

COMMODITIZING CULTURE: THE PRODUCTION, EXCHANGE, AND CONSUMPTION OF *COURO VEGETAL* FROM THE BRAZILIAN AMAZON¹



Hevea brasiliensis

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Many communities strive to increase incomes in the global economy by commoditizing their culture. They do this by selling traditional crafts and clothing imbued with cultural meanings, and performing traditional dances and rituals for tourists. This article, based on the theoretical work of Marcel Mauss and anthropological studies of gifts, commodity exchange, and consumption examines how forest communities in the Brazilian Amazon, with the assistance of “cultural brokers,” use the World Wide Web to market culture-imbued products fashioned from latex extracted from rubber trees. It argues that by providing potential consumers with details of extractor livelihoods, including productive activities and rituals, and their sustainable use of the forest, cultural brokers facilitate developing social bonds between buyers and Amazon extractors. This suggests that businesses can play an important role in helping communities add cultural value to products; however, these global marketers must ensure that communities understand the socio-economic and cultural changes that market activities can bring, and prepare them to administer operations and growth. (Amazon, commoditization, consumption, sustainable development, economic anthropology)

Anthropology has made important contributions to understanding the social meanings of exchange from early pre-capitalist to present-day communities operating in a market economy. Of early studies, Malinowski’s (1961[1922]:85) on the Trobriand Islanders and the Kula ring demonstrated the social importance of ritual gift exchange, “bind[ing] into couples some thousands of individuals” from different tribes into a permanent “lifelong relationship” while facilitating exchange of useful trade items. In *The Gift*, Marcel Mauss (1967) revealed the social meaning imbued in gift objects in Maori exchange, and the reciprocal relationship, the *hau* or spirit of the gift that gift giving creates. These, among other studies (e.g., Bohannan 1955; Polanyi 1957; Sahlins 1972) unveiled the social and cultural aspects of exchange relations that macroeconomic interpretations of economic activity, focusing on rational, profit-maximizing behavior, ignored.

As the capitalist economy penetrates into social life across the globe, social scientists continue to contribute to a critical examination of how the market economy may be shaping local socioeconomic relationships and culture. Marxist

and political economic inquiry (Cook 1985; Hopkins 1978; Littlefield 1978; Littlefield and Gates 1991; Wolf 1997) have examined how capitalist development structures local relations of production. Conversely, Blanton et al. (1997:x) called attention to not only “how the global affects the local, [but to] how extralocal linkages are developed and manipulated by local people for their own ends.” This suggests that individuals and communities are not passive recipients of global economic processes but engage them in creative ways.

As communities and households struggle to adapt to market forces, many are attempting to harness them. One way they engage the market economy is through commoditization of their culture. This is carried out through the production and marketing of traditional objects, such as pottery, cloth, clothing, and indigenous arts that are imbued with social and cultural meaning (Bayly 1986; Hendrickson 1995; Hoskins 1989; Spooner 1986; Weiner and Schneider 1989), and performing traditional dances and rituals for tourists (Canclini 1993; Krystal 2000; Stronza 2000). Commoditizing cultural traditions might be considered both a means to improve socioeconomic conditions (Eber and Rosenbaum 1993; Healy and Zorn 1994; Little 2000; Swain 1989) and to reinforce or recover cultural knowledge and traditions (Carlsen 1993; Goff 1994; Hiwasaki 2000; Krystal 2000; Nash 1993; Salvador 1976; Ware 2003), including languages (Bernard 1997) and ethnic identity (Deitch 1989; Linnekin 1997). By harnessing what Kley Meyer (1994:32) calls “cultural energy” at the local level, communities could gain greater control of production and marketing activities (Healy and Zorn 1994; Ryerson 1976; Stephen 1991), as well as reassert their cultural identity within new cultural and economic realities (Hoard 2001; Korovkin 1998; Stephen 1993, 1991; van den Berghe 1995; Geismar 2005; but see Canclini 1993; Greenwood 1989; MacCannell 1984; and Waterbury 1989) and reclaim disappearing traditions (Nason 1984).

This article examines how rainforest communities in the Brazilian Amazon are engaging the global economy in new ways, bringing their histories and livelihoods into consumer households through marketing their products and culture by means of the World Wide Web. Rubber tappers and indigenous peoples in the Southwest Brazilian Amazon have teamed-up with Couro Vegetal da Amazonia S.A. (CVA), a business based in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, to produce *couro vegetal* (“vegetable leather”), a rubberized fabric made from rubber-tree latex using traditional technologies, which is then used to make handbags, briefcases, diaries, and even high-fashion clothes. Products are marketed under the Treetap[®] trademark to tourist and business travelers at airport shops and over the internet. To market Treetap[®] products, CVA makes reference to and uses images of indigenous and rubber tapper cultures, and emphasizes their role in the sustainable development of the Amazon rainforest. The present study demonstrates not only how cultural objects can be commoditized, but also reveals the role of CVA,

the cultural broker, in facilitating the development of social bonds between buyers and Amazon extractors by bringing couro vegetal products, and rainforest cultures, to consumers worldwide. It argues that through the use of the World Wide Web and developing business partnerships, communities can engage the global economy in new ways. It also cautions the organizations and companies that act as intermediaries between communities and consumers to prepare communities to manage and administer their enterprises, and to help them harness the benefits that market engagement might bring. Cultural brokers must also consider the potential social, cultural, and economic changes within communities that commoditizing culture might entail.

This essay first considers notable theoretical works in economic anthropology that inform our understanding of the commoditization of culture. It then examines the CVA website through these theoretical lenses, particularly that of Carrier (1995, 1990), on the relationship between the seller and consumer and the role of Internet advertising in shaping this relationship. Carrier argues that companies invoke the image of the gift in commodities with advertising as a means to assist consumers to “appropriate” them as possessions. His examples of catalogue advertising show how advertisers bestow the symbolism of the initial maker, designer, or seller on the object being sold, which is how CVA uses the World Wide Web to market couro vegetal products from the Amazon.

THE SPIRIT OF THE GIFT

In examining the custom of gift exchange in archaic, or pre-capitalist, societies in Melanesia, Polynesia, and the American Northwest, Mauss (1967) argued that the institution of gift exchange in past systems, rather than a product of rational economic action of individuals, involved a “moral transaction” that carried social meaning and was part of a larger social system that wove individuals and groups together in personal relationships (Evans-Pritchard 1967:ix; Mauss 1967:3). Mauss’s (1967) discussion of the Maori and the obligation created by gift giving is the essence of his argument. When an object (*taonga*) is given, it is given without bargaining or a price. The receiver of this object may give it to another person. This third person may then decide to give an object in repayment for this gift, and thereby gives a *taonga* in return. Mauss explains that this *taonga* is the *hau* the spirit of the gift that was given. Therefore, the receiver of the *hau* must return it to its source, the original giver (Mauss 1967:8–10). If it is not returned by the receiver to the original giver, a Maori proverb states that *taonga* have the power to “destroy” the receiver. Returning the gift gives greater power and authority to the return giver (Mauss 1967:8–9).

For Mauss (1967), gift exchange creates a personal bond between giver and receiver. What has been given and received is the “nature and substance” of the

individual or group; “. . . to give something is to give a part of oneself . . . while to receive something is to receive a part of someone’s spiritual essence” (1967:10). “[S]piritual bond[s]” are developed “between things which are to some extent parts of persons, and persons and groups that behave in some measure as if they were things” (1967:11). Therefore, it is not just things being given away and repaid, but persons (and cultures) that circulate as well. Gifts are inalienable from givers. This is why the hau must be returned to the giver, not just because it is dangerous, but because “[i]t is alive and often personified, and strives to bring to its original clan and homeland some equivalent to take its place” (Mauss 1967:10).

Mauss viewed exchange as passing through stages, beginning with “total prestations” found in pre-capitalist societies, where gift exchange between clans, tribes, and families was obligatory, to modern societies where exchange is one of contracts and property rights. Modern society is characterized by a “marked distinction . . . between things and persons” and “[t]his distinction is fundamental; it is the very condition of part of our system of property, alienation, and exchange” (Mauss 1967:46). The economy and social institutions in modern societies are no longer a whole, but separate parts. Mauss argued for a return of economic man as a “calculating machine” back through the stages of exchange from whence we have passed, where moral obligations exist among transactors, because “[t]he mere pursuit of individual ends is harmful to the ends and peace of the whole, to the rhythm of its work and pleasures, and hence in the end to the individual” (Mauss 1967:74–75).

GIFTS AND COMMODITIES

While Mauss’s seminal work provided a critical understanding of the social relationships, the “spiritual bonds” embedded in exchange and how they vary under different exchange systems, more recently anthropologists have taken a closer look at gift and commodity economies and re-examined this distinction, arguing for a more complex and dynamic understanding. For example, Gregory (1982), echoing Mauss, distinguishes commodity exchange from gift exchange, noting that “commodity exchange establishes a relationship between the objects exchanged, whereas gift exchange establishes a relationship between the subjects,” i.e., a relationship between individuals (Gregory 1982:19). Gift transactors, givers, and receivers are interested in the “personal relationships that the exchange of gifts creates” (a qualitative relationship), “not the things themselves” (a quantitative relationship) (Gregory 1982:19, 41). He argues that in gift exchange, the inalienability of the object from owner can become so strong that “things” become anthropomorphized, or personified (Gregory 1982:45). Yet,

Gregory (1982:117) also suggests the existence of an “‘ambiguous’ economy,” where gifts become commodities and vice-versa.

Following Mauss (1967) and Gregory (1982), Carrier (1995) retraces the themes of inalienability and identity, and the obligations of transactors created with gift exchange, and the alienation of object from person associated with commodity exchange. His main contribution is in how people and objects interact, i.e., how people think about themselves and the objects they transact, and the different set of social relations that are developed through transactions, particularly the growing alienation of persons and objects due to industrialization.

[T]he spread of industrial and commercial capitalism has meant the spread of alienated relations and objects. This spread, however, has not done away with people’s need to have their objects be possessions, nor has it abolished the need to transact possessions in personal relationships. Rather, in some ways it has made that need more urgent. At the same time, however, the spread of capitalism has made it more difficult to fulfill that need, for one of its consequences has been that most of the objects that people confront are commodities, inappropriate for transactions in personal relations. (Carrier 1995:11)

He suggests to better understand the need to “appropriate” objects in the age of industrialization, it is necessary to look closer at the life of things through production, exchange, and consumption; the circulation of objects, how people interact with them, and in particular, the role of different actors in facilitating the appropriation of objects by consumers.

Carrier (1995) identifies various factors that influence the appropriation of an object. One is the object itself: “Does it have a history, and is that history interesting?” (1995:111). Appropriation is a dynamic process: “When people share or transact objects, their understanding of the object interacts with their understanding of the relationship, strengthening or weakening it, modifying or reproducing people’s understandings of each other in their relationship and of the objects involved” (Carrier 1995:8).

The growing alienation of people from things under capitalism has led to the need for people to appropriate commodities and make them possessions. Thus, “shopping is not simply [a] mechanical process . . . [but] . . . where people shop and the ways they shop can be important for changing those things from impersonal commodities to possessions that embody the shopper’s identity and location in a web of personal relationships” (Carrier 1995:15). Appropriation may take two forms: appropriation of the object—making the object personal, requiring that “the purchaser works directly, albeit symbolically on the object,” and appropriation of the relationship—redefining the relationship between buyer and seller, making an anonymous relationship personal (Carrier 1995:120). In his examination of catalogue shopping, advertisers assist the consumer in the

appropriation process by imbuing the object with the symbolism of the maker, designer, seller, or other potential users. If the consumer is able to accept this relationship, or identity, objects become less impersonal and are more easily appropriated (Carrier 1995:127). This is important, for it points out how marketers or cultural brokers can help consumers develop, strengthen, or rethink their relationships with commodities.

THE SOCIAL LIFE OF THINGS

Discussing the trajectory of things, Appadurai (1986) notes that “even though from a *theoretical* point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a *methodological* point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context” (1986:5). In a like manner, Kopytoff (1986) considers the “cultural biography” of a thing by looking at an object “as a culturally constructed entity, endowed with culturally specific meanings, and classified and reclassified into culturally constituted categories” (Kopytoff 1986:68). Questions about that biography might be, “Where does the thing come from and who made it? What has been its career so far, and what do people consider to be an ideal career for such things?” (Kopytoff 1986:66). The answers to such questions reveal the social life of an object, and its changing meanings. Appadurai (1986) moves beyond the gift-commodity dichotomy, what he calls the “exaggeration and reification of the contrast between gift and commodity in anthropology writing” (1986:11), and suggests the need to look for “the commodity potential of all things” (1986:13). He argues that an object might be in one state in one situation and in a commodity state in another, hence his concern with a “*total* trajectory” of a thing “from production through exchange/distribution, to consumption” (Appadurai 1986:13).

Moving from the theoretical to the methodological, Appadurai considers the “commodity situation” in the social life of a thing “*the situation in which its exchangeability (past, present, or future) for some other thing is its socially relevant feature*” (Appadurai 1986:13). The commodity situation has three components: (1) the commodity phase of a thing’s social life, which carries the idea “that things can move in *and* out of the commodity state” (Appadurai 1986:13), and is related to what Kopytoff refers to as a thing’s cultural biography or life history (Kopytoff 1986:14–15); (2) the commodity candidacy of a thing, which “refers to the standards and criteria . . . that define the exchangeability of things in any particular social and historical context” (Appadurai 1986:14); and (3) the commodity context, being the “variety of *social* arenas within or between *cultural* units, that help link the commodity candidacy of a thing to the commodity phase of its career” (Appadurai 1986:15).

A focus on the trajectory of things is best accentuated by Appadurai's "paths" and "diversions," the temporal aspects of the social life of things and how commodities that move along "socially regulated paths" may be shifted from their paths by "competitively inspired diversions" (Appadurai 1986:17). These diversions may be products of entrepreneurship or economic or aesthetic crisis. For example, during an economic crisis a family may sell a once protected heirloom. An example of the "aesthetics of decontextualization" might be the diversion of tools or articles of "the other" taken out of their commodity state and placed in museums or in the homes of private collectors (Appadurai 1986:28). The path-diversion relationship is "historical and dialectical," with diversions "becoming new paths, paths that will in turn inspire new diversions or returns to old paths" (Appadurai 1986:29). Thus Appadurai (1986) and Kopytoff (1986) argue for understanding the commodity as a dynamic thing, defined by contexts and histories, and embedded in and directed by social relationships.

CONSUMPTION AND COMMODITIES

Anthropologists have focused considerable attention on production processes in economic activity and until recently have given less emphasis to understanding consumption (Miller 1995, 1987), despite the importance of the latter due to the globalization of the world economy (Miller 1995). Douglas and Isherwood (1979:57) consider consumption as "the vital source of the culture of the moment" and "the very arena in which culture is fought over and licked into shape." Just as in tribal societies, where "rituals serve to contain the drift of meanings . . . consumption is a ritual process whose primary function is to make sense of the inchoate flux of events" (Douglas and Isherwood 1979:65). It is a system of classification, a "marking service" that classifies individuals and events and represents underlying patterns of social relations. Consumptive behavior occurs in patterns of "periodicities," with information being critical for inclusion or exclusion among consuming classes (Douglas and Isherwood 1979:115). Concomitantly, Philibert (1989) also examines the underlying patterns and classificatory schemes revealed through consumptive practices. He considers consumption as the "appropriation of meanings symbolized in the use of particular objects," and that "people consume according to a code of recognition, a semiotic chain invested in a (bound) series of objects" (Philibert 1989:64). Consumption can be viewed as a text of how "people speak about themselves in their consumption choices" (Philibert 1989:64).

Miller (1995, 1987) posits a theory of consumption based on the objectification of material culture: that it is through consumption that we re-socialize commodities (Miller 1995:143). Consumption is thus the "negation of the commodity" (Miller 1987:192) and a process through which an alienable

object becomes inalienable because “[t]he object is transformed by its intimate association with a particular individual or social group” (Miller 1987:191).

However, re-socialization of commodities has consequences. Ideology may be important in consumptive practices. The interests of a group of consumers can result in material culture constructed in its image, resulting in less powerful groups having “a lack of access to the means of objectification” (Miller (1987:205)—i.e., consumptive behavior. Also, mass consumption has the power to shape local production, particularly craft production, where foreign consumers influence production designs for ethnic art, clothing, handicrafts, dances, and rituals in styles and images. The problem then is that “[b]oth people and objects are then required to exemplify the stereotypes which have been constructed” (Miller 1987:123). MacCannell (1984:385) calls this “[r]econstructed ethnicity . . . the maintenance and preservation of ethnic forms for the entertainment of ethnically different others.” Once “located in a global network of interactions . . . [groups] begin to use their former colorful ways both as commodities to be bought and sold, and as rhetorical weaponry in their dealings with one another” (MacCannell 1984:385). What remains “is not just ethnicity anymore, but it is understood as rhetoric, as symbolic expression with a purpose or a use-value in a larger system” (MacCannell 1984:385). “Capitalist modernization” can “appropriate [traditional cultures], restructure them, [and] reorganize the meaning and function of their objects, beliefs, and practices” (Canclini 1993:viii). It appropriates not only economic surplus through putting-out systems and increased intensification of craft production, but also “the past of social groups that it oppresses . . . and turns objects into symbols, other people’s daily utensils into trophies that . . . vouch for the fact that their owner has a taste for the old and controls time and history” (Canclini 1993:82–83). “[C]rafts stop being part of peasant culture to become ‘folkloric’ appendages of the national and multinational capitalist system” (Canclini 1993:76). Fiestas are sustained by a dominant culture as “archaic pockets, conferring on them new functions and new contexts,” thus they “take away from Indian groups . . . space and meaning . . . the places and times . . . they have chosen for [the] remembrance or joy” they hold (Canclini 1993:103–104).

Similarly, Waterbury (1989:265) found that a growing tourist trade for embroidered blouses in San Antonino, Mexico, moved production from home to a putting-out system, resulting in a deterioration of quality, alienation of labor, and increased social inequality in the village. Blouses lost their symbolic significance within the community and were no longer given as wedding presents to symbolically join inter-marrying families. Greenwood (1989:176) suggests that the *Alarde* ritual festival, “an enactment of . . . ‘sacred history’” in the town of Fuenterrabia, Spain, that celebrates a victory over the French in 1638, had become so much of a tourist attraction that the townspeople no longer wanted to

participate in it. More recently, Fernando (2003:68–69) found that the commoditization of indigenous knowledge became controlled by outsiders, including those trying to be helpful, and warns against “the remarkable creative powers of capital to achieve its ends by not only destroying and homogenizing diverse systems of knowledge but also disciplining and managing their diversity according to its own imperative.” These scholars are concerned with the disruptive effects of the consumptive behavior of a capitalist economy on local community economic and socio-cultural systems, and warn of the transformative powers of capitalism to shape local practices. But what attracts consumers to indigenous art and crafts and culturally endowed products in general?

THE ATTRACTION OF THE “OTHER’S” CULTURE

Among studies that contribute to understanding the attraction of culturally imbued indigenous crafts and art of “the other,” Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981:79), find that objects in people’s lives define “who they are, who they have been, and who they wish to become.” People may “see possessions as extensions of themselves or as a personal record of their memories and experiences” and they may serve “as instruments for discovering and articulating personal values” (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981:84–85). Objects are valued for relationships and their meanings rather than material worth. (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981:84). Belk (1988:145) argues that “possessions can . . . symbolically extend self . . . that we can be a different person than we would be without them.” Possessing crafts may also allow capturing “the extended self of valued others,” the makers of the craft (Belk 1988:149).

As souvenirs, Gordon (1986:137) suggests that such objects are “a concrete reminder or tangible way of capturing or freezing a non- or extra-ordinary experience.” People collect souvenirs as they “feel the need to bring things home with them from the sacred, extraordinary time or space, for home is equated with ordinary, mundane time and space” (Gordon 1986:136). “Souvenirs function as metonymic signs...an actual piece of the whole,” and are “perceived as part of the history, essence, or experience of that location” (Gordon 1986:139). Handicrafts may be “perceived as products of exotic or different people” whether produced locally or from far away places (Gordon 1986:143).

Littrel (1990:234–41) identifies five categories of tourist consumers who search for indigenous textile crafts:

1. “Shopping Oriented Tourists” find meaning in going to exotic places to purchase objects and in meeting the craftspeople from whom they purchased items. Crafts might hold symbolic significance as a “trophy” earned from meeting the challenge of travel;

2. “Authenticity Seeking Tourists” who recount the history or “cultural symbolism” of their craft acquisitions, using terms such as “indigenous,” and “authentic.” Symbolic meaning also derives from the object’s association with a foreign country or specific community;

3. “Special Trip Tourists” find meaning in the travel experience and meeting individuals very different from themselves;

4. “Textile for Enjoyment Tourists” find meaning in enjoying the textile itself, its beauty and other qualities. The workmanship of the craftsman is admired, and owners speak of the craft’s “hand made” and “primitive” qualities; and

5. “Apparel Oriented Tourists” gain meaning from the “personal statement” made by their purchase.

The most common purpose for textile acquisition is the feeling of uniqueness and “difference from others” (Littrel 1990:241), mirroring the views of Douglas and Isherwood (1979), Miller (1987), and Carrier (1995) who consider the object as a marking service or providing the object with status that distinguishes the owner from other consuming classes.

COURO VEGETAL

Rubber tappers and indigenous peoples living in the tropical rainforest of the Western Brazilian Amazon have been collecting and bartering (and more recently selling) latex from the rubber tree (*Hevea brasiliensis*) for over 150 years. The history of the rubber tapper has been well documented including its importance to regional, and national economies (e.g., Dean 1987; Santos 1980; Weinstein 1983). It is a history of fabled riches that drew poor migrant farmers from the Northeast of Brazil to the region to live in isolation in the forest, tapping rubber along an *estrada de seringa*, or rubber-tree trail, and of oppressive relations with rubber barons who controlled the rubber fields. At its ugliest, it is a history of brutal enslavement, torture, and murder of indigenous peoples in the uppermost Amazon regions in Peru and Colombia (Collier 1968; Stanfield 1998).

The rubber tappers’ story today is one of successfully protecting their lands from ranchers bent on clearing the rainforest for pasture, and the establishment of federal protected areas designated “extractive reserves” that give rubber tappers long-term usufruct rights to extractive resources (Schwartzman 1989; Hecht and Cockburn 1989). It is also one of searching for sustainable development strategies that are adaptable to the rubber tapper culture to increase family income and also conserve the rainforest (Allegratti 1995). It was within this historical and socio-economic context that couro vegetal emerged—a new product promising higher local incomes through traditional extractive activities that would also keep the forest standing.

Couro Vegetal da Amazonia S.A (CVA) began selling Treetap[®] products made from couro vegetal in 1994 after being approached by rubber tappers at an EcoMarket in Rio de Janeiro. Couro vegetal is a material fashioned from the latex of rubber trees. In the past, rubber tappers dripped the latex onto a turning wooden pole over a smoky fire until a large rubber ball was formed. Most rubber tappers now pour the latex into three- to six-inch deep rectangular wooden molds and mix in an additive (also extracted from a native tree) that hardens the latex into more easily transportable rubber bricks, or sell the latex direct to a local state-supported industry producing prophylactics. Couro vegetal is produced by dipping a cotton cloth stretched over a wooden frame into the latex, previously mixed with a chemical additive, and then smoked over a small volcano-shaped clay oven to form square rubberized sheets. The sheets are shipped to Rio de Janeiro, where they are used to make clothes, sandals, handbags, duffel bags, toilet kits, and change purses, among other products.² Couro vegetal has its roots in a similar material originally developed by rubber tappers to make bags (locally referred to as *saco encauchado*) that were used to hold the liquid latex they collected on the rubber trails. With new technologies developed specifically for the commercialization of Amazon latex, CVA developed a vulcanization process that produced a more durable couro vegetal fabric, and patented this process.

The website of CVA (AmazonLife.com), with text in English and Portuguese, introduces the company and Treetap[®] products. It includes information regarding its founders, the not-for-profit Institute NAWA, established to work with rubber tappers and develop education and marketing strategies for couro vegetal products; the development of the couro vegetal project; images of the products sold and their prices; the socio-economic and cultural history of the region and its inhabitants, including land conflicts; rainforest ecology and biodiversity; and the manufacturing process for couro vegetal.

CVA sources couro vegetal from three communities in the Western Amazon. Two of these are rubber tapping populations, the descendants of migrants from the northeast of Brazil and *caboclos*, mixed race peasants living along the Amazon River and its tributaries. One community is an indigenous tribe, the Kaxinawa, for which the most information is provided. This includes the community's location, population, language spoken, kinship relations, the size of their lands and date of demarcation, their subsistence crops, and activities such as hunting, fishing, and handicraft production. In addition, there are numerous color photographs and three short videos. These show the various stages of the couro vegetal production process, beginning with the collection of latex along a rubber trail in the forest to the finished product ready for transport to Rio de Janeiro. Photos are included of the producer groups that have received training in the processing of couro vegetal. There are images of the Kaxinawa culture, showing indigenous women preparing food, face painting, and a ritual involving

children. The videos show a rubber tapper cutting a rubber tree to start the flow of latex, the smoking of the latex, and an indigenous dance.

There are also photographs of a fashion show held in Rio de Janeiro, where models in striking runway poses are dressed in clothing made from couro vegetal. The women wear skirts, blouses, evening gowns, bikinis, and sandals, all made from the rubberized fabric. A few models are adorned with beads and feathers, one wearing what appears to be an indigenous headdress. On some of the models, textile weavings with what appear to be Kaxinawa designs are also part of the clothing.

The theoretical positions discussed above collectively provide a means for analyzing the CVA website and the role and methods it employs to bring together forest extractors and consumers. Mauss's work revealed the social relationships embedded in exchange, while Appadurai (1986) and Kopytoff (1986) suggested looking at commoditization as a dynamic and complex process, focusing on the "cultural biography" of a thing "as a culturally constructed entity, endowed with culturally specific meanings, and classified and reclassified into culturally constituted categories" (Kopytoff 1986:68). This more dynamic framework facilitates following the course of couro vegetal, from latex extraction by rubber tappers, to its processing into rubberized fabric by community organizations, to the production of couro vegetal products, and the promotion and sale of Treetap[®] products by CVA. Its website, through text, photographs, and videos, reveals how material objects are endowed with culturally constructed meanings and symbolism. These include the preservation of rubber tapper and indigenous cultures and the conservation of rainforests. The CVA website shows how these meanings and symbols are communicated, commoditized, made available to be worked on, and reclassified by consumers. It also illustrates the important role of CVA as the intermediary party—the cultural broker—making salient the history of the rubber tapper and indigenous peoples to potential consumers, as part of the biography of couro vegetal products that "might otherwise remain obscure" (Kopytoff 1986:67).

For some consumers, CVA's focus on sustainable livelihoods and forest conservation in Amazonia imbues the products with a set of principles that value social and environmental responsibility with which they can identify (Belk 1988; Miller 1987). Couro vegetal products, made from natural rubber extracted using simple technologies by people who live in the forest, may serve as symbols of what is natural and traditional for consumers, helping define "who they are" (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981:79), and serve as "extended self" (Belk 1988:149). The focus on the Amazonian peoples who produce couro vegetal may serve as a metonymic sign that helps consumers capture the essence of Amazon history and culture without visiting there (Gordon 1986:139). For

those who have travel to the Amazon, these products may serve as a reminder of personal relations established with traditional peoples and communities.

The CVA website also facilitates the consumer's search for authenticity in indigenous handicrafts, as it provides details of the extraction and processing activities required for making couro vegetal. CVA emphasizes the traditional qualities of couro vegetal products, the people, and the production relationships involved in producing it, the communities that produce couro vegetal, their livelihoods in the rainforest, and how the rubberized fabric is transported by canoes to small towns along the Amazon's river system then carried on "barges on the great rivers, Purus, Juruá, Madeira, and Amazonas" as it makes its way to manufacturing facilities in Rio de Janeiro (AmazonLife.com). Even though it is not the rubber tappers and indigenous communities who actually make the final products, consumers can accept them as authentic based on the traditional extractive and processing methods employed to produce the latex and the traditional livelihood of the rubber tappers (Cohen 1988).

While the sale of utilitarian products fabricated with couro vegetal may evoke images of the rubber tapper culture, the sale of high-fashion clothing fosters a much different image. Here, Appadurai's (1986) discussion of the "aesthetics of decontextualization" and how the value of an object is enhanced by placing it in unlikely context is fitting (1986:28). In the case of couro vegetal, a raw material historically produced for the manufacture of automobile tires is transformed into high-fashion clothing, undertaking a diversion (one commodity state to another) by "combin[ing] the aesthetic impulse, the entrepreneurial link, and the touch of the morally shocking" (Appadurai 1986:28).

CULTURAL BROKERS IN COMMODITIZING CULTURE

The above discussion of theories of consumption suggests that consumers may purchase couro vegetal products for the social relationships that develop between producer and consumer. Complementing this is Carrier's (1995) portrayal of how manufacturers invoke the "symbolism of possession" on products to attract consumers. From his examination of the role of catalogue advertising, a medium similar to the World Wide Web used by CVA, Carrier (1995) observes that advertisers invoke the symbolism of possession to consumers in three ways: by invoking the makers, the sellers, or the users of the commodity. Treetap[®] focuses on the makers: the rubber tappers and indigenous communities that produce couro vegetal, and their history and culture. The website text states that the rubber tappers were the largest suppliers of rubber to the world market, with production reaching 42,000 tons of rubber in 1912. At the end of the twentieth century, they struggled for land rights "in the war against uncontrolled exploitation of the forest and of the people that inhabit it" which included the

assassination of the rubber tapper leader, Chico Mendes. The photographs and videos provide another dimension of the maker of this “traditional handicraft.” They show the rubber tappers and indigenous peoples producing the rubberized fabric and carrying out activities related to their livelihood in the forest, such as cooking, face painting, and ritual. Even the limited information about CVA is provided in the context of its close relationship with the indigenous peoples and rubber tappers. For example, the company provides information regarding the establishment of Institute NAWA and the partnerships it has developed with diverse organizations working with forest communities in the Amazon. It includes the innovative technologies developed by the company to perfect the production of the rubber tappers and the training of local peoples to ensure high quality products. However, it omits the CVA workers and their production methods in Rio de Janeiro that produce the products that are marketed on the website, and there is little about the products themselves. There are pictures and prices of each, but few additional details are provided, and little descriptive information is available regarding the size of the articles, colors available, and their potential use. Through text, photographs, and videos, CVA wraps its commodities in the symbolism of possession and develops a “relationship of identity” between the product and the consumer (Carrier 1995:10). The association between the product and maker is such that the consumer receives not just a product made from *couro vegetal*, but a “personal possession” of rubber tappers and indigenous peoples of the Amazon (Carrier 1995:134)—a gift. This argues that even in modern societies characterized by capitalist production, social bonds can be developed between producer and consumer, that commodities can be imbued with the identity of the maker, that alienable commodities can be transformed into things inalienable from the place they come, the people that produce them, the ideals they represent, and the livelihoods and culture in which they are embedded. The cultural broker is fundamental in this process, and the CVA’s use of the World Wide Web provides an example of how technological development can open new avenues for binding producers and consumers in social relationships.

CONCLUSION

The case of *couro vegetal* demonstrates how culture is commoditized and how modern communication media are employed to bring remote cultures into the homes of consumers worldwide. Yet, while a theoretical examination of gifts and commodities (Mauss 1967), the social life of a thing (Appudrai 1986; Kopytoff 1986), and consumptive practices (Carrier 1995) provide instructive frameworks for analyzing the commoditization of culture and the important role of the cultural broker, they do not examine the changes taking place among the

communities and people who construct these objects and endow them with meaning.

It is therefore critical to consider the socio-economic, cultural, and political implications of the process of commoditizing objects or activities imbued with cultural meaning. Are there some communities better placed to maintain their cultural traditions while at the same time profiting from commoditizing them? Research in Ecuador, Mexico, and Panama on indigenous craft production for tourists found that communities that largely controlled marketing and distribution of their products and reinvested profits in the community were able to reinforce their cultural identity (Stephen 1991:102). In Vanuatu, local producers of wood carvings were able to extend indigenous entitlements, based on genealogical histories and rituals, into the realm of international market property rights. Thus, “[e]xpatriate collectors and dealers are increasingly affected by the stringent terms of the Ambrym men, who both restrict the pool of production and control the pool of consumers” (Geismer 2005:451).

How is the commoditization of couro vegetal changing socioeconomic relations in the Amazon rainforest? Rubber tappers and indigenous peoples have been able to increase their local incomes by carrying out value-added processing activities in the forest. In addition, local community members have been trained to manage local production activities, increasing their control of the production process.

Cultural brokers, such as NGOs, may face challenges in maintaining the interests of local producers engaged in commercializing material culture (Wilson 2003), cultural knowledge (Fernando 2003), and in ecotourism ventures (West and Carrier 2004). These intermediaries can play a key role in bringing culture imbued products to consumers, but they must work closely with communities to ease them into the global marketplace. Businesses and non-governmental organizations can help them build management and administrative capacity to manage growth and change within the business and the community. They can help reflect on potential changes to intra-community relationships, both economic and social, prior to engaging the global marketplace. The challenge rainforest communities face is to establish new market linkages in ways that both value and respect their cultural traditions.

NOTES

1. The author thanks H. Russell Bernard and Marianne Schmink for their comments on early drafts of this manuscript and also thanks the anonymous reviewers of *Ethnology* for valuable suggestions to improve the paper.
2. It appears that the actual fabrication of clothing is now done in Italy.

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