Material signatures of practice, agency and world view: the ethnoarchaeology and archaeology of chiefly residences in the Mandara mountains of N. Cameroon

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1. Summary of Proposed Research

We contend that it is still the task of anthropology to explain humanity’s sociocultural development over the long term. However, sociocultural anthropology and archaeology rely on radically different metaphors, engage different kinds of evidence … and are going their separate ways. This leads to loss of holistic perspective, while postmodern rejection of comparative studies, combined with a lack of models capable of stimulating new insights, undermines the very possibility of explanation. To escape such dilemmas we need to reconceptualize society in a manner that is acceptable to and workable by both subdisciplines, and which also effectively interconnects the mental and the material realms.

Combining recent approaches to complex adaptive systems (CAS) with theories of social agency, we outline an interaction-based model of society, manifested in the practice of its members, who are regarded as social agents endowed with intentionality. Next, the French anthropology of techniques school provides a theoretical basis for linking objects to ideas (“social representations”), and a methodology for recovering representations from archaeological data. Archaeological “cultures” are material palimpsests of human communities with interwoven historical trajectories. They constitute expressions of CAS unobservable by other social scientists. To comprehend and compare them archaeology had best meet ethnography on the contested terrain of the relations between space and time in a region of determinate character.

Using an ethnoarchaeological approach that bridges the sociocultural-archaeological divide, we will test the viability of the model using a) the uniquely large and varied database gathered since 1984 with SSHRC support by the Mandara Archaeological Project team in the Mandara region of Nigeria and Cameroon, and b) data gathered in a capstone 6-month field study – for which support is primarily sought – relating to residences of chiefs and rainmakers, holders of contrasting spirit-mediated powers over land and people and over natural phenomena. In a pilot study, we have already shown that chiefly residences are prime nexi of sociopolitical and sociocultural representations, linking authority and community, and the familial, political, and sacred realms. Taking this further, through analysis of a range of present and recently abandoned architectural complexes, we will define the varied material signatures of different configurations of practice, agency and world view, and then apply them to the archaeology of a cluster of previously unstudied prehistoric strongholds. These are the only coherent archaeological sites in this mountainous and densely populated region.

Our approach will link recent practices to the archaeological record, facilitating archaeological attempts to detect the role of social agency in such materials, and will inform archaeological debates on the nature and significance of differing (hierarchical and heterarchical) distributions of power, and also regional culture history. In this manner, by forging new links between complexity and agency theory and testing the viability of a CAS-practice model of society, we intend to contribute both to a reconceptualization of society that can be put to work in archaeology, and to broader anthropological questions relating to comparison and explanation – not least of the human career.
1.1 Detailed Description

Objectives
Our aims are:

1. to work towards the reintegration of archaeology and sociocultural anthropology by reconceptualizing society in a manner acceptable to and workable by both (sub-)disciplines, and which effectively interconnects the mental and material realms;

2. through a 6-month, ethnoarchaeological and archaeological, field study relating to present and past residences of chiefs and rainmakers in North Cameroon, to test the viability of the societal model, and in particular the feasibility of detecting social agency and differential hierarchical and heterarchical distributions of power in the archaeological record;

3. to interpret the resulting data in the context of the archaeological evidence available and of the uniquely large and varied ethnoarchaeological database gathered since 1984 with SSHRC support by my team in the Mandara region of Nigeria and Cameroon, and

4. by publishing our results expeditiously and in a variety of media, to contribute to archaeological interpretation in the areas of social agency and the development of social complexity, and to broader anthropological problems relating to comparison and explanation.

Context
We contend that it is still the task of anthropology to explain humanity’s sociocultural development over the long term. However, sociocultural anthropology and archaeology rely on radically different metaphors, engage different kinds of evidence … and are going their separate ways. This leads to loss of holistic perspective, while postmodern rejection of comparative studies, combined with a lack of models capable of generating new insights, undermines the very possibility of explanation. To escape such dilemmas we need to reconceptualize society in a manner that is acceptable to and workable by both subdisciplines, and which also effectively connects the mental and the material realms.

The model of society we are developing combines complexity theory, and specifically that relating to complex adaptive systems (CAS) (Gell-Mann 1994 a and b), with the structuration and practice theories of Giddens and Bourdieu. The advantages of such an approach are that it admits and can cope with change and even transformations, but does not deny that the most fundamental transformations – of sensory input into behavioral output – occur in the human mind. Such processes are an integral part of the theory of CAS, which are systems that continuously take in information, find regularities in the data stream, and compress them into modifiable schemata that are used to describe the world, make predictions, and prescribe behavior. Society’s human actors are, in this view, endowed with intentionality, and considered as active social agents, both structured by and structuring social institutions and their material surroundings (Giddens 1982). Confronting the environment, their behavior emerges from the interplay of their biology with knowledge and ideas that are open to discursive elaboration, and with what practice theorists refer to as habitus, unthinking dispositions and basic know-how that constitute a practical cultural competence (Bourdieu 1977:86). CAS combined with structuration/practice theory provides a viable foundation for a conceptualization of human society that can be complemented by more specialized, e.g., marxist, theories relating to social dynamics.

To link mind and material things, we turn to the French technologie culturelle school (Lemonnier 1992). In this theoretical perspective, objects – primarily artifacts but also any material thing that impinges on social life – exist in dialectic couplings with mental objects that are their counterparts or “social representations.” These pertain both to discursive and non-discursive knowledge.
Both elements in these couplings change through time in interaction, mediated by mind and practice, with each other and with the natural and social environment. Sociocultural anthropologists have relatively easy — though still indirect — access to social representations, but archaeologists are much further distanced. However, the school offers a methodology, that of the chaîne opératoire, that exploits the incorporation into artifact manufacture of a series of technical decisions that are embedded in social relations and cultural practice, and that can to an extent be reconstructed from the items themselves. Thus archaeologists have potential, if limited and difficult, access to social representations.

These are the bases for a conceptualization of society through time and space that is logically coherent and practically useful, denying neither the immanence of mind nor the relevance of matter. Society is more than social representations; it is their interplay with each other and the world enacted in the practice of its members. By an explanation of society, then, is meant a description of the factors responsible for the generation of practice. These include natural environmental possibilities and constraints that limit the range of possible interactions, and social factors — institutions, myths, habitus… — the schemata that underdetermine their nature, frequency, and range.

We would further argue that archaeological cultures are material palimpsests of human communities with interwoven historical trajectories, transformed by their passage into the archaeological record (Shott 1998). They constitute expressions of CAS unobservable by other social scientists. To comprehend and compare them archaeology had best meet ethnography on the contested terrain of the relations between space and time in a region of determinate character (Blaisel and Muller 1997) — in this case the northern Mandara mountains of Cameroon and Nigeria in which the Mandara Archaeological Project (MAP), directed by the applicant, has been conducting research since 1984, accumulating a primarily ethnoarchaeological database that is unequalled in its combination of size and the variety of material culture classes studied.

The CAS model is an improvement over earlier systems models in that it emphasizes human information processing, but, though it provides a set of valuable and interrelated concepts, it offers no simple formula for truth. How, in particular, do we recognize schemata or apply the insights of practice theory to the archaeological record? The chaîne opératoire approach (see Audouze 1999) and postprocessual explorations of meaning in archaeology (e.g., Hodder 1984) provide useful leads towards identification of schemata, but what little has been written on the issue of social agency in archaeology mostly consists of programmatic statements and preliminary results (e.g., Dobres and Hoffman 1994). We have learned that

1. agency is inseparable from gender,
2. research must take account of variability at the micro, intra-site, and regional scales,
3. innovation is a particularly fruitful topic,
4. interesting results can potentially be gained from the study of any and all technologies, and
5. contrasts in the expressions of different technologies from the same cultural context are likely to be especially revealing.

But the very paucity of results suggests that archaeological research in this area is so far inadequate, in good part because of a lack of ethnographic material that can be used for purposes of analogy. A broader perspective is needed, and has indeed been sketched by Dobres and Hoffman (1999:2). In their introduction to an edited volume on the social dynamics of technology they argue for an integration of three related topics: “(1) the dialectic of technological practice and social relations of production and their combined impact on the production, use, commodification, and exchange of end-products; (2) the political nature of technique and production in relation to social agency and identity; and (3) the structural importance of historically specific cultural systems of representation, or world views, in shaping the physical contours of technological practice, past and present.”
These are all ends towards which the ethnoarchaeological research of the MAP has been directed. While space precludes discussion of publications, the three categories listed above are well exemplified respectively in David and Robertson’s (1996) “Competition and change in two traditional African iron industries”, Smith and David’s (1995) “The production of space and the house of Xidi Sukur,” and David, Sterner, and Gavua’s (1988) “Why pots are decorated.” The second paper is of particular relevance to this proposal; the authors interpret the residence of a Mandara mountains chief as a site in which political power is negotiated through the techniques of inclusion and exclusion, and by the projection of a gender-inverting, nurturing image of his role in the community. The paper includes a sketched comparison with the “châteaux” of Mofu-Diamaré “princes” in another part of the Mandara mountains. Though limited by the data available, the comparison indicated considerable potential for defining archaeological signatures of different types of power.

**Methodology and research design**

The field study proposed, and for which financial support is primarily sought, deals with such chiefly residences, semi-public works that link authority and community, and the familial, political, and sacred realms. Cultural constructs, they dynamically assist in the constitution and reproduction of culture. Northern Mandara montagnard societies were characterized in precolonial times more by heterarchy (cf. Ehrenreich et al. [eds.] 1995), with several foci of power interacting within communities and sub-regions, than by the vertical power relations characteristic of hierarchy. Two kinds of power, both mediated through spirits, over land and people and over rain and other natural phenomena, were occasionally united in the same personage, but more often held separately (Sterner 1998: chap. 9). Despite appropriation of political power by the state, these institutions survive today. The nature of the power of chiefs and “rainchiefs” is, as already demonstrated for Sukur, expressed in and in part constituted by their residences and settings in the landscape. These monuments are indeed a form of what Alfred Gell (1998), whose ideas resonate with Lemonnier’s, conceived of as art, forms of instrumental action embodying complex intentionalities. Negotiated social agency made manifest in stone and daub, these statements of chiefly power and authority spoke and still speak not only to their own but to later generations.

Thus, through field study of the recently abandoned hill top residences of Mofu-Diamaré chiefs, subjects of an exhaustive ethnography (Vincent 1991), and their present seats on the plains, and those of other potent figures, the nature and extent of whose powers and authority we must document, we will attempt to reconstruct the chaînes opératoires that produced them and define the material signatures of different configurations of practice, agency and world view. The process will make use of the large database on the material culture and social representations of numerous Mandara montagnard groups that we have accumulated in past projects. For example, we will be alerted to the mobilization for symbolic purposes of left:right, up:down, front:back, apart:together, and other oppositions, which are frequently found with different though related connotations in the various communities.

This information will then be applied to archaeological interpretation. In the northwestern Mafa area, characterized in precolonial times by numerous, largely autonomous, political communities with their own chiefs, nine pre-Mafa ruins have been located, several by project collaborator Müller-Kosack, over an area of approximately 50 km². These sites are virtually unstudied, although one, Kova-Mondossa, the subject of a note by Seignobos (1982), is described by him as a *forteresse* or *oppidum* and interpreted as the residence of a chief (see illustrations on pp. 20-21). On the basis of its area (ca 1285 m²) and dressed stone retaining walls that survive to a height of 4.5 m, the term “maison forte” (fortified house) would seem more appropriate (see illustrations on pp. 20-21). The other Mondossa sites, of varying sizes but all characterized by dressed stone walling, are attributed by the Mafa to presumably legendary, red or bronze-skinned, men. The sites suggest the former presence of societies
more complex than those of the recent past (Müller-Kosack 1987, 1997). Moreover, they are the only coherent ancient sites in this mountainous region, where population densities in the 100-200 per sq. km. range lead to rapid recycling of abandoned structures into new buildings and agricultural terraces.

**Plan of Research**

**Year 1 (2001)**

Fieldwork over three months (May-July) will be devoted primarily to survey and planning of a sample of chiefly residences, and to ethnoarchaeological studies, developed from and extending the pilot project already carried out in Sukur (Smith and David 1995), of those still occupied or only recently abandoned. From a chaîne opératoire perspective, we will minimally study the architecture and sociocultural contexts of:

1. at least two mountain top residences of Mofu-Diamaré “princes,” who uniquely combine powers over land, people, rain and other natural phenomena, and one of their residences recently constructed on the plain,
2. the residence of the Bi Vreke, a Mafa chief with power over locusts and other kinds of plague,
3. the residences of two rainchiefs called upon by several ethnically diverse and politically autonomous settlements, including that of Bi Mudukwa, a Mafa of Muktele origins who lives not far from the archaeological sites under investigation,
4. the residence of the former chiefs of Mofu-Gudur, according to oral traditions the most powerful of all in the region, and the polity from which many ethnic communities and/or their chiefs, including Bi Vreke, claim descent; the residence may now be abandoned as no chief has been appointed since the death of the last in 1980 (Jouaux 1989:265), and
5. the complete set of Mondossa sites as presently known, particular attention being paid to evidence relating to their construction, it being at present uncertain whether the larger examples are platform structures with subterranean entrances, or whether they once comprised more than one story.

In order to complete the planning of these in some cases extensive and complex monuments expeditiously and accurately, one group including the applicant will survey them using a Leica Total Station (TCR 705 model) and collect surface materials on the Mondossa sites. A team member with a specialization in building science will focus on building techniques and reconstruction of the sequence and social nature of the construction process. Meanwhile the co-investigator and collaborator will be engaged in ethnoarchaeological and ethnohistoric research relating both to the archaeological sites themselves – including inquiries as to the possible (though unlikely) existence of unrecorded others – and to the larger socio-political context especially as this relates to regionally overlapping distributions of power and authority. The latter task can not be completed in a single season.

Time permitting and depending upon the results of noninvasive study of the archaeological sites, the first group may conduct a test excavation in preparation for larger scale excavations in the following year. Integration of the survey and ethnoarchaeological data will be carried out in the remaining months of the first year. Surface collections will be compared with archaeological samples from the region stored in Calgary. We shall also pay particular attention to the settings of these architectural complexes in their natural and socio-political landscapes, including the siting of the Mondossa sites on ridge lines on either side of the Mozoua valley, and their implications. Do they, for example, represent a single community or a succession of communities, or parts of one or more communities?

Following the field season we shall develop approximations of chaînes opératoires for the present and recent chiefly residences using the survey data, the qualitative and quantitative observations
of the assistant specializing in Building Science, and information deriving from their comparison, a technique ND has already applied to smelting (David and Kramer in press).

Year 2 (2002)
During a second three month field season, ethnoarchaeological and ethnohistoric research will continue, focusing on the larger question of the overlapping areal distributions of power and their material manifestations. However, our main effort will be devoted to excavation of Mondossa sites and determination of the chaînes opératoires that produced them. We will emphatically not be attempting to impose our ethnoarchaeological models on the archaeological data, but rather using ethnoarchaeological insights to alert us to dimensions of variation and praxis likely to be relevant to interpretation.

While we cannot yet specify which sites, our choice will be guided by:

1. the need to understand the sites as a set, and not merely the largest or best preserved amongst them,
2. the recognition that the sites are likely to represent capsules relating to a limited time period or periods, and the need, in order to reconstruct their contexts as fully as possible, including the likely different environmental setting of the sites during their occupations, to collect a full range of data, including, besides samples for carbon and TL dating, human, faunal and macrobotanical remains and samples for phytolith and pollen analysis.
3. the requirement that, since these sites are impressive, if as yet unexploited, heritage resources, our excavations should not prejudice but rather facilitate future reconstruction by Cameroonian authorities.

Once we have gained a good idea of the ceramics unquestionably associated with the monuments (perhaps as opposed to those occurring on their surfaces) and their contrasts with Mafa materials, we shall conduct judgmental surveys in their localities in order to determine their distribution and thereby to evaluate the place of the monuments in former settlement systems and landscapes. Archaeological materials will be classified and recorded in the field using techniques and procedures similar to those used in previous years by the Mandara and Maya-Wandala projects, and sample materials will be returned to Calgary for further study.

Year 3 (2003)
The final year of the project will be devoted to writing up the ethnoarchaeological data and completing the analysis of the archaeological materials. According to the theoretical perspectives presented above, the former will first be developed into a diachronic account of residences as the material inscriptions of power and sociocultural relations, and then confronted and contrasted with the archaeological evidence. Whatever the degree of similarity found between recent and past chaînes opératoires, the research will, besides contributing directly to regional culture history, test the practicality of the CAS-practice model of society, of the identification of social agency, and of hierarchy and heterarchy in the material record of development of societies attaining a certain degree of complexity.

Longer term outcomes: reconceptualizing archaeological practice

In the past we have pictured Mandara montagnard peoples as drawing differentially from a “symbolic reservoir,” aspects of which can be traced back to the beginnings of the regional Iron Age in the mid-first millennium BC (David et al. 1991; Sterner 1992). We now prefer to view as related schemata the institutions, symbolic themes, myths, and rites that find kaleidoscopic expression in montagnard cultural variety (Sterner 1998). The cultural forms these take became incorporated into social life as the result of “frozen accidents,” and retain their fitness and distribution by continuous
processes of selection and diffusion as, in a form of Brownian motion, individuals and families moved and continue to move across the landscape, attaching themselves to different communities or founding new ones. The ethnoarchaeological record we accumulated in the 1980s and 90s, complemented by substantial sociocultural, ethnohistorical, historical, human geographic, and linguistic literatures, allows us to interpret the present as the historical outcome of multiple interaction trajectories.

The findings of the MAP and much other evidence (for example from New Guinea [Roscoe 2000]) indicate that representations of ethnic identity are less common and less identifiable in archaeological remains than are avatars of CAS extended in space and time in such a manner that they would not have been recognized by their human constituents. But archaeological data do record a substantial proportion of the interactions whereby society enacts itself through time and space. Modern sociocultural anthropologists, while retaining a holistic perspective, tend to sample precisely chosen interaction sets. It is our contention that archaeologists should follow their lead, and, dispensing with often bogus reification of particular societies, instead investigate particular databases as to the types of interactions represented – and not represented. Underpinned by an explicit model of society and of human actors as social agents, the interactions detected and the factors inferred from them can then form the basis for comparative studies that beg fewer conceptual questions. This proposal seeks to elaborate such a model and to test it in the field with respect to a particular interaction set, that relating to chiefly residences, in order to establish a groundwork that will support historical materialist and other theoretical superstructures relating to social dynamics, and in terms of which the cross-cultural research necessary for explanation of the human career can be conducted – not as an exercise in imaginative reconstruction but as social science (cf. Holy 1987).

As to the epistemological dilemma earlier raised regarding comparability of description, this must in part be resolved at the level of practice by changes in the mode of production of anthropological knowledge. Besides the team approach to research taken by the Mandara Archaeological Project, this requires greater intersubjectivity and improved inter-disciplinary communication. These are promoted in the research area by the thematic colloquia and publications of the Reseau Méga-Tchad, a multi-disciplinary association of human scientists, of which the present team forms part, working in and around the basin of the central African lake.
Sketch of west end of Kova Mendossa by C. Seignobos (1982:43)

1.2 List of bibliographical notices


