Approaching material culture
A history of changing epistemologies

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The relationship between archaeology and anthropology has been debated and it is still controversial. Materiality matters, but the role material culture plays in the construction and constitution of humans and societies is blurred in the current archaeological debate. Processual archaeology stressed a methodological collectivist approach representing vulgar materialism in which human behaviour was more or less shaped by non-human constraints. The post-processual counter-reaction favoured a methodological individualism stressing the acting individual, from which evidence regarding society or social units could be deduced. Both these approaches are, in their extreme forms, misleading, because the former advocates only determinism and the latter only free will. By defining archaeology as material culture studies one may incorporate the structuring principles which both create and restrain human agency. Material culture studies as a post-disciplinary science incorporate both methodological collectivism and methodological individualism in their approaches, and as such bridge the processual and post-processual archaeologies, not on these paradigms' own premises but as an acknowledgement of the role that materiality has in both constraining and creating human behaviour.

Keywords: ethnoarchaeology, epistemology, material culture, methodological collectivism, methodological individualism

Background and objectives

In the debate concerning the relationship between archaeology and anthropology (see Gosden 1999), the extreme positions are represented by, on the one hand, Binford's well known characteristic of "archaeology as anthropology" (Binford 1962), and on the other hand, Clarke's equally well known statement that "archaeology is archaeology is archaeology" (Clarke 1968:13). These two traditions have continued in various forms. Another central topic in archaeology is the relation between culture and nature (materiality), which includes the debate over methodological collectivism and methodological individualism. Within post-modernism the dogma of the superiority of mind over matter has been forced to its extreme: there is nothing but language. When social scientists have acknowledged nature as a relevant aspect in social constructions, it has most often been approached as a unified entity – as one thing – Na-ture. This includes Binford's famous definition of culture as man's extrasomatic means of adaptation.

The various positions will be analysed here in both a historical and a scientific perspective, by emphasising the different epistemological stances involved in the respective approaches. I thus have four objectives. Firstly, I will give a short introduction to the relation between archaeology and anthropology and consider the problems with ethnoarchaeology as a methodological bridge between them. Secondly, I will analyse the paradigms of archaeology from the perspectives of methodological collectivism and individualism. Thirdly, I will explore the concept of material culture studies as a successor to ethnoarchaeology, transcending the processual and post-processual archaeologies. In defining archaeology as material culture studies regardless of any time dimensions, I will illuminate this approach with two case studies concerning death ritu-

als in Nepal, which lead to the conclusion that, logically, the world as an artefact is the object of study for archaeology. Finally, I will synthesise the various interpretative frameworks and include current approaches to the past as a solution which bridges the past and the present.

Ethnoarchaeology – bridging anthropology and archaeology?

Ethnoarchaeology gave rise to both the processual and the post-processual paradigm in archaeology (Tilley 1989). In processual archaeology, "ethnoarchaeology" was intended to be a fresh solution to archaeology's methodological crisis. Paradoxically, it was the variation in the ethnographic record which gave rise to the notion of cross-cultural laws, which also undermined its own basis, and gave rise to its counterpart – post-processual archaeology (Hodder 1982 a, b, c). "Ethnoarchaeology" has traditionally been, on the one hand, the sub-discipline which has aimed to bridge archaeology and anthropology, and on the other hand, a methodological tool providing analogies and interpretations.

Despite the importance of ethnoarchaeology in the early days of contextual or post-processual archaeology, its decline in the 1990s was a result of three parallel agendas: a rhetorical one, a theoretical one and a political one. Rhetorically, "there was no longer a need to draw upon such ethnoarchaeologcial and modern material culture studies", because "those already convinced by the new approach did not need any further examples from the present, while those still sceptical wanted to see how such an alternative perspective might improve an understanding of the past itself" (Reybrouck 2000:44). Theoretically, post-processual archaeology found its inspiration from hermeneutics and post-structuralism rather than anthropology, emphasising "reading of text" without drawing parallels with contemporary case studies. Politically, post-structuralism claimed the absolute authority of the text – open to multiple readings – but nothing lay outside the text (Reybrouck 2000:45).

> "Since ethnoarchaeology required a minimum of cross-cultural comparison and a certain belief in the possibility of generalization, its place became increasingly problematic in post-processual discourse…this new theoretical course limited the role of ethnoarchaeology: this could only show that material culture played an active role, not which one; that it was socially constructed, not how exactly in particular cases." (Reybrouck 2000)

The critics of ethnoarchaeology do not necessarily address the ethnographic study in itself (although the majority of traditional archaeologists prefer such studies to be conducted by anthropologists rather than being an integrated part of archaeology). The main controversies have been *on which methodological criteria* it is possible to *transfer knowledge* from one context to another. The past cannot be reconstructed by a process of sympathetic imagination without any kinds of controls, i.e. using interpretations which are based on loose analogies, blurred distinctions between argument and assumption and rampant use of untested generalizations (Trigger 1995:455).

Materiality and historical materialism

Daniel Miller has called for "an independent discipline of material culture" (Miller 1987:112). Material culture studies is a discipline concerned with all aspects of the relationship between the material and the social. It strives to overcome the logistic constraints of any discipline (Miller 1998). The aim is to model the complex nature of the interaction between social strategies, artefactual variability, and material culture (Miller 1985:4). According to Miller & Tilley;

> "The study of material culture may be most broadly defined as the investigation of the relationship between people and things irrespective of time and space. The perspective adopted may be global or local, concerned with the past or present, or the mediation between the two." (Miller & Tilley 1996:5)

It is important that the most fruitful definition of artefact in this sense is a very wide one. "Artefacts are a means by which we give form to, and come to an understanding of, ourselves, others, or abstractions such as the nation or the modern" (Miller 1994:397). "The concept of the artefact is best defined in the broadest terms. *There is little point in attempting to distinguish systematically between a natural world and an artefactual one* [...]" (Miller 1994:398, my emphasis). The main characteristic of materiality is its physicality, and "to study material culture is to consider the implications of the materiality of form for the cultural process" (Miller 1994:400). Defined broadly, *the world is an artefact* and the object of investigation for archaeology. The world people live in must be included in archaeological analysis because otherwise one would not grasp the relevant variables for an understanding of how material culture actively constitutes cultures and human perceptions.

The post-processual archaeologists' emphasis on landscape analysis is an approach that incorporates the material world inhabited by people. Landscape, environment, nature, space or other words can be used to designate the physical surroundings or the world humans live in, but different meanings and schools of thought are associated with the various terms. "Landscape" is a black-box category, but it often refers to the meaning imputed by local people on their physical and cultural surroundings. It was introduced into the English vocabulary in the late sixteenth century as a technical term in painting, and thus originally carried the connotation of "scenery" or picturesque images. The cognitive, cultural and representational aspects are in the foreground, and the actors are somehow outside the landscape (Hirsch 1995). Where "environment" often implies notions of "constraints", "landscape" refers to notions of "constructions". "Space" is a neutral category in archaeology, and as such it does not denote any particular meaning, but as Godelier notes, the very concept of "space" is social because space is distributed among communities, which exploit territories or appropriate natural resources (Godelier 1988:55). "Nature" is untamed and controls humans, while the "environment" is a contested field of relations between man and nature in which humans are most often the inferior part, and "landscape" designates surroundings conquered culturally by humans. The point of departure in archaeology is "that…monuments took over the significance of important places in the landscape and brought them under control" (Bradley 2000:17). Humans built monuments, and therefore natural places have a significance in people's *minds* (Bradley 2000:35). Man conquers nature; there are no restraints on human agency.

The opposite approach is the historical materialism of Marxism, whereby people are subjugated to external forces, modes of production or material conditions, including nature. Engels writes on this subject that "the materialist conception of history starts from the proposition that the production of the means to support human life and, next to production, the exchange of things produced, is the basis of all social structure" (Engels 1970). Marx himself wrote in 1859 in his *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy,* on the basis of his analysis of society, that "The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. *It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness*" (Marx 1970:20–21, my emphasis). Marx assessed the problem in terms of the contradiction between deter-

minism and free will, and tried to solve it by *dialectic materialism*, which approaches society as containing both progressive and conservative variables. This relates to the scientific debate regarding methodological collectivism and methodological individualism – the difference between determinism and free will.

Methodological collectivism or individualism – an archaeological approach

Methodological collectivism and individualism are two ideal types of historical explanation; the first is holistic and the latter is individualistic. The first principle states that human behaviour can be explained by being deduced from a) macroscopic laws which apply to the social system as a whole, and b) descriptions of the positions or functions of the individual within the whole. The latter principle states that events and processes should be deduced from a) principles governing the behaviour of acting individuals, and b) descriptions of their situations (Watkins 1973:88). Methodological collectivists start with society or a whole from which the individual's behaviour is deduced, while methodological individualists start with the acting individual, from which society or social units are deduced (Gilje & Grimen 2001). Methodological individualism is the doctrine that all social phenomena are in principle explicable in ways that only involve individuals and their properties, goals, beliefs and actions. Thus methodological individualism is a form of reductionism. Methodological collectivism, on the other hand, assumes that there are supra-individual entities that are prior to individuals in the explanatory order.

Materialism defines reality as a form of "matter". An idealist is one who denies the ontological reality of matter; a materialist of the mind (Gorman 1982:20). The main question and controversy is whether Marxism emancipates or enslaves human behaviour. Processual archaeology represents in its extreme version a form of methodological collectivism, whereas its counter-reaction, post-processual archaeology, represents in its extreme version a form of methodological individualism. "It is argued by the processual school in archaeology that there are systems so basic in nature that culture and individuals are powerless to divert them. This is a trend towards determinism…There is a close link between discarding notions of cultural belief and of the individual" (Hodder 1994:7). All materialist Marxists define subjectivity impersonally and freedom as realisations of objective laws (Gorman 1982:57), and hence the neo-Marxist reaction within

post-processual archaeology, which includes free will.

New archaeology adapted parts of the neo-evolution developed by Leslie White and Julian Steward. These approaches represented vulgar materialism, because human behaviour was more or less shaped by non-human constraints (Trigger 1994:292). Binford's "archaeology as anthropology" (Binford 1962) is normally seen as the paradigmatic break and the start of processual archaeology. He saw culture as man's extrasomatic means of adaptation, and determinism, system thinking, the environment and cross-cultural laws were some of the characteristics of processual archaeology. This school of thought might be characterised as materialist and methodologically collectivist, because "what emerges is an eschatological materialism in which human consciousness plays no significant role" (Trigger 1981:151). Hodder says that by

> "materialist approaches [I mean] those that infer cultural meanings from the relationship between people and their environment. Within such a framework the ideas in people's minds can be predicted from their economy, technology, social and material production. Given a way of organizing matter and energy, an appropriate ideological framework can be predicted. By idealist I mean any approach which accepts that there is some component of human action which is not predictable from a material base, but which comes from the human mind or from culture in some sense… In inferring cultural meanings in the past, there is no necessary relationship between social and material organization of resources on the one hand and cultural ideas and values on the other." (Hodder 1994:19).

Furthermore, the contextual approach in early post-processual archaeology emphasised that "*positioned subjects manipulate material culture as a resource and as a sign system in order to create and transform relations of power and domination*" (Hodder 1994:9, my emphasis), and consequently determinism was avoided. With a form of methodological individualism as its scientific anchor, archaeology as a discipline gained new areas of investigation. "If archaeology is anything, it is the study of material culture as a manifestation of structured symbolic practices meaningfully constituted and situated in relation to the social" (Tilley 1989:188). In post-processual archaeology there is an emphasis on the active individual which presupposes that "agents actively using material culture need to be considered, that there is a relationship between structure and practice, and that social change is historical and contingent" (Preucel & Hodder 1996:7). Schematically, it is possible to distinguish processualism and post-processualism as two opposite, epistemological poles (Fig. 1).

The determinism of processual archaeology enabled a "scientific" approach to be adopted. Since man is predictable according to cross-cultural laws, it was possible to deduce universalisms from middle range theory. Individualism and human free will in post-processual archaeology resulted in non-predictability and cultural specific studies. The lack of predictability in the study of humans resulted in accusations of non-scientific or pseudo-scientific practices from the processualists. The differences between processualism and post-processualism are ontologically a debate regarding human nature, the role of which is negative in the former case and positive in the latter. The post-processual ontology is freed from determinism and materialism, but this ontological success has its epistemological and methodological price (Sørgaard 2001:45). This leads Trigger, among others, to attempt

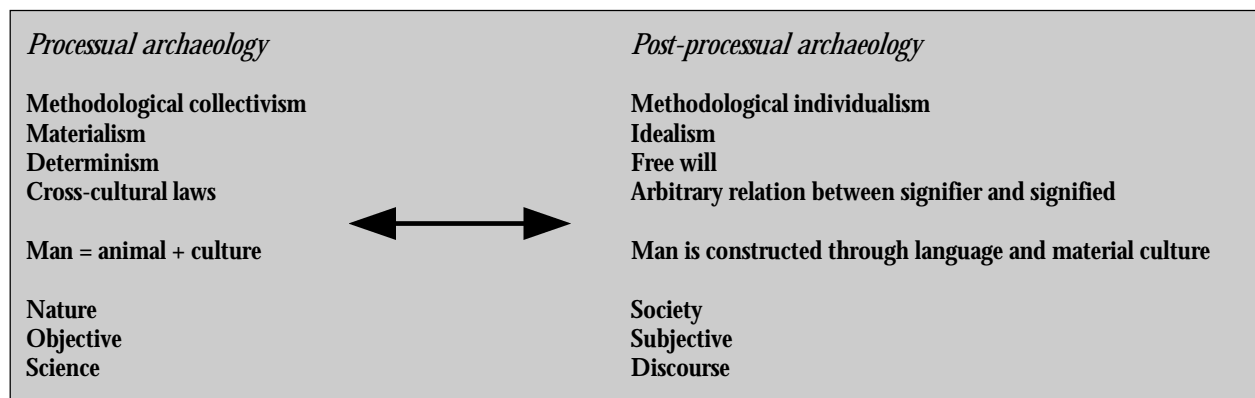| *Processual archaeology*	*Post-processual archaeology*
Methodological collectivism	**Methodological individualism**
Materialism	**Idealism**
Determinism	**Free will**
Cross-cultural laws	**Arbitrary relation between signifier and signified**
Man = animal + culture	**Man is constructed through language and material culture**
Nature	**Society**
Objective	**Subjective**
Science	**Discourse**

Figure 1. Archaeology and methodological collectivism and individualism.

to overcome the distinction between methodological collectivism and individualism by advocating that "a comprehensive theory to explain human behaviour and material culture must synthesize the understandings of cultural ecology and cognitive anthropology" (Trigger 2000:368).

Archaeology and worldmaking – the world as an artefact

Fredrik Barth's argument that social actions are "intended" and not simply "caused" (Barth 1981:3) avoids ecological determinism because functional interdependences "constitute necessary but not sufficient conditions for understanding the actual pattern of energy flow which emerges in man's interaction with the natural environment" (Haaland 1991:14). It is thus necessary to develop a perspective that combines macro-level ecosystem dynamics with micro-level analyses of the actor's intentions and perceptions (Haaland 1991). I will illustrate this with two case studies from Nepal: Hindu death rituals performed at

Figure 2. Map of Nepal.

the *Nire* cemetery outside Baglung Bazaar, and Buddhist death rituals performed at the *Tore* cemetery in the village of Manang (Fig. 2).

Certain areas of the Himalayan mountain range in Nepal represent a cultural, ritual and religious border dividing Hinduism and Buddhism, although in other places in Nepal the religions co-exist. Muktinath is a holy pilgrimage site for both Hindus and Buddhists located at an elevation of 3800 metres, being "near the extreme northern edge of Hindu influence in this part of the Himalayas and at the same time near the extreme southern edge of Buddhist and Tibetan influence" (Messerschmidt 1992:30). This area is situated in the rain-shadow behind the Annapurna and Dhaulagiri peaks, with an annual rainfall between 200–400 mm. One of the few trails connecting India and Tibet, following the Kaligandaki River, runs through the deepest and steepest river gorge in the world, with Dhaulagiri rising up to 8167 metres on the westward side and Annapurna I to 8091 metres on the eastward side. At the widest point of separation, the peak-to-peak distance is only 32 km, with the river flowing at an elevation of between 2000–2500 metres. In front of the mountains, the river is located at en elevation of 800 metres, and here some villages receive between 4000–6000 mm of rain each year. The Himalayan range separates the Tibetan and Buddhist regions in the north, in an arid zone virtually unaffected by the monsoon rains, from the Hindu regions south of the mountains, situated in a highly humid, fertile area, creating some of the world's steepest gradients regarding both elevation and precipitation.

The Nire *ghat* is located in the foreland of the Himalayan Mountain range. The relation between water and death is well known in Hinduism, and the river ideology penetrates all Indian cultures. Cremation is generally perceived as the most auspicious funeral practice. When the funeral pyre is built, the bamboo stretcher carrying the deceased is placed with the feet extending into the river. Cemeteries are places where Yama, the King of Death, rules, and wicked souls and departed spirits are roaming around causing trouble and harm to other people. The deceased is in a vulnerable condition in which such beings or ghosts may adversely affect the forthcoming incarnation, but Varuna, the god of water, is more powerful than Yama, so that Yama and his companions cannot punish those who bathe in the water. Before the pyre is lit, the relatives again sprinkle holy water on the deceased. The ashes immersed in the river will float down to the Ganges and on to Varanasi, where the deceased may eventually attain salvation, even though he was cremated in another place.
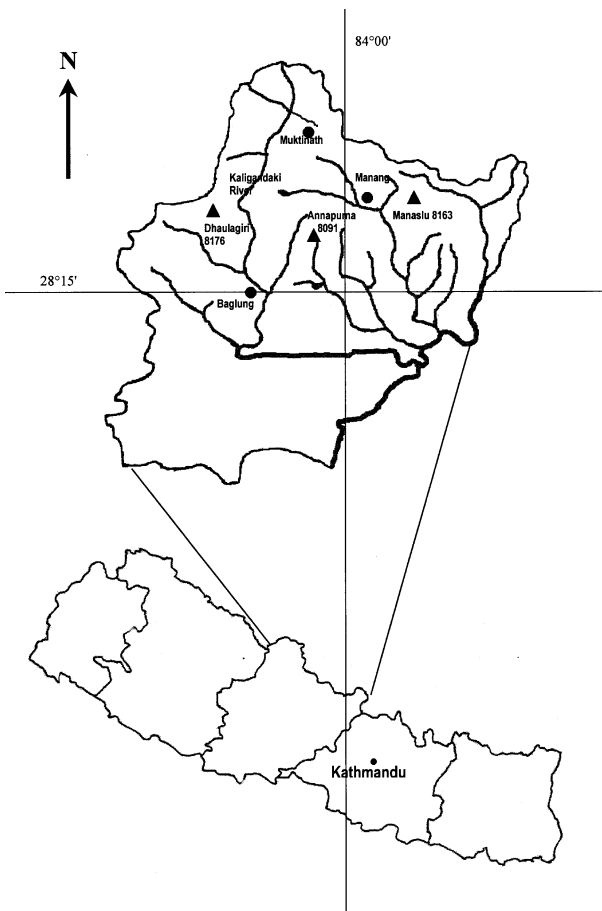
In Manang, air-burials were the most common practice only 20–25 years ago. A lama appointed two persons outside the family to cut up the corpse. The deceased was chopped into small pieces and given either to the birds or to the river, these two modes of deposition being equally appraised. The deceased's skull might be saved in some cases and used by the lamas for *puja*s, or worship, and even today a skull-bowl from an air-burial is used as a drinking cup for ritual purposes in the oldest *gompa* in Manang. One of the deceased's thighbones was often made into a flute, and the lamas commonly use such bone-flutes during rituals even today. When the lamas blew on thighbone flutes during air-burial funerals, it was to call upon the gods and request them to make rain. The use of human relics has been an intrinsic part of the ritual rain-making process, and the mode by which the deceased is disposed of has to be seen in this light. The practice of air-burials was a rainmaking ritual that re-created society in terms of a successful harvest. There was a common belief among the lamas and laymen two or three decades ago that if the deceased was cremated the smoke from the funeral pyre would reach the sky and heaven. This was highly inauspicious. The gods would become angry and hot tempered because of the smell of the burnt human flesh, and they would vent their fury on the people by not giving them the life-giving rain. During the wintertime, however, everyone was cremated, because the descendants did not want any precipitation, which would come as snow. The aim was to make the gods angry in order to avoid this. In short, air-burials were performed during the spring, summer and autumn in order to create rain, whereas cremation was the proper funeral practice during the winter, to avoid snow. The relation between air-burial and cremation was a matter of creating the life-giving water which society was dependent upon.

Ecologically, the importance of the river and rain can be seen from both a southern and a northern perspective (Fig. 3). The names of some of the Himalayan Mountains illustrate the southern perspective and the importance of rivers. The Annapurna range, with its five peaks rising from 7000 to above 8000 metres, means "Full of grain", Dhaulagiri, an 8000-metre peak, means the "White Mountain", and the name Gangapurna for a 7000-metre peak means "The Ganges is full". In short, when the mountains are full of snow, the rivers will be full of water and the harvest successful, with a lot of grain. Thus, water is a giver and sustainer of life. The majority of the Hindu texts and
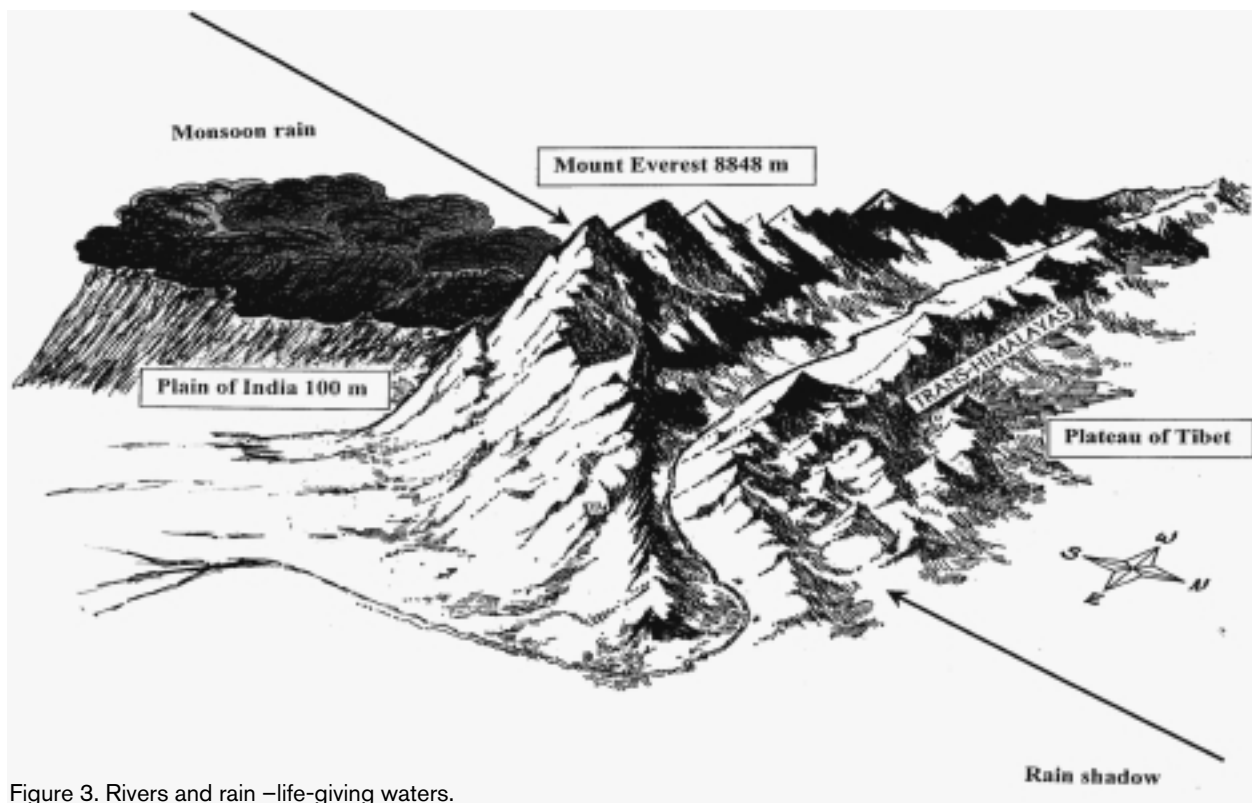

Figure 3. Rivers and rain —life-giving waters.

scriptures have been developed on the Indian continent rather than in Nepal itself, and thus emphasize the importance of rivers for successful harvests and the continuation of life. The names of the mountains illustrate the people's dependence on the annual precipitation in the mountains for the amount of water entering the rivers. Seen from the northern perspective, that of the Buddhists in the rain-shadow, droughts due to absence of water in the rivers are hardly conceivable, since the glaciers provide the rivers with water continuously. It is almost impossible to use these rivers for irrigation purposes, however, because of the steep valleys, so that they are in a sense "useless" from an agricultural point of view. Life and death depend upon the amount of precipitation: as much rain as possible during the summer time, to give life, but equally important, as little snow as possible during the winter, because it can cause death. Absence of rain in summer is a death-giver, in form of harvest failure, while the presence of snow in winter may equally well be a death-giver.

The world we live in is a material one – *the world as an artefact.* We conceptualize it, modify it and introduce new constructions into it: to live is to participate in an endless series of material modifications of worlds that have already been made. All materiality is old and new at the same time, but different phases of the material modifications or man-made constructions may have a specific origin and date. By including the total sphere of relations of materiality into the analysis, logically, archaeologists studying humans in past and present contexts have to analyse the premises for behaviour and action. World-making always starts from worlds that are already to hand; the making is in fact remaking (Goodman 1978:6). A world is an artefact (Goodman & Elgin 1988:53), and the world in which we live is a universe of significations for us (Schutz 1971:133). When humans create their world and world-views, it is a process that involves horizons, both close and distant, that it is possible to interfere with and manipulate in accordance with one's personal aims and wishes. Schutz distinguishes between the "world-within-everyday-reach" (Schutz 1971:306) and its counterpart, the "world-outside-everyday-reach" (Kyvik 2001, 2002).

A world-view is a picture that people themselves have of the way things actually are, their concept of nature, of society and of the self (Geertz 1973:127). "Everyday" experience and the world are within reach and it is possible for the actor to change them, so that this is the most intimate "world as an artefact" of all. In material terms, the "near" world is perceived as

manipulatable and modifiable, whereas the "distant" world is seen as stable and permanent. The materiality of the distant world is more resistant than the "world-within-everyday-reach", which is modified and used in daily life. Together, the materiality of both of these spheres forms and defines the "world as an artefact".

Revisiting the past
– a preliminary conclusion

Material culture studies as a post-disciplinary science incorporate both methodological collectivism and methodological individualism in their approaches, and as such bridge the processual and post-processual schools of archaeology, not on their own premises but as an acknowledgement of the role that materiality plays in the construction and constitution of humans and societies. Materiality matters, for it both constrains and creates human behaviour, and since all materiality has various time dimensions, archaeology as material culture studies is independent of the temporal depth of the artefacts or manifestations of materiality which are the objects of study. Thus, the dichotomy of idealism and materialism is resolved, but the question of how one interprets the past still remains.

"It is inadequate to assume that some cultures in space and time are more 'like us' than others are" (Shanks & Hodder 1995:10). This means that ethnographic analogies are mainly a source of ideas to broaden the horizons of possibilities about how the past might be interpreted (Hodder 1999:46). These data are subsequently used to develop models and theoretical frameworks. By exploring the connection between material culture and human behaviour in different ethnographic societies, it is possible to combine the meanings of archaeological objects in the past with living societies today, comparing ethnographic and archaeological patterning, with special reference to excavated material (Oestigaard 2000:5). Since the past is different from the present, ethnoarchaeology cannot solve this epistemological problem, and it is important to stress that ethnographic perspectives are applied to archaeological material not because these contexts are assumed to be identical, but because the present may generate knowledge of the past in itself (Haaland in press). In an interpretative process, ethnographic perspectives cannot take precedence over other approaches generating knowledge of the past, but I would argue that the ethnographic approach, when applied to the past, is often the most successful. This is neither obvious nor generally agreed upon, however.

Fredrik Fahlander has recently described archaeology as science fiction, because analysing the past is not simply a study of the Other, but rather a study of the *unknown*. Hence he argues that it is preferable to pursue an interpretative approach based on fictions rather than contemporary data. The ethnographic record is still a source of inspiration and food for thought, however, if not a source of frameworks for interpretations (Fahlander 2001:41). One may of course choose other approaches to the past as well, but "no matter how appetising some theories might appear on a meta-level, they are still useless if we cannot link them to the archaeological data" (Fahlander 2001:11).

This brings us one step forward. Regardless of which position one favours, ethnography or science fiction, "an interpretation shows us that a narrator is not simply describing events but construing them. Sense is made, not passively recorded…The point of interpretation is not to understand a single individual but to enlarge our conception of how sense might be made – or deformed" (Ochberg 1996:102). Thus being explicit in one's reasoning is of utmost importance in interpretative archaeological practice, since all archaeology is a contemporary activity. We are inevitably constructing meaning based on our own prejudices, horizons of understanding and knowledge. Nevertheless, archaeological theory seems to be "still occupied with fighting ideological wars between competing epistemological standpoints", Fahlander argues, and notes that "the archaeological debate would benefit by discussing good and bad archaeology in general, not by maintaining dualistic concepts of processual-postprocessual, modern-postmodern, and theoretical-practical archaeology" (Fahlander 2001:14). As I have shown, all archaeology is situated in between the extreme methodological collectivism and methodological individualism stances, and interpretative and epistemological problems in archaeology cannot be solved by any simple methodology. What matters in the end is whether or not the interpretations of the past enhance our knowledge of the past.

English language revision by Malcolm Hicks.

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