

## THE RELEVANCE OF MATERIAL CULTURE TO ANTHROPOLOGY

Interest among anthropologists in the study of material culture has fluctuated considerably throughout much of this century. Prior to 1900 anthropologists had relied on material, verbal and observed behavioral data equally and without hesitation. Indeed material data, as Tylor and Pitt Rivers ably demonstrated, lent themselves particularly to arguments regarding the evolution and distribution of cultures. Yet by 1914 Wissler could remark:

For some years the study of material culture has been quite out of fashion, though not so very long ago it was otherwise. Field-workers still record such random data as come to hand and gather up museum specimens, but give their serious and systematic attention to language, art, ceremonies, and social organization.<sup>1</sup>

Although Harrison later complained,

The systematic study, and the systematic teaching of the material side of human culture receive less than their due share of attention in this country,<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> C. Wissler, 'Material Cultures of the North American Indians', in *American Anthropologist*, Vol. XVI (1914), pp.447-505, at p.447.

<sup>2</sup> H.S. Harrison, 'Evolution in Material Culture', *Proceedings of the British Association for the Advancement of Science*, 1931, pp.137-159, at p.137.

there was in fact a revival of interest in material studies in England during the early 1930s.<sup>3</sup> This interest was to continue until the end of the War when there began a further decline to what was perhaps the nadir in the late 1950s. During the 1970s, in part under the stimulus of archaeology, research in the field of material studies has been revitalized and interest raised to an encouragingly high level.

The reasons for the overall decline during the first half of the century are complex and form a fascinating topic in themselves for historical research. One can isolate major factors: the shift of mainstream anthropology from a museum to a university base; the unfortunate identification of material culture studies with the more extreme diffusionist schools of thought; the emergence of the functionalist school and its understandable efforts to distance itself from the latter; the narrow equation of material culture with museums, which themselves were acquiring a poor image, both public and scholarly.<sup>4</sup> The great concerns of the post-World War II era with social and political problems helped to direct anthropological attention once more away from material topics. The isolation of material studies from mainstream anthropology increased as structural-functionalism came to dominate anthropology,<sup>5</sup> reducing the flow of good scholars to them and creating a widely held opinion that material studies were 'unproductive' and sterile.

---

<sup>3</sup> R.U.Sayce, *Primitive Arts and Crafts: An Introduction to the Study of Material Culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1933.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Wittlin, '...museums, with few exceptions, have remained essentially what they were in the early nineteenth century when the public museum began to be a feature of European culture. This deficiency would seem to have been caused by the museum's insufficient contact with reality' (A.S.Wittlin, 'The Part of the Museum in Modern Society', in *Proceedings of the British Association for the Advancement of Science*, 1944, pp.57-62, at p.57). Wittlin continues, '...up to the present date no standards exist for the professional qualifications of the museum curator, not even for the curator of the "general museum". The traditions of the curator who was a courtier, a second-rate artist, a retired officer or private "connoisseur" still loom in the halls of our museums and in the minds of our curators.'

<sup>5</sup> Some anthropologists did make serious attempts to apply functionalism to material studies. See, for example, McConnel, 'My task as a social anthropologist is to place these artefacts in their social setting and to describe their function in the way of life to which they belong' (U.H.McConnel, 'Native Arts and Industries on the Archer, Kendall and Holroyd Rivers, Cape York Peninsula, North Queensland', in *Records of the South Australian Museum*, Adelaide, 1953, pp.1-42, at p.2).

It is against this historical background that I choose to consider the 'relevance' of material culture to anthropology. Material culture forms the subject matter, of course, of a number of disciplines: archaeology, geography, material history and, surprisingly perhaps, even some aspects of environmental psychology and sociology. Here we are concerned only with anthropology.

The more immediate objectives of anthropological research change in response to new theoretical developments and the shifts in emphasis that result. This is understandable. What, however, remains unchanged is the overall objective: to understand Man as a cultural being. Whether we belong to the school of thought that considers material culture to be an integral part of culture, whether we hold the opposite view or whether, like Kroeber, we consider the point of no consequence, the reality of the situation is similarly unchanged.<sup>6</sup> All societies have material assemblages, Western societies most obviously so.<sup>7</sup> As we know from our own personal and direct experience material items play an important part in our lives. They both influence and in their turn reflect influences from our cultural beliefs and social behaviour. To understand fully any society, therefore, one cannot exclude its material aspects.

Even when material culture studies were at their lowest ebb and most field anthropologists were obviously disinterested in them, these same anthropologists relied heavily on the material cultures of the societies in which they worked. Such reliance was for the most part on material items as visible markers: of the level and thrust of subsistence and economic activities; of the built environment within which social activity took place; as symbols of political, religious and other beliefs; and as indispensable adjuncts to all aspects of social

---

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 'Strictly speaking there is no such thing as "material culture" - what is culture is the idea behind the artifact' (A.L.Kroeber and C.Kluckhohn, *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1952, p.65); Harris, 'Moreover, like most modern anthropologists, Tylor regarded material objects as an essential part of culture' (M.Harris, *Cultural Materialism: The Struggle for a Science of Culture*, New York: Random House 1979, p.279); Kroeber, 'Accordingly we may forget about this distinction between material and nonmaterial culture, except as a literal difference, that it is sometimes of practical convenience to observe' (A.L.Kroeber, *Anthropology*, New York: Harcourt & Brace 1948, p.296).

<sup>7</sup> Harris suggests, '...a complete inventory of the material culture of U.S. society would certainly exceed a trillion items' (i.e. *types* of objects, not just objects) (*op.cit.*, p.124).

life. Malinowski rightly observed, 'There is no single type of human activity without its material accessories'.<sup>8</sup> As may be seen from the field monographs of any anthropologist since Malinowski, the researcher, no matter what his or her main topic, has depended heavily, if perhaps unwittingly, on the material aspects of the culture studied.

But this, of course, is not the same as systematic research deliberately focused on material culture. All too many anthropologists see this as an arid field, one best left to 'technologists'. Yet as we have noted material culture forms a substantial and significant part of the cultural heritage of every society. What is also most evident is the strong interest people in the society take in this tangible aspect of their heritage. Each year billions of visitors throng our museums. Almost every small town has its group of enthusiasts seeking to preserve old buildings. The urge to collect is both widespread and varied, covering everything from postage stamps and sporting memorabilia to porcelain and antique motor cars. Obviously, a phenomenon that plays such a major role in society, as does material culture, cannot be ignored. It merits study because it is there. Could anthropology, deeply interested though it is in human society, have been a little myopic in its disinterest in things material? Or does it consider them to be the proper subject of study for some parallel discipline? If so, I know of none. Archaeology, concerned with past societies, has no such reservations and fully accepts material data as valid for study.

Traditionally we, as anthropologists, have concentrated much of our research efforts in societies that are non-Western. As modern anthropologists have come to realise, fieldwork is not just a one-way process, with the individual researcher gathering data from a passive body of informants. The host society is an equally important participant in the process and the researcher, whatever his or her initial views and personal research objectives, accepts automatically a responsibility towards the society, a responsibility to document its culture *for its own benefit*. This is how anthropological research is increasingly being seen in such societies, concerned as they are with recording their disappearing traditional heritage.

As is evident from the strict legislation enacted by most recently independent countries and from international pressure for the repatriation of anthropological collections, concern for the cultural heritage, whatever its motivation, places a high level of emphasis on tangible material. Regardless of the distinctions we ourselves draw within anthropology, host-peoples today usually see material and non-material aspects of culture as equally important and expect anthropologists, whatever their

---

<sup>8</sup> B. Malinowski, 'Anthropology', in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol.1 (13th edition), 1926.

specialty, to document both aspects of their culture. The failure of anthropologists in the past to honour sufficiently this responsibility has contributed substantially to the reluctance of many countries to allow anthropological research and also to the application of stringent and very specific requirements regarding the data gathered and their publication.

Many anthropologists have obviously felt that the documentation of a material culture, whatever its value to the society concerned, is an unproductive pursuit from the professional, theoretical viewpoint. The more one explores the subject, however, the more evident it becomes that this dismissal is the product of a frustrated inability to unlock the information contained in artefactual documents and indeed of a confusion of thinking regarding what constitutes material culture and its study. For an apparently obvious and straightforward subject this is surprising.

Material culture consists of the tangible phenomena of a human society that are the purposive products of learned patterns that are not instinctive. It includes portable objects, fixed structures and landscape features. Material culture is *not* a synonym for technology and it does *not* include related processes of manufacture and usage. Again it is *not* a synonym for portable museum objects; it extends well beyond these.

Within any society no item of material culture stands in total isolation from other material phenomena nor from the human members of that society, their beliefs and their behaviour. The interaction between the items and these other elements is a continuing process. Even where an item is removed from its original setting, for example to a distant museum, this process continues though within the new setting. What we are seeing is a network or system of interaction of which the material item forms the core.

The term 'material culture studies' is in a sense a misnomer. Our interest as anthropologists lies in what these phenomena can tell us about Man. Our focus, therefore, is on the relationship between material phenomena and Man in other words the material system containing the material culture, not just the material culture itself. Because of its apparent simplicity, material culture as a term has been used loosely to refer to material culture proper, to material systems and again to their scientific study, in other words material anthropology. This loose usage has been apparent both within the field of material studies and among its critics in other fields of anthropology. One result is that it has made difficult the framing of new theoretical objectives, the formulation of stimulating new ideas. All too often material studies have been allowed to remain ethnographic or to shift into technological studies. If we are properly to appreciate the relevance of material culture to anthropology, however, it is essential that we are clear in what we mean by the term.

But clarity of definition is not enough in itself. We can recognize that material cultures and material systems are of

value to field anthropologists, whatever their speciality. We can identify for the purposes of study each field of material culture and its associated system. We can recognize the mass of data that exists within this field. The problem is how best to make use of it in order to achieve our goal, a better understanding of Man as a cultural being.

For the field material anthropologist concerned with cultural ecology or the built environment, with symbolism or symbolic interaction, with material determinism or with ethnicity, the position is not especially difficult. The systematic gathering of data according to objectives and methodologies already formulated is virtually the same as for any branch of anthropology. It requires particular emphases, some special skills and a familiarity with particular aspects of current anthropological thinking. But so does all research.

The problems arise in field attempts to cover the full spectrum of a material culture as an ethnographic exercise, without a clearly pre-defined focus and objective. Such studies encounter great difficulty in treating evenly and in depth, yet also as a coherent whole, such diverse topics as houses, water transport, personal ornaments, body markings and the products of individual subsistence and manufacturing crafts. The problem is compounded, as far as museum research is often concerned, by inadequate research preparation, too short a time in the field, and subsequently inadequate time to analyse thoroughly the collected data before writing up the project.<sup>9</sup> The result can all too often be an uneven catalogue that includes a series of essays on particular features of the material system. The problem is one of inadequacy of method, not of material.

When we turn to the anthropological collections held in museums across the world, the same is even more true. To argue that archaeologists can profitably extract data from undocumented excavated material, albeit stratified, or that languages and cultures can justifiably be reconstructed on the basis of fading memories of aged informants, yet at the same time to dismiss the vast museum collections of the world, conservatively estimated at some 4.5 million artefacts,<sup>10</sup> as valid sources meriting

---

<sup>9</sup> Within most museums anthropology curators often experience a serious conflict between their roles as (primarily) field researchers and as administrators and collections managers within the museum itself. Museums are rarely structured to enable them to cope with extended field work (12 months or more) on the part of a curator.

<sup>10</sup> W.N. Fenton, 'The Advancement of Material Culture Studies in Modern Anthropological Research', in M. Richardson (ed.), *The Human Mirror: Material and Spatial Images of Man*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press 1974, pp.15-36, at p.29.

research is not logical. Yet this is what has in fact all too often occurred. Anthropologists take pains to read with great care the relevant literature before embarking on a major field project. How many take similar pains to locate and examine with comparable care the artefacts from the region?<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, how much of these vast museum holdings remains unresearched and unpublished?

Anthropology's inability to utilise effectively these museum collections, gathered in its name, must represent one of the great failures of the discipline. Yet the fault does not lie entirely on the one side. Those of us familiar with such collections recognise the practical problems involved in their research usage. Collections management systems, particularly documentation systems, are usually antiquated and inefficient. We have to accept a high percentage of 'no-show' responses to requests for specific artefacts. The documentation is often inadequate or suspect and retrieval speed is usually slow and time-consuming. Curators are normally very helpful but how many management systems today could truly withstand more than five or six different researchers on the same day without serious dislocation occurring? Most of these systems are generally unwieldy and gravely under-staffed and under-budgetted.<sup>12</sup>

At a different level the researcher is faced with the problem of how to extract data from the objects presented for study. The supporting documentation can prove invaluable. All too often, however, it can be scant and of questionable reliability. It is therefore the artefacts themselves that offer the greatest potential and therefore the real challenge.

From museum records we can reasonably expect to learn when, where and by whom an artefact was collected. In general terms these records should also indicate the region and the particular

---

<sup>11</sup> An interesting recent example is that of Jorgensen's 1980 comparative study of the Western Indians of North America wherein he and his colleagues analysed a substantial body of literature in order to plot the distributions of various linguistic, faunal, floral, social and (material) culture traits of 172 Indian tribes (J.G. Jorgensen, *Western Indians*, San Francisco: W.H. Freeman 1980). The book gives no indication that any museum collections were examined. One can see this as criticism both of the study and of museums as research resources.

<sup>12</sup> In 1981 I made a study of the collections management systems of four major museums in Australia. The results were published in B. Reynolds, 'Ethnology Collections and Their Management in Australian Museums', in *COMA Bulletin*, Conference of Museum Anthropologists, No. IX, Brisbane, 1981, pp.8-20. The inadequacy of management systems elsewhere in the world has been well documented by Sturtevant (W.C. Sturtevant, 'Does Anthropology Need Museums?', in *Proceedings of the Biological Society of Washington*, 1969, pp.619-649), Fenton (*op.cit.*), etc.

culture. There may well be substantial additional information on the artefact, on similar artefacts, or on the collection as a whole, either in the same records or in published literature.

From the artefact itself we need to learn initially four things: its locality of origin, its age, its component materials, and details of its manufacture and usage. Given modern botanical and other scientific techniques we can usually identify the component materials and thereby perhaps locality. By direct observation, microscopy, X-ray analysis and other laboratory techniques, we can similarly deduce the methods of manufacture and usage. The determination of age, however, is more difficult for, except in instances where comparative dating is possible, we are usually left just with a 'latest date' - the date of field acquisition. This is particularly true of artefacts made from organic materials such as plant fibres or animal skin.

Once beyond these initial basic questions one can begin to explore various avenues of research. Here it is not sufficient to think of artefacts as complete entities in themselves. Particular elements, such as rowlock styles in watercraft, particular design motifs, particular forms of treatment, as seen in knots, or in the spinning of string; all these can prove most useful indicators of contact, of the history of movement, of distribution and of ethnicity.

On a broader scale, much is to be learned from the examination of a broad range of artefacts of the same kind, or of collections of objects from the same culture. From these one builds up a picture of the different aspects of life in the society - its subsistence activities, its economy, its settlement patterns, its ritual beliefs, and its values. Such comparisons also help us to appreciate the extent of adaptation to the immediate environment, the uses to which local resources are put. From particular objects, from colours used and from design motifs, we begin to learn something of the symbols of the society and of their importance. The unconscious motor patterns of craftsmen, as expressed through their artefacts, form an excellent area for exploration.

As in all research, one source but reinforces others. Artefact analysis confirms, or is itself confirmed from literature or personal accounts though in using it we have to allow for the bias of the original collectors - what they preferred to collect, what they obviously never observed in the culture. Despite such bias a picture can be built up of the culture and perhaps of distinctive local sub-groupings within it. There are limits, of course, to the range of data obtainable, just as there are with all cultural research. But laboratory techniques of analysis for anthropological objects are as yet in their infancy. Who knows what exciting avenues await discovery? In this our museum collections are unusual. What other sources of data can offer anthropologists such a potential for expansion?

On a different level, museum collections offer possibilities in terms of broad comparative studies across a wide range of cultures, for the exploration of such fundamental questions as:

where is the borderline between instinctive and cultural responses; what drives Man to develop his material culture beyond certain minimal levels and along such similar lines; the patterns of material culture that develop in response to particular physiological, subsistence, settlement or social conditions; the speed of technological change within a society and the potential acceptability of proposed new changes; the relative values placed by different peoples on their material possessions. Such questions might also be asked of non-material phenomena. Where tangible phenomena offer an advantage is that beyond a certain level they do not reflect subjective bias on the part of the researcher. They are also unique in their unchanging nature thus allowing re-examination at will.

Throughout this paper I have sought to show that our thinking about material culture, its meaning, its nature and its potential, has often been far too casual and dismissive. As a term, material culture covers a substantial part of what people consider to be their culture or cultural heritage. As the core of material systems it forms the subject matter of material anthropology and has made significant though perhaps unappreciated contributions to the success of much field research in parallel areas of anthropology. Through its substantial presence in museum collections it provides anthropology with a rich resource for further study and, through museum exhibitions and related programmes, an invaluable opportunity to increase public awareness, and obviously support, for the discipline. In concluding, however, it is only right that I should return to the initial question implicit in the title to this paper: is material culture truly relevant to anthropology? To that there can only be one answer: material culture forms, has always formed and will long form part of the subject matter of anthropology. As such it is obviously relevant to anthropology. Now whether some parts of anthropology are relevant to material studies....

BARRIE REYNOLDS