Handbook of Material Culture

Colonial Matters: Material Culture and Postcolonial Theory in Colonial Situations

Contributors: Peter Dommelen
Editors: Christopher Tilley & Webb Keane & Susanne Küchler & Michael Rowlands & Patricia Spyer
Book Title: Handbook of Material Culture
Chapter Title: "Colonial Matters: Material Culture and Postcolonial Theory in Colonial Situations"
Pub. Date: 2006
Access Date: September 09, 2015
Publishing Company: SAGE Publications Ltd
City: London
Print ISBN: 9781412900393
Online ISBN: 9781848607972
Definitions of major theoretical perspectives are, even at the best of times, always going to be as much slippery and vague as wrapped in controversy and attempts to pinpoint what postcolonial theory is about or what it tries to achieve usually do not fare much better. If anything, postcolonialism defies any such effort right from the start, as there is widespread debate about the very term that can or should be used to refer to the body of concepts and tenets that have by and large become grouped together under the banner of ‘postcolonial theory’.

Disagreement erupts from the outset when writing out the very term ‘postcolonial’: should postcolonial be spelled with a hyphen or written as one word? And does the prefix ‘post’ signal the same things as in ‘postmodern’ (Appiah 1991)? The hyphenated version is the oldest of the two spellings. It was first used in the 1960s and 1970s by economists, political scientists and anthropologists who were discussing decolonization in Third World countries that had been occupied by Western colonial powers. In this straightforwardly chronological use of the term, the prefix must be understood literally and the neologism as a whole simply refers to the period after colonialism. In recent years, however, deletion of the hyphen has gradually gained currency in academic circles, especially in literary studies (cf. below), in order to signal an endeavour to go beyond colonialism in a metaphorical and ideological rather than simply chronological sense. As a result, the unhyphenated version of the term denotes nothing simple at all, as the hyphen has in practice been displaced by a host of associated but not necessarily coherent connotations that are assumed to amount to a particular analytical and theoretical perspective on colonialism (Barker et al. 1994: 1; Loomba 1998: 7–8). Adding to the confusion is that the chronological sense of the term has not entirely been supplanted either, as there is a general recognition that the academic postcolonial
perspective roots directly in the ‘post-colonial condition’ of the wider world and that the former cannot, and indeed should not, be separated from the latter (Jacobs 1996: 22–9; Young 2003: 45–68).

Although the absence of a coherent set of basic principles has led to the increasing insistence that ‘there is no single entity called “post-colonial theory”’ (Young 2003: 7), the multitude of introductions to, handbooks on and readers of postcolonialism that have appeared as well as the launch of two major academic journals suggest a rather different situation in practice.¹ In academic terms at least, there certainly does appear to be a distinct way of thinking or perspective that is subscribed to by substantial numbers of academics and other intellectuals alike, whose primary academic basis is to be found in literary and cultural studies. Leaving aside for the moment the finer details of the origins, coherence and scope of postcolonial theory, I note that postcolonial studies can at the very least be characterized, if not defined, as a specifically Western analytical perspective about representing colonial situations and structures and I will use the term in that sense throughout the chapter. Where this leaves the term ‘postcolonialism’ is another matter which I will consider in more detail below.

While this simple observation alone would warrant exploration of these ideas and insights and consideration of their relevance to and connections with material culture studies, it is worth noting that the rise of postcolonial studies has been accompanied by a renewed interest in colonialism and colonial situations more generally, that has not had much follow-up in material culture studies. This is all the more remarkable, as material culture has gained substantial prominence in discussions of globalization, which is a theme that is inherently intertwined with post-colonial developments (in the chronological sense), and which has not escaped the attention of postcolonial studies. Because globalization studies constitute a substantial field in themselves at the interface between geography and anthropology that has not failed to note the significance of material culture, I will limit my discussion in this chapter to colonial situations (Eriksen 2003; cf. below).

It is therefore my aim in this chapter first to discuss postcolonialism and the wide-ranging views of postcolonial studies as well as to consider their background and characteristics. I will then go on to explore how and to what extent they can inform
material culture studies and how an emphasis on the role of material culture may contribute to postcolonial theory and studies of colonialism. Throughout the chapter I will draw on archaeological and anthropological examples from colonial situations across the world, albeit with a bias towards the Mediterranean.

Postcolonial Origins: Decolonization, Colonial Representation and Subaltern Resistance

While the suggestion that the Algerian war of independence (1954–62) represented a critical moment in the emergence of postcolonial studies may be difficult to substantiate (Young 1990: 1), there can be little doubt that their origins hark back to the early post-World War II decades, when the European nations were dismantling their overseas colonial networks. As formal decolonization, for a variety of reasons, was slow or failed to be matched by economic and cultural independence, Western neo-colonialism was denounced by both political activists and scholars. Economic relationships between the recently independent countries and north-west Europe and North America were also increasingly analysed academically, from which sprang scholarly concepts such as dependency theory and world systems theory (Frank 1967; Wallerstein 1974; Amin 1976).

The cultural critique of Western neocolonialism was by contrast mostly fronted by writers outside the academy. Authors like Leopold Sédar Sengor, Wole Soyinka and Aimé Césaire led the way for (francophone) authors in Africa and the Caribbean to extol indigenous values, traditions and cultural achievement under the banner of the so-called nègritude movement and to insist on the cultural liberation of their countries. Other intellectuals, among them Franz Fanon, Albert Memmi, Amilcar Cabral and Mahatma Gandhi, soon joined these demands, insisting that the formerly colonized countries and peoples should become aware of the cultural and historical legacies of Western colonialism (Young 2001: 159–334). Fanon in particular pointed out that colonialism ‘turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it’ (1967: 169) and emphasized the importance of writing ‘decolonized histories’ in which
indigenous people are fully represented and play an active part. How this advice could be put into practice was brilliantly demonstrated by the Moroccan historian Abdellah Laroui, who wrote an ‘alternative’ History of the Maghreb (1970, 1977). In this study, he foregrounded the role of the Berber inhabitants as opposed to the Roman and French contributions to the region emphasized in conventional colonialist histories. Shortly afterwards, the Algerian historian Marcel Bénabou published his study of Roman North Africa (1976), in which he explored this period from an indigenous perspective and emphasized local resistance to Roman rule and culture. He particularly drew attention to the fact that many allegedly Roman features of and contributions to North Africa, as diverse as certain deities and rituals, funerary and domestic architecture and irrigation and other related hydraulic engineering systems, can actually be traced back to pre-colonial times and argued that Roman North Africa maintained a substantial indigenous dimension (Bénabou 1976; cf. Mattingly 1996). Slightly later, and taking his lead separately from Marxism and world systems theory, Eric Wolf proposed an alternative global history of the early modern period (1982).

[p. 106 ↓ ] Postcolonial theory has subsequently developed as an academic discipline from the study of the writings of these pioneering authors into what has been summarized as ‘a certain kind of interdisciplinary political, theoretical and historical work that sets out to serve as a transnational forum for studies grounded in the historical context of colonialism as well as in the political context of contemporary problems of globalization’ (Young 1998: 4). This rather loose definition reflects a frequently expressed view that postcolonial studies are not and should not be limited to academics alone. To many people, the postcolonial critique of colonialist concepts and stereotypes should be voiced in the wider world, too, especially because the consequences of colonization continue to be felt in a range of ways. Hence the claim that ‘postcolonialism is about a changing world, a world that has been changed by struggle and which its practitioners intend to change further’ (Young 2003: 7).

It should also be noted that in this view the relevance of postcolonial theories is explicitly not restricted to colonial situations proper but that they apply just as much to contemporary decolonized or post-colonial contexts and their specific economic, political and cultural dependences that derive from older colonial connections.
The honour to have galvanized these widespread feelings of unease about the post-colonial world is unanimously awarded to Edward Said, whose *Orientalism* (1978) is widely recognized as the founding text of postcolonial studies (e.g. Quayson 2000: 3; Loomba 1998: 43). While postcolonial studies draw on a wide range of influences, it is Said's merit to have woven the various strands together into a more or less coherent ensemble. Among these threads, two in particular have been elaborated upon and added to in many respects. These are known under the labels of ‘colonial discourse analysis’ and the ‘subaltern studies group’. In the remainder of this section, I will briefly discuss these constitutive influences on postcolonial studies.

**Edward Said and the Power of Culture**

The basic thesis put forward by Said in *Orientalism* (1978) and elaborated in more general terms in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) is that colonial domination does not rely on violence and exploitation alone but is ‘supported and perhaps even impelled by impressive ideological formations … as well as forms of knowledge affiliated with domination’ (Said 1993: 8). Following Foucault's insistence that ‘power and knowledge directly imply one another’ (Said 1978: 27), Said argued that ‘ideas, cultures and histories cannot seriously be studied without their force, or more precisely their configurations of power, also being studied’ (Said 1978: 5). With regard to the Middle East, this meant that British and French colonial rule was greatly assisted by the creation and cultivation of Western prejudices and stereotypes about the region and its inhabitants. Representing them variously as primitive, unreliable and lascivious not only morally justified European occupation of the region – at least in Western terms – but also discouraged local people from actively resisting European rule. As Said demonstrated in a careful examination of a wide range of media varying from novels, scholarly accounts and popular journals to paintings, school books and political speeches, these stereotypes became a permanent feature of life in the colonies and the home countries alike and effectively made Western representation so persistent and pervasive that resistance became literally inconceivable.

Theoretically, Said based these arguments on Foucault's contention that specialized knowledge must be expressed in a specific way as part of a particular ‘discourse’ in order to be acceptable to the specific tradition or ‘discursive formation’ of the
relevant field or institution. Because ‘Orientalism can be discussed and analysed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient’, as Said explicitly argued (1978: 3), the seemingly disparate range of Orientalist representations he had examined thus turned out to constitute a coherent ‘system of knowledge about the Orient’, in which ‘the Orient is less a place than a topos, a set of references, a congeries of characteristics…’ (Said 1978: 177). In essence, it is therefore the hidden coherence of the various representations that explains their impact on the ‘real’ world outside the texts (cf. Young 2001: 395–410).

The influence of Said’s work on postcolonial studies is best demonstrated by the fact that his emphasis on discourse has basically created an entirely new field which is now called ‘colonial discourse analysis’ and which in literary circles has practically become shorthand for postcolonial analysis. Given Said’s literary background – he taught English literature – it is also fitting that his work has contributed much to the present literary focus of postcolonial studies.

[p. 107 ↓]

Representation and Colonial Discourse

While it is clearly Said’s merit to have placed representation at the heart of postcolonial studies, the latter have been influenced no less by Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha, and it is a measure of their impact that the three of them have been dubbed the ‘holy trinity’ of postcolonial theory (Young 1995: 165). Practically all handbooks follow suit and dedicate a chapter to each of the three theorists.

The literary orientation already evident in Said’s work has strongly been reinforced by Spivak and Bhabha, not least because both are literary theorists, too (Moore-Gilbert 1997: 74–151; cf. Thomas 1994: 51–60). In theoretical terms, they have both elaborated on the textual nature of discourse and representation, drawing attention to its fragmented and incoherent if not contradictory nature. In doing so, they have also tended to emphasize the autonomy of colonial discourse from its authors and often the external world altogether. This is particularly evident in Bhabha’s work, as he pays little attention to the economic, political and indeed material world in which the texts
were produced. He has accordingly repeatedly been accused of ‘an “exhorbitation of discourse” [and] of neglecting material conditions of colonial rule by concentrating on colonial representation’ (Loomba 1998: 96; cf. Moore-Gilbert 1997: 147–8). This critique holds only partially true for Spivak, who has taken up Derrida's notion of deconstruction to read texts of colonial discourse ‘against the grain’, because she emphasizes that the hidden voices she exposes relate to ‘real’ groups of people in the colonial world. On the whole, however, there is no denying that postcolonial studies have adopted an ever-increasing focus on literary critique and literary representations that is evidently at odds with Said's insistence on the systematic and institutionalized nature of colonial discourse and its intimate connections with social and political power (Loomba 1998: 69–103; Young 2001: 389–94; cf. below).

Spivak and Bhabha's major contribution to postcolonial thinking concerns the coherence of colonial discourse, which was a key issue for Said. As Spivak has made clear in her seminal essay ‘Can the subaltern speak?’ (1985), the alleged uniformity of colonial discourse is interspersed with implicit references to and statements by groups of people who are denied an official voice, like peasants and women. While Spivak has elaborated on Said's lack of attention to the colonized and attempts to retrieve an alternative history from the colonizers' representations, Bhabha has called into question the strong opposition between colonizers and colonized, emphasizing the common ground bridging the alleged ‘colonial divide’ between the two sides. Highlighting the ambiguities of colonial discourse, he explores what he calls the ‘third space’ of colonial situations (Bhabha 1989), where he finds ‘processes of interaction that create new social spaces to which new meanings are given’ (Young 2003: 79). Bhabha's discussion of these processes of interaction in terms of hybridization has given rise to a major theme in postcolonial studies (Young 1990: 141–56; Werbner and Modood 1997).

While Spivak and Bhabha have led the way with ever more sophisticated analyses of colonial discourse and representation, the critique of widespread textualism in postcolonial studies ‘at the expense of materialist historical inquiry and politicized understanding’ (Young 1995: 161, 2001: 390) has steadily become louder. In response, Robert Young has begun to explore the roots of postcolonial studies beyond literary studies, insisting on the intimate connections between culture and politics, representation and domination – effectively going back to Foucault's tenet that ‘there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor
any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations’ (1979: 27; Young 2001, 2003).

**Alternative Histories and Subaltern Resistance**

There is another strand of postcolonial studies that goes back as far as *Orientalism*: in the late 1970s a group of historians began regular meetings in Cambridge to discuss South Asian historiography, because they were dissatisfied with its elitist and colonialist bias. Their joint publication in 1982 became the first of a series of (so far) eleven volumes published under the banner of the subaltern studies group (Guha 1982b; see Chaturvedi 2000; Young 2001: 352–6).

In the programmatic opening essay of that volume, Ranajit Guha explicitly spelled out their intention to highlight ‘the subaltern classes and groups constituting the mass of the labouring population and the intermediate strata in town and country – that is, the people’ who had so far consistently been refused a place in Indian and Asian history (Guha 1982a: 4).

The subaltern scholars share their emancipatory goal to write alternative histories ‘from below’ with post-colonial intellectuals like Césaire, Cabral and Laroui. As with many proponents of dependency or world systems theory like Wolf or Amin, Marxism looms very large in their conceptual baggage. As signalled by the prominent use of the term ‘subaltern’, the ‘subaltern scholars’ draw in particular on the work of Antonio Gramsci, whose inspiration was also explicitly invoked by Said (1978: 6–7, 1993: 56–9). They have in particular borrowed Gramsci’s notion of subalternity as a means to restore agency to the peasants and colonized alike and to insist on their autonomy: ‘subaltern politics … was an autonomous domain … It neither originated in elite politics nor did its existence depend on the latter’ (Guha 1982a: 4, original emphasis).

In order to redress the colonialist stereotypes of the passive and irrational peasant and their alleged ‘inability to make their own history’ (O’Hanlon 1988: 192), the subaltern
scholars and other historians in their wake have seized on the theme of rebellion and resistance, exploring the role and significance of rioting, banditry and forms of ‘silent resistance’ such as tax dodging, poaching, evasion, etc. (Scott 1985; Haynes and Prakash 1991; Adas 1991). Despite numerous references, Gramsci's views on hegemony and resistance have, however, received much less attention, perhaps because their theoretical implications are at odds with the much acclaimed peasant autonomy (Arnold 1984). This is unfortunate, because Gramsci's discussion of the ways in which the subaltern 'common sense' is shaped by hegemonic culture but may also give rise to forms of silent resistance gets close to the postcolonial notion of hybridity as proposed by Bhabha and others (Mitchell 1990; van Dommelen 1998: 28–9).

On the whole, the subaltern studies volumes have been very influential, as they have not only succeeded in opening up new debates in South Asian historiography but because they have also inspired alternative perspectives on colonial history elsewhere in the world, notably in South America (Young 2001: 356–9; cf. Prakash 1995; Schmidt and Patterson 1995).

Representing Colonialism

If ever there was one term that expressed what postcolonial studies are about, it would have to be ‘representation’. In the first place of course because of their heavy literary bias but in the second place also, and probably more importantly so, because of their concern with the place of the colonized in colonial societies, bearing in mind Said's assertion that knowing the Orient was key to European rule.

From this perspective, a number of key post-colonial themes can be identified that are loosely connected by a shared ‘contestation of colonialism and the legacies of colonialism’ (Loomba 1998: 12). These concern:

- 2. The awareness that colonial situations cannot be reduced to neat dualist representations of colonizers versus colonized, because there are always
many groups and communities that find themselves to varying degrees in between these extremes.

- 3. The recognition that hybrid cultures are common, if not inherent, features of colonial situations because of the constant and usually intense interaction between people.

Given its roots in Western (neo)colonialism, postcolonial theory is undoubtedly a Western perspective, and a largely intellectual and academic one at that. Nevertheless, the broad terms outlined above do not necessarily apply to Western modern colonialism alone, even if that tends to dominate research. These general principles can be applied equally fruitfully to the analysis of earlier pre-modern colonial situations, such as ancient Greek colonialism or the early Spanish occupation of Central America, or indeed contemporary, formally decolonized situations such as twenty-first-century West Africa (van Dommelen 2002: 126–9; Mignolo 2000: 93–100).

## Contextualizing Postcolonialism

Outside literary studies, postcolonial theory has not become a distinct field anywhere else. There is nevertheless no shortage in other disciplines of research inspired by or drawing on postcolonial theory, especially not in history, as one might expect, given the historical background of the subaltern studies group (Cohn 1990; Washbrook 1999).² In anthropology and archaeology, where most attention to material culture may be expected, postcolonial ideas have certainly not passed unnoticed, especially as colonialism has again come to the fore as an increasingly prominent research topic (Thomas 1994; Gosden 1999: 197–203, 2004; cf. Pels 1997; Lyons and Papadopoulos 2002).

In both anthropology and archaeology colonialism has long remained – and to some extent continues to be – a theme of limited interest in general. It is only in specific fields, such as Pacific ethnography and classical and historical archaeology, where colonial situations play a central part, that colonialism has been the subject of substantial debates. This is somewhat surprising, because colonialism has been such a widespread phenomenon across the globe and through the ages that it has arguably
been a manifest feature of many situations (Gosden 2004). As pointed out earlier, this contrasts markedly with the attention given in anthropology to globalization (Eriksen 2003).

While the renewed anthropological archaeological interest in colonialism has certainly resulted in a number of fine studies of the significance of specific categories of material culture in colonial situations (see below), it is nevertheless the representation of colonial situations that has figured most prominently in anthropological and archaeological studies of colonialism, alongside occasional more specific approaches such as a long-term perspective in archaeological studies. In this section I will first discuss how these two disciplines have responded to postcolonial theory. I will then focus more specifically on material culture and examine, first of all, how it has been studied in relation to colonialism and postcolonial theory. Because of the very different ways in which material culture and consumption have been taken up in globalization studies I will limit this discussion to colonial situations only. Second, I will explore some theoretical issues of relevance to material culture studies and postcolonial theory alike.

Archaeological and Anthropological Representations

In both anthropology and archaeology, most attention has been focused on the connections between the disciplines and contemporary colonialism. Although the awareness of the colonial entanglements of academic research in both disciplines is ultimately related to the political and cultural decolonization of the Third World, it is only anthropological inquiries into the active involvement of anthropologists in colonial administrations that can be traced back to the 1950s and 1960s (Asad 1973; Stocking 1991; Pels and Salemink 1999; Gosden 1999: 15–32; 58–9). While the actual contribution of anthropologists to the establishment and maintaining of colonial power was fairly minor, this certainly does not hold for the reverse: as Talal Asad points out, it was not simply that colonial connections facilitated fieldwork, the heart of the matter surely is the recognition that ‘the fact of European power, as discourse and practice, was always part of the reality anthropologists sought to understand’ (Asad 1991: 315). With the debates about the ‘crisis of representation’ and ‘critical reflexivity’ in recent
decades, anthropologists have realized the impact of many colonialist concepts and discourses that remained influential after decolonization, and have accordingly shifted attention from examining practical and direct collaboration with colonial administrators, missionaries or military officials to considering issues of representation and authority in general. A key study in this respect has been Johannes Fabian's *Time and the Other* (1983) that demonstrated how the denial of time and change in anthropological studies continued to contribute to a notion of Western superiority (Pels 1997: 165–6). It is finally worth noting that parallel developments in postcolonial theory have not gone unnoticed by anthropologists (e.g. Thomas 1994), while the same cannot be said of postcolonial studies, which remain slow to pick up on research outside literary studies.

Archaeology, in contrast, has been much slower to wake up and own up to its colonial baggage. In evident contrast to anthropology, it did not examine its specific colonial roots and more general Western biases until quite recently. That does not mean that no archaeologist has ever noticed or commented on the implications of their disciplinary past, as Bruce Trigger had already drawn attention to the colonialist and nationalist biases of archaeological representations in 1984 (Trigger 1984). At the same time, Michael Rowlands exposed Western prejudice in representations of European prehistory (1984, 1986). But well known and much cited as these papers are, most people have taken them not to apply to their particular field and it was not until a more general interest in disciplinary history developed in the later 1990s that archaeologists began a critical self-examination of their colonial inheritance.

Postcolonial theory has played a significant part in this process, which has been most prominent in Mediterranean and classical archaeology. One of the best examples can be found in North Africa, in Algeria in particular, where the abundance and high quality of monumental remains of the Roman period (second and first centuries BC to fifth and sixth centuries AD) has always attracted much attention, both from archaeologists and the French colonial authorities. Inspired by colonial discourse theory, the one-sided colonialist bias of the histories written by (mostly French) archaeologists and historians has recently been laid bare, and the active and sustained involvement of the French military in archaeological fieldwork and publication has been made evident (Mattingly 1996, 1997; cf. Webster 1996 and Hingley 2000: 1–27 for a British perspective). The latter not only facilitated archaeological research but
also actively appropriated the Roman past of the Maghreb by comparing themselves to the Roman army and presenting themselves as their rightful successors. This is evident from the myriad references to Roman military feats in accounts of the French occupation as well as from the frequent comparisons between the Roman and French armies and their respective achievements in an authoritative study of the Roman army in North Africa by the historian René Cagnat (published in 1832: Dondin-Payre, 1991). These ideas also influenced French military activities on the ground and led to the active involvement of troops in the excavation and restoration of Roman remains. This is best demonstrated by the Roman military camp of Lambaesis in the Batna region of north-east Algeria, which was largely excavated by the French military, who had begun to construct a prison on the site (Figure 7.1). Under the direction of Colonel Carbuccia, the Roman camp was unearthed between 1848 and 1852. These activities included the reconstruction of the tomb of T. Flavius Maximus, the commander of the Roman third legion based in Lambaesis, and adding a French inscription commemorating these restorations. When the monument was formally inaugurated in 1849, Colonel Carbuccia extensively praised the Roman officer as his illustrious predecessor, while his troops saluted them both with a rifle volley and march-past (Dondin-Payre 1991: 148–149).

Throughout Algeria in particular, there are plenty of examples where the French colonial authorities used Roman remains to suggest, if not to claim explicitly, that they had returned to land that was legitimately theirs, thereby ignoring and often cancelling thirteen centuries of Muslim settlement and much longer Berber presence (Prochaska 1990: 212). As more attention is gradually being paid to indigenous traditions and contributions before and during the Roman period, it is fitting that it was precisely in the Maghreb that calls for such an alternative history were first voiced with regard to (Roman) archaeology. It nevertheless remains a demonstration of the strength of colonial representations that it is only now that Marcel Bénabou’s work has been rediscovered: when he wrote his La Résistance africaine (1976) in the wake of the Algerian war of independence, it was all but ignored by Western archaeologists (van Dommelen 1998: 20–1).

Its colonial roots have also been brought home to archaeology, especially in North America and Australia, by indigenous people’s claims of ancestral objects and bodies which had been recovered in the name of science or which had simply been looted (Gosden 2001: 249–57). Overall, it is obvious that postcolonial theory has certainly not
gone unnoticed in archaeology and anthropology, although it is the former discipline in particular which has been influenced most directly.

Colonial Contexts in Practice: Hegemony, Resistance and Material Culture

Despite the recognition that postcolonial theory suggests radically new ways of looking at colonial situations, there have been relatively few archaeological or anthropological studies that have really engaged with these ideas and that have placed them at the heart of their approach; and even fewer have made the explicit connection between material culture and post-colonial theory. As a consequence, the literary bias of postcolonial study has imposed itself on the social and human sciences, instead of being redressed by an emphasis on social practice, human agency and, of course, material culture.

As mentioned earlier, the ‘weak contextualizations’ of postcolonial theory have already repeatedly been criticized because of the tendency in postcolonial theory to ignore the often harsh realities of colonialism on the ground (Turner 1995: 204; Parry 1987, 2002). Several anthropologists have taken this observation to its logical conclusion and have argued that colonial projects cannot be reduced to either economic exploitation or cultural domination and that both coercion and persuasion are part of the colonial equation, because, as Nicholas Thomas has said, ‘even the purest moments of profit and violence have been mediated and enframed by structures of meaning’ (1994: 2).

While Thomas's book *Colonialism's Culture* has perhaps most explicitly called for more attention to ‘the competence of actors’ in the shaping of colonial situations (1994: 58; cf. Turner 1995: 206–10), the most extensive ethnographic elaboration of the specific ways in which people's daily activities were part and parcel of the colonial process is surely provided by the two volumes of John and Jean Comaroff's *Of Revelation and Revolution* that have so far appeared (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, 1997). In this study, they highlight the roles of the various actors involved in the colonial context of Tswana land in northern South Africa, in particular the missionaries and the local Tswana people. They are at pains to distinguish between the different positions
and perspectives among the local Tswana as embodied by ‘the humble prophetess Sabina, the iconoclastic, *nouveau-riche* Molema, the “heathen” chief Montshiwa and many others’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001: 116). All these actors voiced their views in what the Comaroffs call the ‘long conversation’ between Methodist missionaries and Tswana people, and they all tried to have things their own way. A key argument developed throughout both volumes is that it was not so much the overt attempts of the missionaries to impose themselves that had the greatest impact on the colonial situation but rather that most changes occurred unconsciously under hegemonic colonial influence (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 23–7; cf. Piot and Auslander 2001).

*Figure 7.1 Overview of the site of the Roman military camp of Lambaesis, as shown on a nineteenth-century postcard*


It is Gramsci’s notion of hegemony, ‘updated’ as it were with ample reference to Bourdieu’s theory of practice, that several anthropologists have invoked as a conceptual means to connect local practices with the wider colonial structures of domination and exploitation (most notably Keesing 1994; Comaroff 1985; Comaroff and Comaroff 1991). Unlike the subaltern scholars, however, they focus on the extent to which subaltern consciousness is (or is not) swayed under hegemonic influence. Particular attention is given to what Gramsci called the ‘practical activity’ of people, of which they have ‘no clear theoretical consciousness’ but which ‘nonetheless involves understanding the world in so far as it transforms it’ (*Quaderni* 11.12). It is again
the Comaroffs’ work that exemplifies how practice, theory and postcolonial views about resistance and hybridity can meaningfully be brought together. They use both concepts to capture the ‘in-betweenness’ of many indigenous and colonial activities and processes, as local people actively transformed changes that colonizers attempted to impose, emphasizing that ‘processes of cultural appropriation and admixture … occurred on all sides, and on the middle ground, of the colonial encounter’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001: 113). As argued by the Comaroffs, these processes constitute a dialectic that lies at the heart of colonial situations, because it ‘altered everyone and everything involved, if not all in the same manner and measure’ through ‘an intricate mix [p. 112 ↓ ] of visible and invisible agency, of word and gesture, of subtle persuasion and brute force on the part of all concerned’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997: 5, 28; see van Dommelen 1998: 28–32 for a detailed discussion).

Because of their emphasis on daily life and routine practices, such an approach inevitably touches on material culture as constituting an integral feature of the shaping of everyday experiences and practice (Bourdieu 1990: 52–65; Appadurai 1986; Miller 1987). This observation is all the more relevant to colonial situations, that are after all largely defined by the physical co-presence of colonizers and colonized (Thomas 1994; Pels 1999: 1–43). Material culture plays a critical, if rarely acknowledged, role in these ‘contact zones’, because it frames everyday colonial life and colonial interaction in general (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 274–8; cf. Pratt 1992). Material culture can also be argued to be particularly prominent in colonial situations, because of the usually strong and inevitably very visible contrasts between colonial and indigenous objects (Thomas 1991: 205–6). Another quite different reason for examining material culture in conjunction with postcolonial ideas is the insights it may give into the lives and practices of those people who are usually absent from historical documents and novels, i.e. those better known as the ‘subaltern’.

Postcolonial Matters

Whilst colonial situations may differ substantially from other social contexts in a variety of ways, social interaction in such contexts is not intrinsically different from that in general (Pels 1997: 166–9; Prochaska 1990: 6–26). There is consequently no reason why material culture would play a less significant role in colonial situations than
anywhere else. The basic insight that ‘things matter’ consequently applies just as much to colonial contexts as to any other situation (Miller 1998: 3).

While there is a remarkable lack of archaeological and anthropological studies that have taken up the role of material culture in relation to postcolonial theory, as discussed above, the significance of material culture in colonial contexts has nevertheless been highlighted or commented on in one way or another by a number of archaeologists, anthropologists, art historians and geographers. Most of these studies are unrelated to one another, as they consider colonial situations that differ widely in time and place, and only few refer explicitly to postcolonial theories. At the same time, they do share several broad themes that relate to postcolonial thinking in general. Some of these themes may be associated with more widely shared concerns of our time but others can arguably be ascribed to a shared interest in material culture which has led these studies to investigate the various colonial situations along similar lines.

In this final section I will discuss a range of colonial studies with a particular focus on material culture and argue why and how they demonstrate ways forward to draw on post-colonial ideas in material culture studies. By and large, three broad themes can be distinguished that relate closely to the key postcolonial ideas outlined above (p. 108) and that I suggest offer as many promising avenues for examining material culture in (post)colonial studies. These three themes concern the material dimensions of representation, the use of material culture for writing alternative histories ‘from below’ and the material expressions of hybridization processes. It should be noted, however, that these strands are not strictly separate and indeed do intertwine.

Material Discourse and Representation

One particularly exciting and promising avenue for new research that is being pioneered by material culture studies in colonial situations regards discourse and representation: while the literary bias of postcolonial studies is increasingly being noted and redressed by an increasing interest in other genres and media of representation such as school books, engravings and paintings (Douglas 1999; Young 2001: 390–1, 408–10), material culture constitutes another, so far largely unexplored, dimension of representation. More specifically, it is houses and settlement layouts that are being explored as related
to and indicative of people’s perceptions of and actual responses to colonial contexts (Chattopadhyay 1997: 1). Domestic architecture and settlement planning feature particularly prominently among the studies exploring this strand, because there are well established and profound links between how people organize their living spaces in practical terms and their views of how life should properly be lived (Miller 1994: 135–202; Robben 1989; cf. Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995).

A powerful example is provided by Chattopadhyay’s study of colonial houses in (late) nineteenth-century Calcutta, in which she demonstrates that the domestic life of the British residents in this city was organized in ways that diverged quite markedly from the Victorian ideal as usually expressed in public (2000, 2002). General historical wisdom has it that the colonial world of British India was dominated by the strict separation of public and private spheres, in which men and women led strictly separate lives. Keeping up the distinction and literally keeping a distance from the indigenous inhabitants was deemed to be equally important, and it was the women’s task to realize this in the domestic context. Novels and housekeeping guides are the key sources from which evidence is sought to support this representation (Chattopadhyay 2002: 243–6).

*Figure 7.2 Three examples of colonial house plans in nineteenth-century Calcutta that clearly show the central place of the grand hall Source: Chattopadhyay (2002: figure 1)*
On closer inspection of the actual houses occupied by the colonial inhabitants of Calcutta, however, it turns out that colonial life on the ground was rather different. For a start, the layout of houses was typically very much open-plan, organized as it was around a grand central hall with multiple aligned doorways to promote ventilation (Figure 7.2). In many cases, the rooms could be closed off from the hall only by a curtain and, even if there were doors, they could not normally be locked. In most cases the hallway was used as both drawing and dining room, because it was the largest space available, and the direct access from there to the bedrooms was a common cause of complaint among colonial inhabitants of Calcutta. While separate spaces at the back of the house were usually reserved for servants, the open structure made it difficult to maintain any strict separation between residents and servants. Any such distinction was often blurred even further by the use of the veranda as an extension of the hall.
to enjoy a cool breeze, because it literally extended the residential spaces among the storage and working areas of the servants (Chattopadhyay 2000: 158–66).

Taking material culture into account not only provides an alternative source of evidence, demonstrating why colonial discourse analysis can be problematic in historical and anthropological terms, but also allows us to consider representations of the colonial situation in another light and effectively to contextualize them. This point can again be demonstrated with evidence from Calcutta, which was (and is) generally represented as a typical colonial city, where colonizers and colonized lived entirely separate lives in distinct ‘black’ and ‘white’ towns. The widespread occurrence of neoclassical architecture is usually highlighted to underscore the colonial nature of the city. Scrutiny of residential patterns and of the spatial organization of the city, however, suggests that these architectural features merely provide a colonialist facade, behind which colonial and indigenous lives were lived in much less strictly separate ways than publicly suggested (Chattopadhyay 2000: 154–7). What is interesting in this instance is that material culture – neoclassical architecture – was used to prop up a representation of the colonial context that was contradicted, if not challenged, by the situation on the ground.

A comparable case has been documented in Morocco under French rule (1912–56), where the colonial authorities created ‘dual’ or segregated cities by building modern European-style villes nouveaux next to and in many ways in opposition to the existing indigenous medinas [p. 114 ↓] (Abu-Lughod 1980: 131–73). The professed motivations of Lyautey the governor-general of the French protectorate of Morocco between 1912 and 1925, for spearheading large-scale urban transformation alternated between modernist planning concerns and the desire to preserve indigenous architecture (Rabinow 1989: 104–25). At the same time, they also served the colonial interests of the French colonial elites particularly well.

The modern capital of Rabat is a clear case in point, as the centuries-old town became literally surrounded by new French developments in less than a decade after the French take-over. As the new city plan shows, the city centre was shifted away from the indigenous old town, which was literally bypassed by the spacious new boulevards (Abu-Lughod 1980: 155–62; Figure 7.3). In addition, the obvious contrast between the latter and the narrow and dark alleys of the medina, as well as that between the
indigenous architecture with its dark mud bricks and irregular outlines and the straight lines and brightness of the concrete tower blocks in the *ville nouvelle* actively reinforced the colonialist representation of the indigenous [p. 115 ↓ ] Moroccans as backward and by implication in need of Western and modern(ist) stewardship. As underscored by the stark contrast between the modernist boulevards and the mud-brick city walls in Rabat as well as by the use of terms such as *cordon sanitaire*, referring to the open spaces between the indigenous and European quarters, colonialist representation was supported as much by material culture as by discourse.

*Figure 7.3 Rabat around 1920, showing the colonial expansion of the city*

*Source:* Abu-Lughod (1980: figure 6)
This contrast, however, stood in obvious contradiction to developments in the urban centres of neighbouring Algeria, which had been under French rule since 1831. Those places witnessed the creation of a distinct French North African settler culture and in these hybridization processes well established distinctions between colonizers and colonized were gradually being lost (Abu-Lughod 1980: 152–5; Prochaska 1990: 206–29). These developments were actively countered by the French colonial elites, who coined for instance the disparaging term *pied noir* to refer to North African-born French settlers. The large-scale urban planning efforts can be seen in the same light as an attempt by the French colonial elites actively to use the material culture of the urban fabric to put the inhabitants of French Morocco literally in their place. Lyautey in fact admitted as much when he declared that he was keen to avoid the mistakes made in Algeria (Rabinow 1989: 288–90).

**Alternative Histories**

As the previous section has already demonstrated, material culture studies can unlock information about social groups who normally remain out of sight when considering colonial contexts through written documents, regardless of whether these are novels or other types of documents. As might be expected, archaeological research looms particularly large in this respect (Given 2004).

The point has most forcefully been made by the work in and around Fort Ross, which was a Russian trading and hunting settlement established in 1812 on the coast of northern California (Figure 7.4). The history and occupation of the fort itself are relatively well known from archival Russian sources and these show that close to the fort an indigenous settlement had been located, where native Alaskan workers were housed, who had been brought in by the Russian company as a labour force. Excavations in this settlement and careful analysis of the archaeological remains have, however, shown that the Alaskans were not the only inhabitants of the village. Because the evidence of the daily routines of food preparation and refuse disposal presents many affinities with indigenous Californian practices and because substantial quantities of indigenous Californian material culture like chipped-stone tools and milling stones were used in the village, it is evident that the Alaskans interacted quite closely with the local Kashaya Pomo people, forging, as has been suggested, quite intensive

Farther south along the Californian coast, a string of Spanish missions had been established between 1769 and 1835 with obviously very different intentions (Figure 7.4). Conversion and acculturation ranked most prominently among the aims of the missions and explain for instance the absence of indigenous settlements like the Alaskan village at Fort Ross: although documents attest that substantial numbers of indigenous people went to live at the missions, they all stayed within the colonial compound under the close supervision of the priests. Detailed analysis of the remains of some of the mission houses suggests, however, that within this colonial setting, many indigenous practices persisted nonetheless, especially those regarding food preparation and hunting (Lightfoot 2005a, 2005b).

While the documentary evidence emphasizes the differences between the two colonial situations in coastal California, the archaeological evidence demonstrates that that is not the whole story, because it was largely shaped by the colonizers’ perspective. Examination of the material culture actually in use on the ground allows us to refocus on indigenous and other groups that make up those colonial contexts. It also makes it patently clear that the colonial situations were far more complex than initially suggested and that, most of all, in both cases, despite the apparent differences, people of very different cultural and ethnic background lived together very closely without entirely losing their own traditions (Lightfoot 1995, 2005b; cf. below).

Alternative histories do not follow naturally from archaeological evidence, however, as much archaeological research is often heavily biased towards written evidence and works of art as well as guided by an elite perspective. This is most evident in the ancient Mediterranean, where colonialism played a prominent role throughout its history. In combination with the implicit identification of Western scholars with Greek, Roman or Phoenician colonizers, the colonial situations of classical antiquity have generally been presented in terms of colonizers bringing civilization and wealth, while the indigenous inhabitants of the colonized regions have routinely been ignored (van Dommelen 1997: 305–10).

Figure 7.4 California, showing the location of Fort Ross and the Spanish missions. The detail map shows the area around Fort Ross and the Alaskan village.
The Carthaginian colonial occupation of southern Sardinia between the fifth and third centuries bc is a case in point: documentary sources suggest that the Carthaginians controlled the southern regions of the island very closely and brought over large numbers of North African settlers to work on the great estates they had created to secure a steady supply of grain to the city of Carthage. While the impressive archaeological remains of the colonial cities on the coast and the widespread occurrence of Punic material culture in the interior regions of Sardinia have usually been taken to confirm this picture, intensive archaeological survey and careful analysis of the distribution of archaeological remains have brought to light a far more complicated colonial situation. While both the houses built and the household items used from the late fifth century bc onwards were of identical colonial Punic types, usually produced locally, their relative numbers as well as their distribution in [p. 117 ↓] and relationships
with the landscape differed greatly between the coastal lowlands and the interior (Figures 7.5–6). In the former areas, very high numbers of individual farmsteads were established *ex novo* in close proximity to colonial towns, whereas in the interior houses mostly clustered together into hamlets and villages (Figure 7.5). They were moreover usually built on the sites of long-established indigenous settlements that were clearly marked by monumental settlement towers called *nuraghi* (Figure 7.7). In many cases, the Punic houses simply continued earlier settlement patterns in a different guise. More important, no indications of elite-run estates have been encountered, as small-scale peasant cultivation appears to have been the dominant mode of agrarian production in the Punic period. The differences between the coastal and interior areas therefore suggest that Carthaginian settlers were dominant in the lowlands only, in proximity to the large colonial settlements, and that indigenous settlement patterns and landscape perceptions continued to be prominent in the inland hills and plains (van Dommelen 1998: 115–59, 2002).

*Figure 7.5 The west central region of Sardinia, showing Punic settlements dating from the fourth to the second centuries bc. Drawing Peter van Dommelen*
Figure 7.6 Two typically Punic locally produced domestic items from Punic sites in the Terralba district: an amphora and a tabuna, or cooking stand. Drawings Riu Mannu survey
Hybridizing Material Culture

Hybridity ranks particularly prominently among material culture studies of colonial situations, as the combined use of objects with different backgrounds is often an obvious feature. A good example is the combination of Alaskan-style houses ('flattened cabins') and settlement layout with local Kashaya stone tools in the so-called ‘Alaskan’ village of Fort Ross (Lightfoot et al. 1998: 209–15; cf. above). In this very basic sense, however, hybridity has little analytical force, as simply observing the combined use of diverse objects hardly contributes to an improved understanding of colonial contexts. If, however, the concept is connected to cultural practice and hybridization is redefined as the process underlying the ‘cultural mixture [which] is the effect of the practice of mixed origins’ (Friedman 1997: 88), it does provide a conceptual tool that allows Bhabha’s ideas about ambivalence and the ‘third space’ to be meaningfully related to social practice and material culture (Nederveen Pieterse 1995; Friedman 1997; van Dommelen forthcoming).

Figure 7.7 View of the nuraghe San Luxori (Pabillonis) immediately to the left of the medieval church dedicated to St Luxorius, with the site of the Punic-Roman settlement in the foreground. Photo Peter van Dommelen
In the case of the Alaskan village at Fort Ross, it is clear that the ‘mixing’ of material culture was not random but on the contrary highly structured: all indigenous objects can be associated with basic domestic practices like food preparation and cleaning the house while practices like the building of the house and hunting were all carried out in line with ‘Alaskan’ customs. This pattern confirms documentary evidence that the village had been set up by Alaskan men from Kodiak island who had been brought in by the Russians as marine hunters and labourers and that in time these men had formed households with local indigenous women, chiefly from the Kashaya Pomo tribe. Most significant is the observation that the diet in these ‘interethnic households’ was truly new, as it included foodstuffs that previously had not been consumed by either Alutiiq people (venison, Californian rockfish) or Kashaya people (seal, whale: Lightfoot et al. 1998: 212). This shows that the joint households of people from different ethnic background led to the creation of new hybrid practices.

Of key importance for understanding such hybridization processes is the realization that the meanings of the objects involved could not and did not remain unchanged. While this point has been forcefully made by Nicholas Thomas for colonial situations in general (Thomas 1991; 1997a), it is a critical feature of hybridization processes, in which existing practices and objects are recombined into new ones. This point is nicely made by Thomas in his discussion of the introduction of cloth in the Pacific, and in particular by the use of bark cloth in Samoa (1999, 2002). While cloth gradually replaced traditional bark clothes throughout Polynesia in the course of the late eighteenth century, the latter has continued to be used, albeit not as regular clothing, in various parts of western Polynesia. A particularly interesting case is Samoa, where bark cloth had never been common, but where the so-called _tiputa_, a type of bark cloth typical of Tahiti, was adopted in the early to mid-nineteenth century. What appears to have happened is that the inhabitants of Samoa regarded _tiputa_ in local terms as empowering their bearers, while the missionaries promoted them as symbols of Christian modesty. The interesting point is that these missionaries were mainly Tahitan converts who had adopted an indigenous garment from their own traditions and adapted it to their new needs and beliefs. In the Samoan context, the _tiputa_ were yet again given a new meaning and could thus coexist with the earlier introduced cloth (Thomas 2002: 196).
Similar consecutive reinterpretations and reconfigurations of the meaning of material culture have been noted in Punic Sardinia. In the interior of the island, a series of shrines have been recorded that were apparently dedicated to the Greek goddess Demeter. All documented cases reused a previously abandoned *nuraghe*. Careful excavation and detailed analysis of the finds associated with the Demeter shrine in *nuraghe* Genna Maria of Villanovaforru have painted a complex picture. The objects offered or otherwise used in the cult leave little doubt that the rituals performed in the shrine from the early fourth century BC onwards were not dedicated to the well known Greek goddess Demeter. There are first of all items such as incense burners that refer to Punic ritual traditions and show that the shrine represented a colonial introduction. This is supported by the fact that Demeter was adopted in the Punic pantheon in the early fourth century BC and the ensuing spread of a Punic version of her cult. The ritual assemblage is, however, dominated by oil lamps, which were alien to Punic rituals but which are known from a range of contemporary Sardinian sanctuaries, as well as several pre-colonial Iron Age ones. Interestingly, the many hundreds of oil lamps found are practically all Greek and later Roman imports from the Italian mainland but include a few hand-made ones resembling indigenous types (Figure 7.8).

It is obvious that, amid this multitude of influences and imports, no single ‘original’ meaning could have been kept intact and that the cult that was practised at Genna Maria represented a new ‘invention’ drawing on a range of locally available materials that were reinterpreted in the process. As underscored by the fact that the ritual of lighting or otherwise offering a lamp was important but that the type of lamp that was used was of no significance and that even incense burners may have been used in this role, the original provenance and connotations of the objects were superseded by the new meanings constructed in the [p. 120 ↓ ] new colonial and ritual setting (van Dommelen 1997: 314–16, 1998: 153–4, forthcoming).

*Figure 7.8 An oil lamp, incense burner and female portrait (of Demeter?) from the Punic shrine in the nuraghe Genna Maria*
Conclusion: Colonial Matters and Postcolonial Theory

While there may have been little interaction so far between postcolonial studies and material culture studies, I hope to have demonstrated that there surely is ample scope for joining up these fields. On the one hand, from a postcolonial perspective, paying more attention to material culture is important in two respects: in the first place, because it will help redress the literary bias in studying colonial situations while nicely complementing the present trend to examine colonial practices. And second, because it expands the range of the media in which colonial situations are represented beyond texts and illustrations. On the other hand, from the point of view of material culture studies, postcolonial theory offers the potential to explore the field of colonialism, while also providing innovative conceptual tools to look into globalization.

As the preceding case studies may have demonstrated, hybridization in particular can already be seen to emerge as a prominent theme in material culture studies, in both colonial situations and contemporary contexts of globalization. Nicholas
Thomas's work on the use and perception of material culture in colonial contexts and on colonialism more generally is clearly leading this way (Thomas 1991, 1994, 1997b). At the same time, a distinct field of archaeological colonial studies is emerging, in which the potential to construct alternative histories is realized in various exciting ways (Rowlands 1998; Hall 2000; Given 2004). Representation is finally the third key theme, in which anthropology and archaeology have begun fruitfully to explore how material culture can expand and add to the conventional literary bias of postcolonial studies (Thomas 1997b).

Notes


2 The journal *Comparative Studies in Society and History* is particularly important in publishing such work.

3 While there has been little reflection on the colonial roots of historical archaeology, which is the other field most explicitly engaged with colonialism, there has been increasing interest in the archaeology of slavery (cf. below).

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the editors for inviting me to contribute this chapter to this volume and Chris Tilley in particular for his helpful comments.

Peter van Dommelen

References


AppiahK. #Is the post- in postmodernism the post- in postcolonial?# Critical Inquiry 17 (1991) 336–57 http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/448586


Asad, T. (1991) #From the history of colonial anthropology to the anthropology of Western hegemony# , in G. Stocking (ed.), Colonial Situations: Essays on the


http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/135918350200700301


http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13698010020026958


KeesingR. #Colonial and counter-colonial discourse in Melanesia# Critique of Anthropology 14 (1994) 41–58 http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0308275X9401400103


MitchellT. #Everyday metaphors of power# Theory and Society 19 (1990) 545–77 http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/BF00147026


RobbenA. #Habits of the home: spatial hegemony and the structuration of house and society in Brazil# American Anthropologist 91 (3) (1989) 570–88 http://dx.doi.org/10.1525/aa.1989.91.3.02a00020


RowlandsM. #Modernist fantasies in prehistory?# Man 21 (1986) 745–6


http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781848607972.n8