



# The Power of objects:

Materiality  
Forms  
Ritual Action



Ethnographers, whether their research results in producing texts or in curating museum collections, seem to share an interest in material artifacts whose symbolic and social functions might be easier to describe than to find their common denominator. Among such artifacts, some are written about as ritual, magical, or power objects, or "idols," "relics," and "fetishes," and given, by the cultures that create them, specific names: *agalмата* and *xoana* in ancient Greece, *churinga* in Australia, *boli* and *basi* among the Mande, etc. Others might, despite the strangeness of their power, pass almost unnoticed, like so many materials consecrated by the early Christians, for example, or as certain objects and substances used both within religious contexts and in everyday life as well. Indeed, in analyzing rites, one may observe an ordinary knife becoming the instrument for sacrifices, water the liquid for ablutions, a pan the indispensable receptacle for the communal meal, and a shirt the outfit for the priest. Truly great, then, is the number of elements necessary for the transformation of the universe, for the transition from the day-to-day into this different realm, which is generally saturated with religious meanings. In this realm and in the spaces of transition, things seem to possess more power than a reasonable mind would normally allocate to them. What makes them so potent and how do they attain such a status? How are these powerful artifacts produced? And how exactly does one manipulate or interact with them in order to affect such a transformation?

The aim of this conference is to reinvigorate the discussion of these topics, debated for such a long time by anthropologists and historians of religion, through confrontation of the historical and ethnographic data with new theoretical frames that may well help to formulate new conclusions. These insights point toward four main axes of interrogation upon which the participants will be invited to further elaborate, thus opening the way for comparisons:

1. The importance of context, particularly of the ritual frame, for the staging/ production of the power object. To what extent does the object's potency depend upon the effectiveness of the ritual in which it is used, and its cognitive and relational specificity? To what extent is it independent of any ritual situation?
2. The role that aesthetic factors play in the construction of the objects' efficacy: the influence of certain forms soliciting an enchantment or to the contrary, cognitive troubling, intimidation inspired by the splendor of the performance or the abundance of rich material. In this last respect, the choices surely rely on culturally pre-existent hierarchies. Yet, more than symbols of some political or metaphysical power aren't aesthetic forms its crystallization or means indispensable to achieve it?
3. The significance of figuration: both mimetic accuracy as well as voluntary distortions guiding the act of representation towards hybrid combinations that figure the monstrous or towards an absolute aniconicity. Does such aniconicity suggest, as certain authors argue, that the power of the objects lies in their irreducible "thing-ness"? What, then, could be said about the role of anthropomorphism?
4. Recognition by social actors of the personhood or agency of objects leading to the denunciation of the inconsistency of all binary categorizations (object/subject; substance/object, surface/volume; animate/inanimate; thing/concept, matter/idea, etc.).

All the aforementioned topics, which partially overlap, will be addressed within an interdisciplinary (anthropology, art history, and history) and comparative (Africa, the Americas, Asia, Australia, medieval and modern Europe, and Antiquity) framework which should permit a confrontation of various theoretical and methodological viewpoints with diversified field and historical material. As a result of sharing our research and 'thinking together through things', we expect the emergence of new hypotheses in respect to the types of objects et substances under discussion and of the eventual sources of their power.

#### Scientific Committee:

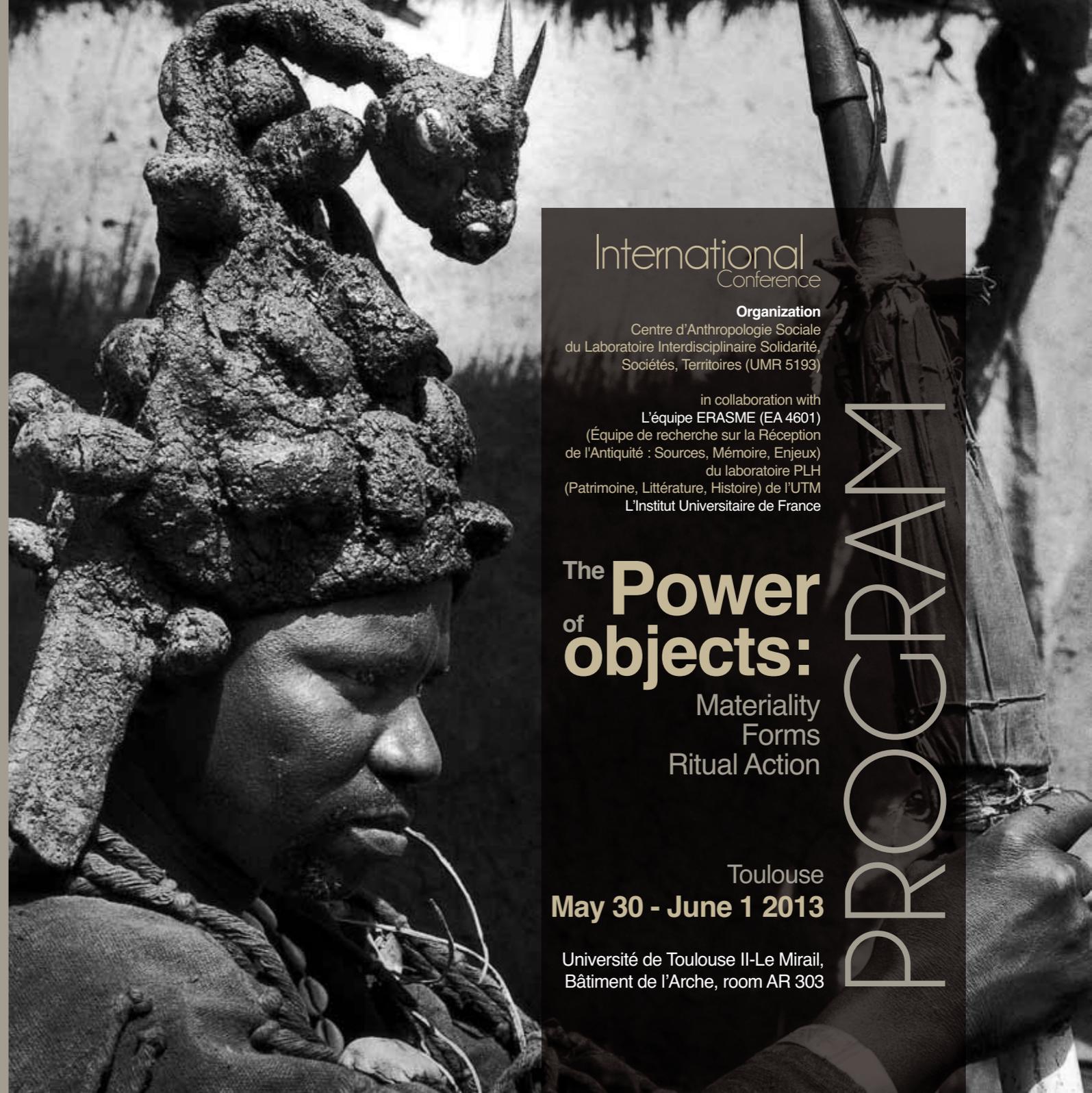
Jean-Pierre Albert (CAS-LISST), Corinne Bonnet (PLH-ERASME/IUF),  
Adeline Grand-Clément (PLH-ERASME), Agnès Kedzierska-Manzon (CAS-LISST)

<http://w3.lisst.univ-tlse2.fr/colloques/colloques.htm>

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## International Conference

#### Organization

Centre d'Anthropologie Sociale  
du Laboratoire Interdisciplinaire Solidarité,  
Sociétés, Territoires (UMR 5193)

in collaboration with

L'équipe ERASME (EA 4601)

(Équipe de recherche sur la Réception  
de l'Antiquité : Sources, Mémoire, Enjeux)  
du laboratoire PLH  
(Patrimoine, Littérature, Histoire) de l'UTM  
L'Institut Universitaire de France

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Toulouse

May 30 - June 1 2013

Université de Toulouse II-Le Mirail,  
Bâtiment de l'Arche, room AR 303

PROGRAM



# The Power of objects: Materiality Forms Ritual Action

## Thursday, May 30th

14:00 – 15:00 pm

Opening of the Conference:  
Vice-Dean of the Scientific Counsel  
of the University of Toulouse Le Mirail  
The welcome speech and presentation of the program:  
**Agnès Kedzierska Manzon** (CAS-LISST)

Slideshow of the photographs  
"Tradi-praticiens et objets de culte au Mali, Burkina Faso et Bénin"  
by **Agnès Pataux**, independent photographer

15:15 – 18:15 pm

### PANEL # 1

#### Humans and Things: Bodies and Matter

discussion moderated by  
Marlène Albert-Llorca (UTM, CAS-LISST)  
and Jonathan F. Walz (Rollins College, Winter Park, FL, USA)

**Catherine J. Allen** (GWU, Washington DC, USA)  
*Stones Who Love Me: Dimensionality, Enclosure, and Petrification  
in Andean Culture*

**Marika Moisseeff** (EHESS, LAS)  
*Churinga and Bodies as Exemplary Ritual Objects*

**Agnès Kedzierska-Manzon** (CAS-LISST)  
*Life Matters: Or (Mande) Fetishes and Their Need for Blood*

## Friday, May 31st

9:00 am – 12:00 pm

### PANEL # 2

#### Effectiveness: Esthetics and Politics of (Post)Modernity

discussion moderated by Anne Bouchy (EFEO, CAS-LISST)  
and Lotten Gustafsson (Museum of Ethnography, Stockholm,  
Sweden)

**Jean-Paul Colleyn** (EHESS, CEAF)

*The de facto Strength of Things*

**Michael Houseman** (EPHE, CEMAF)

*Why Are the Material Aspects of New Age and Neo-Pagan Ceremonial  
so Kitsch and Contrived?*

**Sally Promey** (Yale University, USA)

*Material Objects and Spiritual Sensations in Hawaii Volcanoes  
National Park*

Lunch break

14:00 – 18:00 pm

### PANEL # 3

#### Effectiveness 2: Where Does Power Come From?

discussion moderated by Corinne Bonnet (PLH-ERASME, UTM)  
and Pierre-Antoine Fabre (EHESS)

**Anne-Caroline Rendu Loisel** (Université de Genève)

*Voice and Radiance of Mighty Copper in a Ritual of Ancient  
Mesopotamia*

**Adeline Grand-Clément** (PLH-ERASME, UTM)

*Colors, Rituals, and Religious Norms in Ancient Greece*

**Cécile Guillaume** (Queen's University of Belfast, UK)

*Healing, Charming, or Killing: The Power of regam among  
the Soras (A Tribe from Central Eastern India)*

**Jean-Pierre Albert** (EHESS, CAS-LISST)

*The Roman Catholic Eucharist and the Host: from Virtually Nothing  
to Infinity (and Back)*

## Saturday June 1st

9:00 am – 12:00 pm

### PANEL # 4

#### Transcendence and Immanence: Concepts and Things

discussion moderated by Marine Carrin (CNRS, LISST-CAS)  
and Harald Tambs-Lyche (Université de Picardie, LISST-CAS)

**Webb Keane** (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, USA)

*Rotting bodies: Semiotic ideologies in conflict*

**Morten Axel Pedersen** (University of Copenhagen, Denmark)

*Unthinking Things: Keeping Spirits Avisible in Northern Mongolia*

**Martin Holbraad** (University College London, UK)

*On pragmatology: from things to concepts*

Lunch break

14:30 – 15:00 pm

Performance "Objets à fables" by **François Grand-Clément**

15:00 – 16:30 pm

Closing session

Roundtable of all the panelists

discussion moderated by Jean-Pierre Albert (EHESS, CAS-  
LISST)

