oxford, people often allude to the different beliefs about the communication and interaction between the living and the dead—such as the presence of spirits haunting places where violent deaths occurred.

But I was surprised when I began to find, as illustrated in the following photo (*Figure 2*), objects related to communicating with the dead in the city of Oxford, in 2016.



FIGURE 2  
Tribute Flower  
on the sidewalk  
tree in front  
of the Natural  
History Museum  
building that  
holds the PRM.

Flowers deposited in a tree before the OU Museum of Natural History, which houses the PRM collection, are among the many testimonials of an Oxfordian popular practice. *Tribute flowers*, as it is called, is the practice of putting flowers, teddy bears, letters, drinks, candies, candles, clothes of victims of violent death (car accidents or murders). It is a form of communicating—hopping to, through these objects, tell the dead to rest in peace.

The picture illustrates the unusual situation I found myself in. After all, it exhibits amulets and charms living inside and outside the PRM currently. Other pictures show flowers, letters, teddy bears, t-shirts, football hats, drinks, and sweets on streets where car accidents with death occurred; others show tributes on the banks of the River Thames for drowning victims, or even on the railing of the city's police stations. I found similar objects before two residences where murder crimes occurred, during the period I lived in the city.

In May 2016, when I presented the partial results of my research at the Same/OU research seminar, professor David Zeitlyn commented that the *tribute flowers* became popular when Lady Di died. Nevertheless, this practice suggests that in present Oxford—as in Maputo, São Paulo, Diu, Durban—beliefs and practices of communicating with dead exist. I imagined myself in the 1940s, while EP decreed the inexistence of witchcraft in England to explain his difficulty of being like a Zande.



FIGURE 3i  
Tribute Flower  
on Park Road,  
between the  
PRM and the  
University Parks.



FIGURES 3ii and 3iii  
Detail of Tribute  
Flower on  
Iffley Road.

For some researchers, whether in Oxford or São Paulo, this finding on the contemporaneity of practices and designs of amulets and charms in Oxford may seem naive. Indeed, as Comaroff and Comaroff (1992, 25) state:

in our essays as we follow colonizers of different kinds from the metropole to Africa and back, it became clear that the culture of capitalism has always been shot through with its own magicalities and forms of enchantment, all of which repay analysis. Like the nineteenth century evangelists who accused the London poor of strange and savage customs [...] Marx insisted on understanding commodities as objects of primitive worship, as fetishes.

As such, neither the astonishment nor ingenuity interest more than investigate such relations. For this ongoing research, two aspects are in focus: first, identifying traces of the relation between Christianity and knowledge production inside the University; second, investigating present practices and conceptions about amulets and charms in the city of Oxford, to access evidence of different versions of reality, truth, and knowledge production.

It was by Raymond Williams's novel *Second generation* (1965), that I accessed one of the terms that expresses conflicts over reality in Oxford. Williams described aspects of this difference situating the relation between the world of the University and the world of Oxford migrant workers: "If you stand, today, in Between Towns Road, you can see either way: west to the spires and towers of the cathedral and colleges; east to the yards and sheds of the motor works. You see different worlds, but there is no frontier between them, there is only the movement and traffic of a single city."

It was the relationships I established in choir groups on the east side of Between Towns Road that enabled me to investigate aspects of popular Christianity in the city; that linked contemporary amulets and charms spread throughout the city with those kept in the PRM, providing important clues about the present use of amulets and charms in Oxford. As I detailed the experiences from my systematic participation in these singing groups in a previous article<sup>19</sup>, here I highlight some of its aspects related to ethnography with singing groups—which I had already experienced studying Gujarati with Hindus in Mozambique—, which understands musical performance as a tool that assists in the use of language, brings people together and provides opportunities for carrying out an event that relies on common efforts.

Attending singing practices allowed me to know and live with workers from low-income sectors of the city<sup>20</sup>—people who had never visited the PRM, generally confirming George Stocking Jr's observation (1985, 10), in the 1980s, about the frequency of such museums:<sup>21</sup> "Museum audience are today predominantly white, upper-middle class and above average in education."

19. During the six months I stayed in the city, I sang in two community choirs and in a community group of singers: The Oxford City Singers in the Anglican church of St Michel of North's Gate; the Blackbird choir at Blackbird Leys Community Centre; and The Singing Group at Ark T, in the Baptist church John Bunyan Baptiste. The last two groups used to meet beyond the city limits, after Between Road, in the Black Bird Leys worker's district.

20. In 2019, Leys News Paper published a debate around the data that shows that life expectancy in Black Bird Leys is 15 years lower than the life expectancy of the region around the University. Leys News, Issue158. Oct-Nov, 2019 (<http://www.communitymediagroup.org.uk/publication-info.asp?id=5>).

21. All PRM staff are Oxford graduates—three of them PhD's in Anthropology—except those in the cleaning sector and general services (including a Brazilian worker with an Italian passport who lives in Oxford for 16 years).

In the singing groups I made acquaintance with men and women, white and black, who are descended from: 1) English migrants, whose trajectory relates to the history of Oxford's automotive industry—specially between the 1930s and 1960s—and came from poor regions of the United Kingdom, such as Ireland and northern England; 2) Caribbean migrants who arrived in the same period (Williams 1965, Harrell-Bond 1967, Newbigging 2000, Harvey 2001, Attlee 2009).

Today they work as cooks and cleaners in the colleges, as well as in primary and secondary schools; many are retired or unemployed from the remaining automotive sector, with some working at BMW, the only company still in the region. There are also supermarket cashiers, clothing, and shoe store vendors, among other unskilled workers.

From the residents of Black Bird Leys I learned about contemporary charms and charms. Provoked by their unfamiliarity with the PRM, I organized a presentation for one of the singing groups at the museum; after, we visited the collection of English amulets and charms and discussed their contemporary uses and meanings.

Mediators between good and evil, peacemakers, protectors, producers of harm and benefits, intermediaries between the living and the dead—the amulets and charms of the PRM's English collection commented by Oxford residents, who ignored their existence, refer to a contemporary debate on different versions of reality, truth and knowledge production.

Interacting with the east side of Between Towns Road showed me tensions of this unique city, while indicating contemporary tensions in knowledge production. One of the tensions refer to a debate raised by Fonseca (2004) and Fabian (1986), authors who broached the anthropologists' disinterest in studying popular groups in urban contexts. The social practices of residents from the outskirts of Porto Alegre, in southern Brazil, were rarely analysed as part of a tradition of the subaltern experience they inherited from slave society. Similarly, Fabian points out that the social practices of miners in Kinshasa, capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo, were taken with disinterest by anthropologists who saw them as detribalized Africans or Africans not yet fully modernized.

It occurs, suggested Fabian and Fonseca, that these groups' social practices are not simply responses to emergency needs; they have a history that, when investigated, disrupts the explanations produced about these practices and about the practices and practitioners who study them. Following this discussion, my research—which began looking for answers in the anthropological research of ethnographic museums on the agency of objects from ex-colonial societies displayed there—ended

up with a new question: how anthropology, as a field of knowledge, allows itself to be affected by ideas and practices that challenge its understanding? How anthropology deals with what Overing (1985) called “diversity of right and conflicting versions”?

##### **5. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS: ON ETHNOMUSICOLOGY AND THE CRITICISM OF HEGEMONIES**

This article aimed to show that the PRM research team has been offering complex answers when dealing with their collection of amulets and charms from ex-colonized societies. These societies, organized in instances now recognized by ex-colonial European metropolises, present other narratives about these objects and require appropriate practices for their safeguard and display.

In contrast, the article suggest that another relation is established regarding the amulets and charms of English society itself: discovered only recently, the PRM team recognizes the significant presence of these objects in the collection, producing relevant research and debates, but prioritizing their past life.

English amulets and charms, different from those of ex-colonized societies, are considered dead since their arrival at the PRM in the first half of the last century. Since their users are also presumed dead, there is no institution, practice or person presenting these amulets and charms—and their contemporary counterparts, scattered throughout the city streets—with a different narrative. It were experiences on the work field, beyond museum and university walls, that allowed me to observe and live with a practice and a narrative about the life of contemporary amulets and charms.

Naturally, different research procedures—in this case literature review, observation of the museum’s routine, study of pieces, etc.—contributed to the reflections presented here; but my initiation into ethnographic research with Claudia Fonseca at UFRGS led me to value the crucial role of sharing ordinary routine activities. Choir singing—which requires a collective effort to sing, correctly and in unison, all the words and notes—offers touching opportunities for the research. The communities of singers and choirs were spaces to sing and enchant with people who allowed me to experience other versions of truth, reality, and knowledge production in the city of Oxford.

The data and reflections presented here do not intend to detail the relationship between the singing groups and the research as a whole, but rather to show how this ethnography with singing groups in the city of Oxford constructs its argument, allowing me to access a recent

reflection about the museum and an update of an old debate (*gown and town*), evidencing conflicting views on reality, objectivity and knowledge production. I started from this experience not to examine it in its various aspects but to broach the articulation between the secular and religious domains in knowledge production.

Recover knowledge production in Brazil brings relevant critical issues to close the text. Claudia Fonseca (2004), in her article “Alteridade e sociedade de classes” published in *Família, fofoca e honra*, suggests that among the reasons which lead Brazilian anthropology to prioritize the categories of race and gender—in detriment of class—is the position occupied by the country’s intellectual elites, which inequality rates place alongside South Africa, Mozambique and India, in opposition to United Kingdom. According to the author, the Brazilian intellectual elites avoid confrontation and criticism about their class position—an issue that has worried me, especially since I started teaching in the neighbourhood of Pimentas, on the outskirts of greater São Paulo.

In São Paulo, my university colleagues and I know that the fate of our children is different from those who increase the death statistics in the peripheries. Every day, hundreds of young people between the ages of 15 and 25 are murdered on the outskirts of São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Salvador (Feltran 2004), but they are not directly related to me or my university colleagues. In Oxford, although the children of east Between Towns Road no longer frequent the OU—as with the character of William’s novel, belonging to the second generation of poor migrants of the United Kingdom that came to Oxford between the 1930s and 1950s—, they are not targeted by traffic and police.

As such, English professors and researchers seem to live more similarly to east Between Towns Road residents than most Brazilian professors and researchers of public universities in relation to residents of the Brazilian peripheries. However, such intellectual elites in Oxford, as intellectual elites in Brazil—to which we belong—often take their cosmology, life experience and ideas and practices about the world as objectively given. There as well as here—insofar as we assume the knowledge we produce as neutral, devoid of morality, ideologies, beliefs and value judgments—, we take as enchanted those knowledges and perceptions of the world different from our own parameters.

Our attitude towards the enchantment of the other loses sight of the enchantment involved in constructing and reproducing the world of goods of which we participate in and of which we occupy a privileged position. By naturalizing this position, we get used to defining understandings different from ours as fetishists, uninformed, not objective, preventing research and experimenting alternative ways of producing meaning and knowledge.

In this article, I aimed to organize my research data to reflect on problems I faced in the research field with interlocutors from inside and outside the university walls, having them both as contemporaries in research and data publication. To what extent can we produce knowledge that describes and analyses objects, practices and cosmologies that remain alive—and not museum objects—, practices and cosmologies of the illustrated dominant strata of our ex-colonial and ex-metropolitan societies?

The research carried out in Oxford expanded beyond the boundaries of the museum and reinserted the question into a broader reflection on the relations between the production of anthropological knowledge and the silences that support the political position of knowledge production and hegemonic discourses. The literature, still to be reviewed, and the systematization of data, still to be done, will assist in constructing a more refined reflection.

**TRANSLATION**  
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de Brito Lopes  
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