Ritual Misdeeds and Dutiful Transgressions

The Agency of Sacred Fossils in Matters of Theft

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Abstract: This article explores the role of sacred fossils, specifically ammonites called "Shaligrams," in criminal acts and norm violations. It challenges conventional theories of criminal motivation via object agency, where non-human entities significantly impact crime conceptualization and perpetration. Originating from Nepal, Shaligrams are revered as living manifestations of Hindu gods and possess unique agency that influences human behavior. The relationships that humans form with Shaligrams blur the lines between rational human choice and response to the needs and desires of "agentic" objects. By examining instances where Shaligrams inspire criminal actions or where they themselves violate norms, we broaden the understanding of criminal agency beyond human-centric perspectives. Inclusion of Shaligrams in criminal networks and their impact on decision-making highlights the interplay between humans, natural objects, and cultural beliefs. This anthropological approach to criminology offers new insights into the dynamics of crime, challenging traditional notions of agency and rationality in criminal acts.

Keywords: anthropology, crime opportunity, fossils, object agency, offender motivation, rational choice, Shaligrams

Within standard criminological understandings of crime opportunity, humans are sometimes conceived of as making rational choices about breaking laws or social norms based on a calculation of risk versus reward (e.g., Cornish and Clarke 1986). A popular formulation of this idea is the equation-like, Venn-diagrammable routine activities theory, which portrays crime as occurring at the confluence of a so-called "motivated offender," a "suitable target," and a lack of a "capable guardian" (Clarke and Felson 1993; Cohen and Felson 1979). Situational crime prevention, the "manipulation of the immediate environment in as systematic and permanent a way as possible so as to reduce the opportunities for crime and increase its risks as perceived by a wide range of offenders" (Clarke 1983: 225), is seen as a way to prevent crime within this conception. But while environmental conditions are part of the crime prevention equation, these factors are usually conceived of

as under human control; they are usually things that people have done to their immediate environment. They are signals of human activity as perceived by other humans (e.g., this location is monitored by CCTV; this item is protected by a glass case). These environmental signals are believed to have an effect on how a potential criminal evaluates the risk they would take by breaking the law. Within this model, humans are the only actors, and they are the only entities capable of action and reaction. They are the only entities with agency. Crime is, then, human, and the only criminal actor is a human one.

Beyond the traditional human-centric model of crime motivation and control, significant work within criminology and parallel disciplines allows for alternative understandings of the contexts crimes are committed in and the forces that people are responding to when they commit criminal (or, indeed, any) acts, bringing objects, or "things," into view as agents in criminal situations. These works include, but are certainly not limited to, Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos's (2013) idea of "lawscapes," the immaterial and material manifestations of "law" that is everywhere, in everything, influencing humans in ways beyond any human control. He proposes the idea of "atmosphere" as a way to consider the connections between seemingly external sensory experiences and the internal as "collective, spatial, and elemental" (2013: 36). Bill McClanahan and Nigel South contend that the concept of atmospheres can be used to engage with "the totality of our sensory perception" (2020: 12) when analyzing crime, harm, and justice. Defined further within criminological research by Alistair Fraser and Daniel Matthews, atmosphere is "a place-based mood or spatialized feeling that blends human and non-human elements and has the capacity to act in a quasi-agentic manner" (2021: 455). Research by Alison Young has explored how the design of criminal justice settings such as the *koban* or "police box" in Japan "have spatial, aesthetic and affective dimensions" (2019: 777) that produce atmospheres of criminal justice. Donna Yates and Simon Mackenzie (2021) have explored emotionally charged atmospheres of the art market and conceptualized art worlds as "desirescapes"— networks of objects that affect people, cultivate desire, and disturb reason. Although atmospheres might be shrouded in ambiguity and sensory experiences are seen as vague in criminology (see Herrity et al. 2021), it is not a weakness. Instead, Fraser and Matthews argue that ambiguity is a strength as they address "a form of experience that so often falls through the cracks of more orthodox theorizing" (2021: 13).

To consider that something that is not entirely human has at least some capacity to act is a challenge to the idea of rational humans

existing in an ecosystem of crime that consists only of human action and human reaction. Allowing for the existence of nonhuman agentic actors, and considering those nonhuman actors as having a significant influence on what people do, helps us to engage with the problem that many seemingly irrational criminal acts committed by supposedly rational human actors are not easily explained by crime opportunity theories. Yet if other, not human, actors can influence what people do, perhaps those acts can be seen as more rational than they seem on the face of it after all.

In this article, we will consider how a particular type of agentic object relates to the violation of norms and the committing of crimes. Shaligrams, which are specific types of ammonite fossils that originate in Mustang, Nepal, are taken to be living manifestations of Hindu gods (meaning divine persons in their own right) and have the ability to form significant relationships with humans. These relationships, in turn, influence human behavior. At times, humans commit violations due to the agentic qualities of the Shaligrams. At other times, the Shaligrams themselves violate the rules. In both situations, we see object agency as not always (or not only) being the "will" of objects to act, but also the capacity for objects to inspire action and to enact change or order in the world around them. The social relationships that humans form with agentic objects mirror the social relationships they have with other humans, and the influences these objects have on human behavior may be just as complicated as the influences that humans have on each other.

Importantly, if this position is accepted, it does not undermine traditional criminological theories that prioritize human agency, but it does add more color and complexity to the sociological understanding of theoretical nodes in areas such as the rational-choice-based theories of routine activities and situational prevention, which work with concepts like "motivated offenders" and "suitable targets" (Clarke 1983; Clarke and Felson 1993; Cohen and Felson 1979; Cornish and Clarke 1986). These practically oriented theories were created for parsimony, aiming to explain as much social action as possible with the least number of variables and, essentially, in as simple a format as might be possible. This cluster of theories breaks down, however, where they encounter what they would no doubt see as "edge cases" including drivers of motivation that are hard to discern, or things that might make particular types of objects "suitable" or "unsuitable" as targets. The object in these theories, where they apply to acquisitive property crimes, is passive: exposed and waiting to be stolen or perhaps the subject of some sort of

securitization measure, "target-hardened," locked down. There is little room, at present, for active objects that through occupying a person-like position within a cultural ontology or social narrative manifest some of the key features of personality, appearing to onlookers as if they exhibit emotions such as desire, happiness, or disapproval. In Shaligrams, we will look more closely at objects with these qualities, and consider what a criminology of agentic objects might bring to a discipline that has for so long been firmly focused on people and their behavior as the constituent elements of society and the problem to be explained.

Object Theory and Object Agency

The idea that not only humans but also things, materials, and substances are agentically involved in crimes might be out of scope for rational choice approaches in criminology and yet within the discourses in the social and cultural sciences is not an entirely novel approach. Variants of "object theory" and more-than-human ontology have developed in most of the human sciences that run parallel to criminology. In anthropology, sociology, archaeology, art history, and more, object theory is now accepted as a standard component of the theoretical toolbox available to scholars working in these fields. It provides a framework for considering the social relationships that humans can form with things that are not human and the real-world influence those relationships have on human behavior (Appadurai 1986; Aronsson et al. 2020; Hoskins 2006). This can even extend to ideas of object agency (De la Cadena 2015; Freedburg 1989; Geismar 2011).

Can objects, then, make people commit crimes? How one answers that question may lie in how we conceive of agency. If agency is equated with provoking action, it is fairly easy to see objects as having that ability. The microwave dinging provokes us to retrieve our food; the car horn honking provokes us to look; the phone ringing provokes us to answer. It is not a great leap, then, to say a wallet lying in full view on a car seat provokes theft, and criminology has been discussing the quasi-agentic aspects of "broken windows" for years (Clarke 1999; Keizer et al. 2008; Yates et al. 2022).

One can also consider an object agency that affords the objects more ability to guide human action. Decisions made by people are, in part, guided by their relationships with objects and what those objects need or want. Can objects really be thought of as having desires and intents? In the contexts we consider here, actual object intentionality

and the *perception* of object intentionality on the part of human actors would seem to equate to the same thing when it comes to considering criminal actions and motivations. Even those who ultimately believe that any agentic quality of an object is an extension of human agency or an artifact of human perception (Brown 2004; Gell 1998) might accept that if an object is experienced as being agentic by a human actor, the real-world "crime" outcome is the same as if the object really did have agency.

If the outcome is the same, and it was caused by the interaction of human and object, did the object not exercise a form of agency in shaping the result of that interaction? Perhaps it did—or perhaps it is a matter of perspective and for some analysts it did not (e.g., see Benjamin Boysen [2018] and his critique of object-oriented ontology more generally)—but at the very least, the *possibility* of this more intentional version of object agency indicates that risk versus reward rationality is not the only way that we should understand how people interact with certain types of objects in the context of crime. People may deeply consider what the object in question wants, needs, or intends, and act accordingly. Ultimately, this brings objects into criminal networks and considers their role in human actions that we consider to be crimes.

In many theories of the use of ritual objects, the basis of understanding of the role of the object in the social routine that constitutes the ritual is a semiotic one (Innis 2004). That is to say, the object is a symbol, which can be "read" by participants in the ritual with reference to its place in the underlying symbolic order that constitutes the overall meaning system of the ritual (Lillios 1999). In other cases, especially in non-Western religious contexts, objects are treated as manifestations of deities who may be present only for the time of the ritual interaction or who may be present, and observing their communities, at all times (Eck 1998; Henare et al. 2007). Objects used for ritual purposes therefore carry a meaning that is widely understood to participants and usually is so deeply historically ingrained that it seems to go without saying—the meaning has been normalized and embedded within the overall cultural logics that the ritual behavior has generated and, through repeated practice, sustains.

Beyond rituals, but with comparable effects on the normalization of seeing objects as more than simply passive "landscape" features within society, some cultures have come to attribute certain objects with personhood, anthropomorphizing them in a way that reduces the implied hierarchical distance that exists between humans (important as agents in society) and objects (not so important and taken to be mere passive

physical structural elements on top of which the dramas of social interaction and development play out) (Haber 2009, 2016; Rao 2019; Torri 2015). In some cases, the personification of features of the landscape can be so effective as to create a deep reverence for those objects, which may go so far as to level out the usual hierarchy: the "things" have become considered as important, in many ways, as the people. The treatment of rivers and other natural features of the natural world by Māori, for example, elevates a respect for the environment in this way.

So if ritual objects act within a symbolic, ceremonial social system, and personified objects act as if they had some of the attributes of human actors, they can be inferred to be sanguine or unhappy, venerated or abused, protective or vengeful, and so on. Several of these agentic qualities can be seen in Shaligrams, which are interpreted by the many participants in the meaning structure supporting their deification as having various attributes of both agency and personality (Walters 2020, 2022). For criminologists, most of whom have been trained in a variety of sociological approaches that prioritize humans over objects in terms of what the driving forces of society are, the interesting question arises: what if we take the object agency of items like Shaligrams seriously?

What if we did not dismiss ritual and the attribution of personality to objects as manufactured interpreted artifices of a world where webs of meaning are woven by the people who constitute society? What if we allowed the Shaligrams to act in our etiological crime theories in the way that they seem to, empirically, in the real world, to act, that is, as agents that play a fully rounded role in the social life of communities and the social origins of individual decision-making? In that case, we would see people making choices influenced by their interpretation of the social context in which their action will have its effect, and just as that interpretive process of deliberation, choice, and action includes consideration of how it will interact with the people involved in the particular scene, so it will include consideration of interactions with the objects.

Shaligrams: Sacred Fossils with Agency

For more than two thousand years, the veneration of sacred fossil ammonites, called Shaligrams, has been an integral part of ritual practice throughout South Asia. Originating from a single remote region of Himalayan Nepal, in the Kali Gandaki River Valley of Mustang, ritual

use of these fossils today has become a significant focus of pilgrimage, religious co-participation, and exchange in both India and Nepal and among the global Hindu and Buddhist diasporas. Considered inherently sacred not only because they are not human-made but because the workings of the landscape have imbued them with a living essence and agency of their own (see also Haberman 2020), Shaligrams require no rites of invocation when brought into homes or temples as presiding deities. But Shaligrams are also deeply intertwined with understandings of divine movement, and the growing political and economic challenges of travel to Mustang have resulted in restrictions placed on a ritual practice that depends upon the mobility of both people and stones. As a result, many Shaligram practitioners now believe that the worship of Shaligrams may be in danger of disappearing entirely. This has led to growing tensions regarding the sales of sacred fossils online despite the religious prohibition on buying and selling Shaligrams, the increased presence of sellers who take an unsustainable number of fossils from the river, the theft of established fossil-deities from temples, and the rising issue of national and local border violations committed by pilgrims seeking fossils in the politically contentious region of Mustang (Walters 2020).

Viewed primarily as living and active manifestations of Hindu gods, these aniconic deities are only obtained by pilgrimage to Himalayan Nepal. They are then brought home to families and communities all over South Asia and the diaspora to become both deities and kin (Walters 2022). Shaligrams thus act and converse, if inanimately, over the course of their lives. Therefore, the semiotic separation of bodies and persons in Shaligram religious practice, which reveals a world wherein both stones and humans are represented by but distinct from their physical forms, links language and ritual objects with broader understandings of human and divine personhood in South Asia as they are conceptualized both within and between physical bodies (Lamb 1997; Uberoi 1993). The point here then is that Shaligrams are persons in their own right, endowed with agency and the ability to move and act as they intend to.

It may sound paradoxical to link objects with personhood in such a literal manner, but this work is indeed about an alternative view of the boundary between "human" and "nonhuman" as it relates to ontology. Briefly, for our purposes in this article, ontology refers to the nature of being, the nature of reality, or theories of being. This means engaging with Shaligrams as inhabitants of a different "world" and not merely as objects in a particular "worldview" (Kohn 2013: 9–10). Thus, while scholars have already described the ways in which personhood

in South Asia is often constructed through external relationships with other persons, places, objects, and ideas (Deleuze 1992; Lamb 2004), this discussion furthers those descriptions by demonstrating how divine persons (particularly divine objects as persons) are similarly constituted and carry similar agency. Shaligram practitioners, for example, do not refer to Shaligrams as "stones," and the paleontological term "fossil" is unsurprisingly contentious. Rather, Shaligrams are typically referred to simply as "bodies" or otherwise given nominal distinctions using gendered pronouns (His/Her) depending on which deity is materially manifest. Even more importantly, Shaligram practitioners themselves also do not tend to use representational language when referring to Shaligrams. In other words, Shaligrams do not symbolize or "stand in" for deities, they *are* deities.

The use of representational terms is therefore more common in European and American academic contexts than on the part of devotees, who are often quick to point out these misconceptions regarding who and what might be present at a given moment. As a result, analysis of symbolic meanings in Shaligrams is largely an aspect of scholarly interpretation intended to clarify the relationships between broader cultural systems of ontology and ritual practice and not, as practitioners would argue, an objective description of the manifest nature of Shaligrams themselves. As a result, personhood here is repositioned as a process that includes bodies that "are" present and bodies "as if" they are present so as to blur the distinctions between reality and its representations. This puts our arguments in line with Philippe Descola's (2005) differentiation between ontologies of "modern" and "non-modern cultures" in terms of how various cultures interact with material and spiritual entities as equally "real," but also how we—as social and cultural scientists—are then prompted to integrate and interpret those cultural and material practices through our own political and legal ontologies. To put it simply: we argue that criminology should take agentive objects seriously as actors in crime because the people who interact with them do.

Shaligrams are not necessarily alone in this manner either, because they are contextualized within larger ritual systems that venerate naturally occurring objects interpreted as divine persons or divine person-like beings (such as Shiva Linga stones, Dwarka Shilas, Rudraksha seeds, mountains and rivers, trees and forests, stars and celestial bodies, and certain animals; see Keil 2018). They are also commonly associated with specific deity *murti* (especially statues and religious paintings), with whom they share household and altar space. This is why "person," in these cases, does not specifically refer to a "human" but to a being

that can have agency, speak, engage in social relationships and exchanges with other people, be cared for and care for others in return, have a life course, and go through lifecycle rituals such as marriages and funerals.

What is important to stress here, however, is that Shaligrams are a part of the broader, everyday interactions between Hindus, Buddhists, Bonpos, and the divine—where the gods are immanent in the world, simultaneously transcendent, and embodied in multiple different kinds of earthly forms. Offerings and gifts given to these forms are then meant to draw the deities' favor and to nurture good relationships with them through physical exchanges. The simultaneous presence of the divine in material bodies (such as stones, trees, elephants, and rivers) then helps to mediate needs, problems, and conflicts in people's everyday lives by creating connections between an individual's, family's, or community's present circumstances and the actions or desires of the gods. For this reason, in the following sections we will consider first how Shaligrams appear to make people commit certain crimes and, second, how Shaligrams themselves appear to break rules and social norms for their own purposes.

When Stones Fight Back

Extensive ethnographic fieldwork on Shaligram practices was conducted by Holly Walters in Nepal and India between 2015 and 2023, resulting in many of the quotations and interviews that follow. But also, in that time news outlets reported on a series of Shaligram thefts including the theft of 37 Shaligrams from a temple in Modibeni, Parbat, Nepal, in 2019 and the theft of six Shaligrams from a Balaji temple in Uttar Pradesh, India, in 2022. *The Himalayan Times*, one of Nepal's major newspapers, also further published several reports on government concerns that unchecked and unabated smuggling of Shaligrams out of Mustang, Nepal, constituted a cultural crisis and that without police action Shaligrams in Nepal would soon become extinct.

In a fascinating reversal of expectations, however, the six Shaligrams of Balaji were subsequently returned by the thieves a few days later, citing terrifying nightmares they were having, which they attributed to the Shaligrams' anger at having been removed from their proper homes (Tripathi 2022). The 37 Shaligrams of Modibeni on the other hand were recovered by police after the arrest of three men who appeared to have kept one stone (which is common in Shaligram

worship) and then distributed the rest to other homes throughout the Chhamarke Forest area of Western Nepal (Tiwari 2019). And lastly, just within the past few years and despite local concerns, government restrictions on pilgrims' and sellers' removal of Shaligrams from the Kali Gandaki of Mustang have failed to materialize. In the opinion of many practitioners and devotees interviewed by government officials, and later on by Walters, about the issue, the reason for this largely had to do with the understanding that Shaligram movement was not for humans to legislate because it was the Shaligrams themselves that chose to leave (Walters 2020).

Within our consideration of objects as agentic actors in the committing of crimes and the violation of social norms, Shaligrams no doubt may represent an extreme. These sacred fossils are particularly agentic objects, in that they are alive to those who interact with them and have agency, needs, emotions, and plans for themselves. This means that their role as agents in criminal acts is easier to define than may be the case for less agentic objects. That is not to say that less agentic objects do not participate in crimes but rather that we see this as a step toward criminological understandings of patterns in object influence in the way that Bruno Latour (1999) has argued for the hybrid agency of a shooter and the gun. Our work is also further situated within current legal discourses about human versus technological agency, such as in road accidents caused by self-driving cars (e.g., Braun and Randell 2020) and in civilian deaths resulting from unmanned drone strikes (González 2024; Leander 2013) that attribute "responsibility" to autonomous machines.

Object Influence and Humans Committing Crimes

Mustang District is located in Nepal's Dhaulagiri Zone, along the western ridge of the Himalayan Annapurna mountain range. Founded as the Kingdom of Lo in 1440 CE, Mustang is currently divided into upper (northern) and lower (southern) regions. These distinctions are both locally and nationally defined, and this has tremendous economic, social, political, and cultural ramifications partially due to the fact that Upper Mustang is still restricted to foreign travel and Lower Mustang only opened for limited excursions to travelers and non-Nepali pilgrims in 1992. However, the internal divisions, dialects, and distinctions of Mustang's populace and yearly pilgrims are much more complex than this binary division might imply. For example, Mustang is also home to

the Baragaon settlement area, which comprises speakers of primarily Nepali-Tibetan dialects located in and around the Muktinath Valley, and the Lode Tshodun, the seven principalities of the Kingdom of Lo, a Tibetan-speaking area of which the walled city of Lo Monthang is the capital.

The village of Kagbeni marks the division between Upper and Lower Mustang, in that Nepal's central government in Kathmandu does not allow foreigners to travel north beyond Kagbeni without special permits and guides (enforced by a local military base and several border outposts). The reasons behind these continued closures are politically complex. The entire region encompassed by Mustang today, and in particular the Kali Gandaki River Valley, has been a locus of trans-Himalayan trade for centuries, particularly in the exchange of lowland grains for Tibetan salt. However, since its consolidation in 1789 during the Gorkhali conquests and until the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1959, Mustang had maintained strong cultural and economic ties to the old kingdoms of Tibet, Bhutan, and West Bengal. Today, it is considered an important buffer region between Chinese-occupied Tibet, the Kathmandu Valley, and India. For this reason, Mustang has maintained a certain degree of local autonomy but has continued to struggle economically in political isolation. In addition, and not surprisingly, given its historical, linguistic, and ethnic ties to Tibet, its position as the base of operations for the Tibetan resistance in the 1960s, as well as the large numbers of Tibetan refugees still living in the region, Mustang is often problematically characterized in both travel literature and in academic discourse as "the Lost Kingdom of Tibet."

For Shaligram pilgrims, this poses a serious dilemma. In order to obtain a Shaligram, one must meet the sacred fossil on the road to Muktinath (the temple at the end of the pilgrimage route) at the point where it is born (literally) out of the silts of the Kali Gandaki River. In this way, Shaligrams come down from the Tibetan Plateau (where the fossil beds erode out) to meet their new families just as much as their new families arrive to meet them. The divisions between Upper and Lower Mustang, however, mean that the original Shaligram pilgrimage road (from the village of Jomsom in the south, to the Damodar Kund glacial lake source high in the mountains to the north) is now cut in half, and only a small stretch of river remains accessible for pilgrims to search for fossils. This then leads to two prevalent views among Shaligram practitioners. One, that Shaligrams themselves must navigate these restrictions and violate political boundaries in order to find their families, and two, that borders placed on sacred land are a direct affront to the

will of the Divine. As a result, both issues lead humans to violate border restrictions.

One such pilgrim described the situation to Walters by stating: "I'm going to burn my passport." He said: "I'm going to destroy all my documents and go to Damodar. I came here (on pilgrimage) to find Shaligram, and I will find Shaligram. You can't put borders on sacred land." He then went on to describe the techniques he had been taught by other practitioners to avoid capture and deportation should he be found too far north of the Lower Mustang border. He, and other pilgrims, explained how they might hide their passports in a mountain crevasse, strip off their clothes and travel as mute hermits (so that their accents would not give them away) and steal across the border late at night or in an area where there were no roads for government jeeps to travel. In every case, the reasoning was the same: they had come in search of sacred fossils, and there was no border that could stop them from meeting their deity-kin. This was Shaligram pilgrimage, and where the Shaligram goes, so too do the people. Laws, then, are violated because Shaligrams are the ultimate authorities on the pathways they choose to take.

Similar understandings also fueled debates about the appearance of Shaligrams in natural history museum collections. In European and American contexts, fossils are viewed as principally scientific objects: relics of a shared natural past that belongs to everyone. This conflicts with the experience of Shaligrams as agentic objects with personhood that have private relationships with specific humans and with other Shaligrams, as well as specific desires and needs. The appearance of Shaligram ammonites in museum collections and exhibits has led to anxiety among Shaligram practitioners and, from time to time as mentioned previously, thefts committed by devotees who see this as the literal imprisonment of a living deity. In a scientific collection, the Shaligram is neglected, locked away, or traded in an action that, for devotees and perhaps for the Shaligrams themselves, is akin to human trafficking. The Shaligram itself, then, desires to be taken away from the scientific collection and will do all it can to ensure that the "removal" is successful.

The issue of what Shaligrams need or want is at the center of current discussions between Hindu Shaligram practitioners in the United Kingdom and the Oxford Museum of Natural History following the recent revelations that the institution houses several old Shaligrams in its Jurassic fossil drawers. Classified as natural scientific specimens within the museum and within the United Kingdom more widely, these

Shaligrams fall between the cracks of current discourses on the return of more obviously cultural objects collected by colonial powers during periods of domination and control. Within the museum's own public collection records, the status of these fossils as Shaligrams is not recorded.[1] As such, there is no current recourse for practitioners seeking to free the captive Shaligrams other than to appeal to the will of the Shaligrams themselves.

Importantly, the experiences of the "offenders" themselves is that of object agency, not a risk versus reward calculation. If we ask them why they took immense personal risk to violate a border, or why they committed perhaps the only theft of their entire life, the response would be that it is because of their relationship with the agentic object. They offended because of a combination of their own needs and the object's needs. The object is an accomplice in the crime. To ignore this, or to dismiss this as human agency projected onto an unagentic object, would be to ignore the "offender's" own experience of offending and the cultural ontologies of nonhuman agents that undergird the logic and rationality of the offense.

Rational Objects Breaking the Rules

Despite disparate nationalities, ethnic identities, and religions, Shaligram practitioners all agree on one basic principle: Shaligrams should never be exchanged for money, and if they are, it is viewed as a serious karmic sin. The practice of buying and selling Shaligrams should, by this reasoning, never take place; it is a serious violation of the cultural norms of this community. Yet the sale of Shaligrams is common, especially online. Shaligram practitioners' understanding of why such norm violations take place is further derived from the agentic qualities of these objects. In short, Shaligrams are sold online because they, the Shaligrams, choose to be. The Shaligrams themselves violate the rules for their own purposes. In this scenario, Shaligrams are quite rational actors who break the rules when outside forces, such as political restrictions on pilgrimage, prevent them from fulfilling their needs.

Devotees often describe a Shaligram's choice to be marketed in violation of social rules by saying: "This is how Shaligram comes. They do what they need to because of what is happening." Due to the previously described border restrictions, for example, pilgrimage to Mustang has become harder for Shaligram practitioners to undertake, and in some cases requires serious violation of the law. With the looming threat of

the dissolution of the practice of Shaligram worship should the fossils no longer move out of the Kali Gandaki region in the hands of the devout, the Shaligrams themselves have decided to act. They are thus moving as they intend, so that they can reach their human families, even if that means they have to break the rules to do it, in this case by allowing themselves to be commodified.

Yet commodification remains a grave violation of the social integrity of Shaligram–human relationships. Shaligrams are never meant to move in economic systems, rather only via exchange processes related to gift-giving and kinship inheritance. Practitioners therefore also often act to "save" agentic Shaligrams from having to incur such violations themselves, committing crimes so that the Shaligrams do not have to. Some practitioners have even described stealing Shaligrams from sellers that intend to extort high prices, having first reframed these prices as donations for travel rather than direct payment for the fossil in an attempt to mitigate the social violation involved in the sale. Others have begun to create expansive digital spaces for trading Shaligrams so that the Shaligrams can "come there instead" to find their families and "avoid" the problem of being sold for money (Walters 2020). It is also not unusual for pilgrims to confront commercial fossil prospectors in the Himalayas (sometimes resulting in fights), because, despite the fact that geological fossil hunting in Nepal is legal, practitioners see it as nothing short of destructive violence against and theft (or rather kidnapping) of their kin. The Shaligrams, then, are begging for help.

Action and Meaning

Is it really so controversial to think of objects as expressing agentic qualities? If once it was, it really is no longer so, at least not since the promulgation and popularity of actor-network theories and associated object-oriented ideas (Callon 1986; Gosden and Marshall 1999; Kopytoff 1986; Latour 1996, 2005; Molotch 2003, 2011). The quality of being human can be more or less active or passive: people are not always making choices and creating their own destiny; often they are used and abused, rendered pawns in the schemes of others, and treated in myriad other ways that constrain their capacity for free choice. For interpretivists in sociology, the appearance of a choice made by another may be an act of inference, as we do our best consciously or subconsciously to determine the intentions of others. Often this involves observing their action and trying to fit that action into a narrative in

which it makes sense, and the result of this interpretive process is really a matter of the observer "creating" agency in the person they are observing. It seems reasonable to say that this process can apply to objects as well as people, and therefore that the interpretive sociology of action and meaning allows for objects to "act," to "choose," to "want," and so on by the same mechanism that people do, in the social sense at least. The internal matters of actually having feelings may only be applicable to human existence—objects, we assume, do not actually *have* feelings. But they might as well be considered to have them when we move our level of analysis from the internal lives of people and things out to the "external" dimensions of social constructivism, where in the social routine of interpreting the feelings of others, we attribute them with agency and react accordingly.

This too is an important development: expanding the range of action to include reaction. Again, this is a well-established way of talking about crime. Many theoretical perspectives consider some forms of crime to be a reaction to certain social prompts rather than simply an action that emerges pristine and contextless from a social blank canvas. Frameworks that include crime as a reaction encompass subcultural approaches, where offenders are considered to be rejecting and overwriting the dominant norms of conventional society (Cohen 2005), as well as various theories of violence that look at the situational cues in the moment that are interpreted as hostile and escalatory (Engelhardt and Bartholow 2013). We could find many more examples, of course, but the point seems reasonably clear without the need for a long exposition: crime can be a reaction to a perceived meaning. In that case, the perceived meaning is, empirically speaking, the main "cause" of the crime; objects can radiate perceived meanings just as much as people can; therefore, objects can cause crime.

Crime as Altruism and the "Saving" Narrative

The "saving" narrative has been a strong feature of research into crimes involving cultural objects. Collectors in these cases often express a feeling that they are saving the artifacts they buy from an unhappy fate (Mackenzie 2005, 2014; Mackenzie et al. 2019; Mackenzie and Yates 2016). Within this conception, the objects will be preserved, appreciated, and perhaps displayed in the care of the collector, whereas they would otherwise be left to languish in obscure locations and perhaps be destroyed. Crime, in these circumstances, is a reaction to a context

that presents an opportunity to the collector to intervene and do some good. The discourse of collectors in explaining the process of deciding to (illegally) buy artifacts in these circumstances is often explicitly reactive: "What else was I to do?," "What would you do?," "I was left with no choice."

Gresham Sykes and David Matza (1957) identified a feeling of a lack of agency as being one of the risk factors for criminal behavior. The delinquents in his studies often felt like they were, in his words, "propelled like a billiard ball" (1957: 667; Matza 1964), moved by forces well beyond their control, and merely reactive in their choices in life. They would then be more likely to offend, feeling a pessimistic determinism that seemed to govern their trajectory in life and against which it would be fruitless to struggle. Interestingly though, our study of Shaligrams brings out a different shade to the deterministic feeling that one is overwhelmingly influenced by forces outside one's control. The altruistic drive to respond to the apparent needs of sacred objects can be an aspect of reverence for those objects that seems to be able to manifest a similar "billiard ball" sense of being moved by outside forces that are too influential to resist.

We could dismiss pilgrimage border violations and Shaligram theft as humans justifying their own norm violation, or justifying their own actions, by placing blame on objects or situations outside of themselves. But perhaps an elaboration of Sykes and Matza's (1957) appeal to higher loyalties, the idea that the person's higher loyalty to the sacred fossil-deity outweighs their desire to be a rule-follower, can help us to explain the motivations behind sacred-fossil-related crime. Even the news reports on the Shaligrams of Modibeni and Balaji respectively demonstrate that stealing these fossils was not done to specifically profit from their sale or due to their assumed monetary value but rather to liberate them from improper use, from government restriction, or from commodification. In reality, "offense" is not the person's own experience of the situation, meaning that they do not actually appeal to higher loyalties here and they do not always center things on their own actions. Rather, they take on an almost passive role in this experience. The Shaligram decides and acts, and they, the humans, either respond to that action or just passively observe it. But whether it involves stealing a Shaligram or illegally crossing national borders to obtain one, the success or failure of the venture is, ultimately, up to the sacred fossil.

Conclusion: Agents of Change

Crime is a bad thing. Objects are passive. We have presented a case study here that contests both assumptions, without undermining them, in what we believe to be a novel and important way. In this article, we have used an anthropological approach to the study of a type of revered sacred fossil—Shaligrams—to explore the parallel ideas of "good crimes" and "willful objects." Our framework is, of course, interpretive: we are not making claims that some crimes are objectively good or that inanimate objects possess and exercise a will that science has hitherto been unable to detect. Rather, we have set out the case for certain crimes being in the service of the greater good as far as the individuals committing those crimes see them, and for certain objects as seeming to possess willpower, agency, and intent to the individuals discerning them.

The criminologically focused reader might say that this is only of moderate interest. The world is open to all sorts of "interpretations," and it is hardly surprising that in the multitude of cultures and circumstances that exist we can find one scenario in which people construct meaning in a way that seems counterintuitive to established criminological traditions. In general, this might be a fair critique, but our point here is not to ask: "Isn't it interesting that the cultural meaning of Shaligrams to some people is that of good crimes and willful objects?" Instead, we consider the relationships between Shaligrams and humans toward a more important assertion: *objects and the way we interact with them can cause crime*.

This opens up entirely new avenues of consideration for criminological research and criminal justice cross-culturally. If objects may be seen as participating in crimes, is the next step a discussion about their prospective status as legally capable actors? Can an object be "guilty"? Might the law incorporate an understanding of objects as "responsible" for their actions/affordances, etc.? How might any such approaches support or perhaps undermine global efforts at heritage preservation between nations? There is much to think about and discuss in these, and other, questions that arise from the contention that, in the end, it is the relationships between agentic actors (humans and objects) that create the circumstances in which crime becomes more likely.

The case of Shaligrams highlights this potentially criminogenic relationship between objects and humans because it represents what could be considered an extreme example of the influence that objects can have over people, and consequently the determination that people

can have to undertake criminal activity driven by those objects, crimes that they consider to be necessary or "good." The ability of extreme examples to highlight issues with the prevailing interpretation of human social experience can prompt reflection on whether we should question some of the ideas and assumptions of mainstream and widely accepted theories.

The challenge to criminological theory is not that any one theory should apply everywhere at all times and admit to no exceptions. The challenge is more that we should work with the world as it really is, which may well be messier and more complicated than we would prefer it to be. If crime is indeed not always a bad thing, and objects are not always passive, we argue that these ideas can help develop our thinking around crime and justice more widely than the geographical and cultural limits of the present case study might seem to suggest.

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Note

1. Holly Walters personally consulted with the museum on this issue in 2020, and they provided proof of the Shaligrams in their collections through collection records and photographs without permission to publish the materials. The Shaligrams themselves are currently off exhibit, however.

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