

# Review Article

## African materiality

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FRANÇOIS G. RICHARD (ed.). *Materializing colonial encounters: archaeologies of African experience*. 2015. xi+318 pages, numerous b&w illustrations. New York: Springer; 978-1-4939-2632-9 hardback \$179.

CAMERON GOKEE. *Assembling the village in medieval Bambuk: an archaeology of interaction at Diouboye, Senegal*. 2016. xx+318 pages, numerous b&w illustrations. Sheffield & Bristol (CT): Equinox; 978-1-78179-040-3 hardback £85.

JEFFREY H. ALTSCHUL, IBRAHIMA THIAW & GERALD WAIT. *A slave who would be king: oral tradition and archaeology of the recent past in the Upper Senegal River Basin*. 2016. x+314 pages, 142 colour illustrations. Oxford: Archaeopress; 978-1-78491-351-9 paperback £60.

STEPHANIE WYNNE-JONES. *A material culture: consumption and materiality on the coast of precolonial East Africa*. 2016. xiii+232 pages, several b&w illustrations. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 978-0-19-875931-7 hardback £70.



This review considers four recent volumes on the archaeology of Africa. The first, *Materializing colonial encounters*, is described by its editor, François Richard, as born from a session at the Society for American Archaeology meeting in 2008, with a number

of additional and replacement contributors subsequently included. Although seven years in gestation, from conference session to print,

credit must be given to Richard as one of the initiators, along with other North America-based African archaeologists such as Anne Stahl and Akin Ogundiran, for the recent upsurge of interest in ‘materiality’, ‘material culture studies’ and ‘materialisation’ in African archaeology. Three of the books under review here variously engage with these themes either as explicitly stated through their titles or by the authors (Richard; Wynne-Jones), or through the approaches adopted (Gokee). This reflects the growth of a more diverse, complex and theoretically mature sub-discipline over the past decade or so (Insoll 2015). The fourth volume under review differs substantially (Altschul *et al.*).

*Materializing colonial encounters* offers 12 chapters: the editor’s introduction, four ‘parts’ of two or three chapters each, and two final discursive summaries by the Senegalese archaeologist Ibrahima Thiaw, and by Michael Rowlands of University College London. Richard provides a lengthy and well-researched introduction that examines how archaeologists can and have explored colonialism in the African past. Recent debates are summarised, including that surrounding Peter Schmidt’s (2009) *Postcolonial archaeologies in Africa*. As always, Richard writes well and with significant depth. The following four ‘parts’ or sections of the book then present the empirical ‘meat’. The focus, as Richard admits, is largely on western and southern Africa, reflecting relevant research completed on colonialism within the framework (broadly) of historical archaeology. The varied studies include Swanepoel’s discussion of currency transition and substitution from cowry shells to coinage in northern Ghana in the first half of the twentieth century under the British colonial administration in the ‘Circulations: scale, value, entanglement’ section, through to Kus and Raharijaona’s fascinating consideration of the Malagasy concept of state and power in the pre- and post-colonial periods in the section on ‘Power:

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politics, capitalism, and the making of colonial worlds’.

The volume demonstrates excellent gender balance—eight of the thirteen authors are female—and features a fair number of African (South African, Malagasy, Senegalese) authors. The latter could have been increased by more non-African contributors opting to co-author with the African scholars who, presumably, they work with, not as an exercise in tokenism but as a way of mutual learning, research partnership and of further challenging colonial narratives. This criticism aside, *Materializing colonial encounters* is an interesting volume that should also be read by non-Africanist archaeologists interested in historical archaeology, colonialism and post-colonial studies.

In contrast, Cameron Gokee’s book is site specific. It focuses upon his archaeological research at the Diouboye site in eastern Senegal, where occupation spans the period *c.* AD 1000–1400. Diouboye, as Gokee indicates, was within the land of Bambuk, one of the gold sources for the medieval trans-Saharan trade that contributed to the prosperity of the polities of Ghana and Mali. Gokee adopts a self-stated (p. 13) relational perspective to his material, which is in turn linked with an exploration of materiality and spatiality. Following the initial outline of the theoretical and conceptual frameworks, the reader is led logically through the discussion. Chapter 2 introduces the Western Sudan and Sahel, with a narrowing of focus to Bambuk and the Upper Senegal region in Chapter 3. This is followed by a consideration of the anthropological literature pertinent to the region within the framework of ‘Everyday life in the Land of Gold’ (Chapter 4). A useful review is provided, but the historical specificity of some of the anthropological material presented could have been more fully acknowledged. The ‘Religion and ritual associations’ section is also rather brief (pp. 84–85) and could have been expanded to reflect the wider literature on themes such as syncretism, the status of craft groups and the agency of sacrifice and prophylactic materials within ritual practice.

Chapters 5–8 present and interpret the archaeological data: architecture, features, artefacts, surface archaeology and depositional history. The material is well illustrated and the data are frequently presented in summary form using clear tables. The book is not, however, a site monograph so there are no appendices or material-specific chapters provided. Instead, the

reader has to move around within the text to follow the discussion of particular categories of material in its entirety as, for example, with beads, which are respectively described on p. 113, pp. 114–16, p. 139, p. 161, p. 191 and p. 205. The ‘depositional histories’ discussed in Chapters 7 and 8 succeed in turning the stratigraphic and contextual data into something interesting for the reader in relation to the use of space and potential function. Chapter 9 provides the results of a wider landscape survey incorporating data from the Middle Stone Age through to the “Atlantic Era” (p. 235), beginning with the start of the European-dominated Atlantic trade in the late fifteenth century AD.

Chapters 10 and 11 provide a final discussion and conclusions. Considering the role and function of Diouboye in Bambuk, the relative rarity of imported objects is of interest. This probably results from, as Gokee notes (p. 277), participation in low-level, regional “seasonal trade or down-the-line exchange”, rather than in direct long-distance regional or international trade networks, but it might also reflect different value systems, something that could perhaps be explored by Gokee or others in the future. Overall, the volume is nicely produced and is a useful contribution to our understanding of the medieval (Iron Age) archaeology of West Africa, and is achieved in a theoretically mature manner.

The third volume under review, *A slave who would be king* by Altshul *et al.*, is different. This book reports on work undertaken by one academic organisation, the Institut Fondamental d’Afrique Noire, and two commercial archaeology/heritage bodies, Statistical Research Inc. (USA) and Nexus Heritage (UK). The research was completed as part of an impact assessment for the Sabodala Gold Mining Project, and is, essentially, a field report. It is unlikely to be of interest to the general archaeologist or even to the West African specialist beyond those actively engaged in research in the same region of eastern Senegal.

Some data of broader interest were collected, on the ethnography and oral history of sacred sites for example, but this is presented too briefly (pp. 35–39) and without recourse to relevant comparative literature. Similarly, the archaeological presentation of the “ideological/sacred sites” (p. 118) is cursory. Why the intriguing cluster of 66 “cups” (p. 118) ground into the laterite at the top of a hill in Niakifiri is classified as “ideological/sacred” is not discussed, other than that they “seem to have no ordinary function” (p. 118). The analysis

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of all the sites recorded would have benefited from wider-ranging comparison and fuller interpretation. Chapters 8–10 form a section that is more discursive, addressing, respectively, the predictive modelling of site types and locations, settlement dynamics in the second millennium AD and a summary of the volume, before the book comes to an abrupt end. Again, all three chapters would have benefited from a comparative discussion and literature review. Although it is laudable that this impact assessment was undertaken, something all too rare in sub-Saharan Africa, an opportunity has been missed to transform the results from a descriptive catalogue into a more valuable monograph akin to Gokee's volume.

The last book to be reviewed, Stephanie Wynne-Jones's important monograph on the East African coastal Swahili settlements, moves us to the other side of the continent and back to a focus on materiality. The book is nicely produced and illustrated with, unusually for Oxford University Press, a section containing 11 colour plates. It also differs to its East African coastal predecessors in adopting an explicitly theoretical stance, drawing upon, for example Alfred Gell's (1998) ideas for its exploration of the "active role for objects and materials" (p. 5). As such, it is unique in East African coastal archaeology and is successful in what it aims to achieve. The reader is led through a range of different sites and themes. Those of particular interest include Wynne-Jones's interpretation of her work at Vumba Kuu on the Kenya-Tanzania border, particularly in her consideration of how processes of "distinction and differentiation" (p. 105) were maintained using locally produced material culture in the fourteenth to fifteenth centuries AD.

Importantly, the Swahili are not treated as a disconnected coastal entity but as "entangled communities"

(p. 115) connected with the African interior and the wider Indian Ocean region. The up-to-date discussion of the archaeological evidence attesting the interior connections is particularly useful. The Indian Ocean section also explores connections in relation to the Persian/Arabian Gulf, Sind, and Sharma on the coast of Yemen, but this discussion is rather brief and needed expanding to explore the place of the Swahili in Indian Ocean worlds more fully. It is also unfortunate that, presumably, Rougeulle's (2015) excellent recent monograph on Sharma could not be incorporated into the discussion. Nonetheless, *A material culture*, besides being of use to Africanist archaeologists, provides a very good introduction to Swahili archaeology for the non-specialist and as such it deserves to be widely read.

In summary, three of the books reviewed indicate how African archaeology has changed over the past decade or so to incorporate theoretical approaches and interpretive questions that are routine in other areas of our discipline. Moreover, this is not achieved at the expense of presenting the requisite data; rather, these volumes demonstrate the necessary balance between data and theory in the exploration of the past and complex world of African materiality.

## References

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