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Colonial Entanglements and the Practices of Taste: An Alternative to Logocentric Approaches

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## Research Articles

## Colonial Entanglements and the Practices of Taste: An Alternative to Logocentric Approaches

**ABSTRACT** Anthropology has over the last quarter century privileged language, ideation, and meaning as central tropes in the study of culture. Meaning has been construed primarily in terms of linguistic signification, resulting in logocentric approaches to its study. This preoccupation endures despite the embrace of practice theory and renewed attention to object worlds. In this article, I explore the implications of logocentric approaches for the study of what Thomas terms “colonial entanglements.” I argue that there are both theoretical and methodological reasons for deprivileging meaning (logocentrically conceived) and for focusing instead on the embodied forms of practical knowledge that framed colonial relations. I explore the value of a taste-centered approach that exploits the strengths of archaeological sources. As a form of embodied practical knowledge, extant practices of taste shaped the reception (and rejection) of exotic goods as well as their recontextualization. By creating what Hebdige terms “cartographies of taste” based on a study of past object worlds, we can explore how existing practices shaped the reception of new objects. By viewing these “cartographies” comparatively in time and space, we can contextually analyze diversions and continuities in the practices of taste through time in relation to the interplay of production and consumption, supply and demand, and thus enrich our understanding of colonial conjunctures. An archaeological case study from the Banda area in Ghana is used to illustrate the value of taste as a conceptual tool that emphasizes the importance of embodied knowledge in social life. [Keywords: logocentrism, embodied knowledge, colonial entanglements, material culture, Ghana]

**L**A TE-20TH-CENTURY ANTHROPOLOGY has privileged language and linguistic signification as a site of culture making. Although deeply rooted in the Cartesian mind/body split, this logocentric view has more proximate roots in the diverse legacies of Saussurean linguistics (Lévi-Strauss 1963; Saussure 1999), semiotics (Barthes 1967, 1972, 1983; Baudrillard 1981), dialogic approaches (Bakhtin 1981), discursive perspectives (Foucault 1972), and a conviction that cultural worlds, like texts, are open to decoding or exegesis through reading. Whether language is viewed as a positive creative force or rather more negatively (i.e., Derrida 1976, following Nietzsche), it has come to occupy a central place in anthropological inquiry (MacDougall 1998:255). So too has meaning (Geertz 1973). Although seldom defined, meaning is often linked to linguistic signification and therefore ideation. Yet the last two decades have witnessed the emergence of alternative perspectives that capture other ways of “being-in-the-world” and work to overcome the Cartesian distrust of sensory ex-

perience (Stoller 1997:xii). Shaped by debates in phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty 1969), existential (Sartre 1947) and Marxist philosophy (Althusser 1969; Thompson 1963, 1978), these diverse perspectives work against the privileging of language by attending to the embodied practices of everyday life as a site of culture making (Bourdieu 1977; Certeau 1984; Giddens 1976; Lefebvre 1991). This has brought welcome attention to object worlds as an active force in social life (Appadurai 1986; Miller 1983, 1987, 1995, 1998) and fostered the development of a sensorial anthropology attentive to the embodied pathways through which culture is constructed and experienced (Classen 1993; Howes 1991; Howes and Lalonde 1991; Jackson 1996, 1998; Stoller 1995, 1997).

A confluence of these perspectives has shaped an emerging anthropology of colonialism. Innovative studies of what Thomas (1991) terms “colonial entanglements” have been informed by how cultural practices were reshaped through colonial “conjunctures” (e.g., Cohn 1996;

Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, 1997; Sahlins 1985, 1994; Stoler and Cooper 1997, among others). Scholars are increasingly concerned with the active role that object worlds played in historical processes of entanglement—with how cultural worlds were reconstructed through dress, architecture, the manipulation of space, and the consumption of new objects (Deetz 1977; Hendrickson 1996; Thomas 1991; for an early example in history see Thompson 1963; also Glennie 1995). However, language and ideation continue to be privileged despite the impact of practice theory and attention to object worlds (e.g., Douglas and Isherwood 1979, but cf. Douglas 1994; McCracken 1988:57–70 on the “hegemony” of a linguistic model in the study of objects). As Ingold puts it, “culture is conceived to hover over the material world but not to permeate it” (2000:53). This is linked to an ongoing preoccupation with meaning, which is seldom defined but often linguistically conceived. In the study of colonial entanglements, this translates into a concern with how the meaning of objects altered as they crossed cultural boundaries (McCracken 1988; see also Howes 1996:1–15). Yet, as I argue below, there are both theoretical and methodological reasons for deprivileging meaning as a focal point of inquiry. We need to develop alternative concepts that help us capture the extent to which colonial entanglements (and cultural processes more generally) were sensorial and shaped by practical and embodied forms of knowledge that are inadequately represented or expressed by language. In this article, I explore how taste, as an embodied form of practical knowledge, can help us to explore the cultural terrain of colonial entanglements without privileging the “intervention of language” (Bourdieu 2000: 136, citing Bouveresse). I begin by framing the theoretical and methodological challenges to a meaning-centered approach, then discuss the value of conceptualizing taste as a form of embodied practical knowledge (following Bourdieu 1984, 1993). The final section of the article explores how the practices of taste in the Banda area of west-central Ghana were reshaped through a long history of colonial entanglements, first in the trans-Saharan trade, later the Atlantic trade, and, finally, through a period of formal colonial overrule.

### MEANING AND THE THEORETICAL CHALLENGES TO LOGOCENTRISM

Anthropology has in recent decades been preoccupied with the problem of “meaning.” Despite the centrality of this trope, it often remains unclear what *meaning* “means.” The *Oxford English Dictionary* stresses intention and purpose: “That which is intended to be or actually is expressed or indicated” (1989, IX:522). The implication that meaning is (1) conscious and (2) expressed through language provides only a partial guide to anthropological uses of the term. Under the confluence of Saussurean linguistics and Freudian psychoanalysis, there has been a growing sense that meanings need not be conscious, and,

indeed, often are not. Those influenced by Saussurean linguistics saw meaning shaped by the underlying system of language—by the patterned relationships between signifier (the acoustic image) and signified (the meaning called forth by the signifier), as deployed in syntagmatic (syntax) and paradigmatic (semantic) axes (Saussure 1999; see Gottdiener 1995:5–9 for a useful summary). Semiotics, the study of signs and their meanings, extended Saussure’s insights on language to other cultural systems (e.g., object worlds), but privileged language as the site of meaning in the process (e.g., Barthes 1967, 1972, 1983). Indeed, Barthes (1967:11) argued for an inversion of Saussure’s vision of semiology; whereas Saussure envisioned linguistics as a branch of a general “science of signs,” Barthes argued that semiology was instead a part of linguistics, assuring the centrality of language in forging meaning:

It is true that objects, images and patterns of behavior can signify, and do so on a large scale, but never autonomously; every semiological system has its linguistic admixture. Where there is a visual substance, for example, the meaning is confirmed by being duplicated in a linguistic message . . . so that at least a part of the iconic message is, in terms of structural relationship, either redundant or taken up by the linguistic system. As for collections of objects (clothes, food) they enjoy the status of systems only in so far as they pass through the relay of language, which extracts their signifiers (in the form of nomenclature) and names their signifieds (in the form of usages or reasons) . . . [it] appears increasingly more difficult to conceive a system of images and objects whose *signifieds* can exist independently of language: to perceive what a substance signifies is inevitably to fall back on the individuation of language: there is no meaning which is not designated, and the world of signifieds is none other than that of language. [Barthes 1967:10]

Barthes was particularly concerned in his early studies to explore *underlying* meanings—what he called “myths”—in order to expose how meanings that seem natural to us (taken-for-granted) are cultural products (Culler 1983:17). Ontologically, then, Barthes privileged *language* and *structure* over *practice* and *object worlds* in the generation of meaning, as have many anthropologists who embraced a semiotic approach.

Barthes’ perspective is symptomatic of a broader “priority-of-language thesis” that accords “logical and epistemological precedence” to rule-driven languages over “those activities which mark the earth” (Lefebvre 1991:16–17). The perceived rupture between ideal/mental and practical/social worlds has contributed to the sense that worldview (*weltanschauung*) has priority over lifeworld (*lebenswelt*; cf. Jackson 1998:5). By extension, reflective, retrospective analysis and discursive knowledge are emphasized over nonreflective, practical activity and nondiscursive knowledge (Bourdieu 2000; Giddens 1976; Jackson 1996:42; Lefebvre 1991:1–67; MacDougall 1998:15–16, 80, 254–259; Stoller 1995, 1997). This privileging of language and its power to shape worlds flows from a historically recent “scholastic disposition” that Bourdieu (2000) argues is made possible by the fact that intellectuals are freed from

the pressing practical constraints of the world. This has led to what he terms the “scholastic fallacy.”

Projecting his theoretical thinking into the heads of acting agents, the researcher presents the world as he thinks it (that is, as an object of contemplation, a representation, a spectacle) as if it were the world as it presents itself to those who do not have the leisure (or the desire) to withdraw from it in order to think it. He sets at the origin of their practices, that is to say, in their “consciousness” his own spontaneous or elaborated representations, or, worse, the models he has had to construct . . . to account for their practices. [Bourdieu 2000:51]

The result is a “fetishization of the products of intellectual reflection” (Jackson 1996:1). A focus on meaning, linguistically conceived, thus diverts attention from the “ontological priority of social existence” (Jackson 1996:4).

Although semiotics entered anthropology through complex pathways, Geertz (1973) was perhaps the most broadly influential in promoting a semiotic view of culture (also Turner 1974). His concise and eloquent framing of a vision for anthropology (“Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning” [Geertz 1973:5]) arguably launched a paradigm shift in anthropology that placed meaning center stage. A concern with meaning remained central even as anthropologists began to question (1) the structuralist premises that underwrote early semiotics (e.g., early Barthes, Baudrillard; Gottdiener 1994; McCracken 1988:57–89) and (2) mentalist views of culture that paid insufficient attention to the “social lives of things” (Appadurai 1986).

Practice theory works against a view of culture as finished product and stresses strategic and improvisational action over rule-driven behavior (e.g., Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1976). The embrace of practice theory, combined with attention to how practices are actively constituted through object worlds, provided a new platform from which to examine the relational quality of object and social worlds (Appadurai 1986; Miller 1987). At about the same time, anthropology experienced a “historic turn” (McDonald 1996), and the confluence of these concerns (history, practice, and attention to object worlds) promised a new centrality for archaeology given its long-standing concern with material culture (Hodder 1983; Miller 1983). Importantly, however, the “material turn” in both sociocultural anthropology and archaeology was shaped by anthropology’s growing interest in semiotics, which framed a concern to explore the role of objects as symbols (Douglas and Isherwood 1979; Hodder 1982a, 1982b, 1983, 1987, 1989; Hodder et al. 1995; Keating 2000; McCracken 1988; Munn 1983; Weiner 1983; for an earlier example, see Deetz 1977). Historical anthropologists who embraced the material turn became attentive to the role of objects in quotidian practice—in the making of “lived worlds” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, 1997; Hendrickson 1996; Thomas 1991; Weiss 1996). Yet they too were

concerned primarily with the *meaning* of new material forms—new styles of clothing, houses, adornment and so on. Historians too have embraced anthropology’s focus on meaning, represented for example in the projects of *Alltagsgeschichte* (history of everyday life; Lüdtke 1995). Although some have questioned the ontological priority of language in meaning-construction (e.g., Jackson 1996: 32–35; Stoller 1997), a logocentric view of meaning has come to dominate much anthropological and historical inquiry, signaling what Bourdieu characterizes as “excessive confidence in the power of language” (2000:2).

There are, thus, theoretical grounds for questioning the ontological priority placed on language and meaning, ideationally conceived, in the study of social life (Bloch 1998; Bourdieu 2000; Giddens 1976; Jackson 1998; Lefebvre 1991; Stoller 1997). On its own, such an emphasis diminishes the importance of nondiscursive, embodied knowledge in the ongoing construction of culture: “our gestures, acts and modes of comportment do not invariably depend on a priori cognitive understanding. Practical skills, know-how, a sense of what to do, are irreducible. The meaning of practical knowledge lies in what is accomplished through it, not in what conceptual order may be said to underlie or precede it” (Jackson 1996:34). However, these theoretical concerns are reinforced by methodological ones, to which I now turn.

## METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES TO THE STUDY OF MEANING

Efforts to probe meaning—particularly in past contexts—often falter on several counts: (1) the need to account for the multiplicity of meanings in social life; (2) the analytical practice of reflectively gauging meaning, which separates meaning from practice; and (3) the privileging of linguistic formulations of meaning. I touch on each of these in turn, then discuss methodological practices that shape anthropological approaches to the meaning of object worlds.

Meanings vary within and between societies, as well as through time. As anthropologists have been at pains to point out, meanings do not inhere in objects (Riggins 1994:3). Objects are endowed with meaning according to local cultural logics (Sahlins 1994) and are creatively recontextualized when they cross cultural boundaries (Howes 1996; McCracken 1988; Thomas 1991:187). Meanings may vary by gender (Barlow and Lipset 1997; Durham 1999), class (Bourdieu 1984), or among individuals (Certeau 1984; Glennie 1995:180; Thomas 1991:20, 143). Thus in confronting the meaning of objects, we are necessarily confronted by polysemy (Barthes 1967; Riggins 1994:3).

We face greater complexity when we add a temporal dimension to the picture, for meanings can vary across time in relation to changing political economic circumstances. Bayly (1986), for example, examined the changing significance of home industry cloth in India from 1700–1930, exploring changing patterns of cloth consumption

in terms of extant cultural logics, because “simple economizing was not the only issue: taste had to be considered and cultural preferences accommodated” (1986:303). Cultural factors, particularly the value placed on “superior color and fine texture,” shaped Indian reception of imported cloth, threatening the production of hand-woven textiles. Home-produced cloth took on new meaning in the context of Indian nationalism as part of a boycott of English imports. In this context, home-produced cloth was “transformed from an endangered rural craft to a powerful symbol of the moral and spiritual regeneration of India” (Bayly 1986:311).

In similar fashion, Breen (1988) explored the changing semiotic significance of the “baubles of Britain” in colonial America. Breen argued that object worlds of colonial Americans could help to explain why thousands of colonists with their separate histories united in a revolutionary effort in a way that reductionist economic explanations or political ideas could not. Breen chronicled growing dependence on “store-bought sundries” that came to replace the “pioneer world of homespun cloth and wooden dishes” as Americans “developed a taste for British imports” (1988:78, 79; also Deetz 1977). A “standardization of taste” among colonial consumers was simultaneously a “colonization of taste” (1988:82, 85). A rising level of personal debt associated with increased consumption of British goods translated into an ambivalence about the “meaning of imports” (1988:87). In the wake of the Stamp Act, mundane items of household economies took on a new symbolic function as they became politicized; tea became a “badge of slavery” and homespun cloth a symbol of resistance. The goods that held empire together were symbolically redefined (though note that Breen elided class differences in his analysis [personal communication, Charles Orser Jr., May 16, 2001]). Neither taste nor the meaning of goods was stable in this revolutionary period (see also Reddy 1986; Smith 1998). “What we are confronted with is thus never more or less than a succession of uses and recontextualizations” (Thomas 1991:29).

As indicated above, a scholarly quest for meaning often privileges a retrospective, reflective mode of understanding that obscures the practical domain of human action (Giddens 1976:28, 53; Jackson 1996:42, 1998:8–9). Meanings are treated as texts to be read rather than as embodied sensibilities (Stoller 1997). Bloch’s (1995) anecdote about the meaning of carved house poles among the Zafimaniry of Madagascar illustrates the slippage between practical and theoretical knowledge that emerges from such scholarly practices. French has no direct counterpart for the English verb *to mean* and scholarly inquiry is directed instead by the phrase *vouloir dire* (try to say). When Bloch posed the question, what do the carved house posts “try to say,” Zafimaniry informants replied “nothing” (Bloch 1995:213). Rephrasings of the question to “what are those pictures of,” “what was their point” triggered a similar response. Instead, Bloch was told, the carvings “made the wood beautiful” (1995:214), a disappointing

insight given that other researchers had described the same carvings as representations of the moon, the rain, and so on. Earlier researchers had pressed the Zafimaniry to name the designs, but had mistaken the indicator of the design for its “meaning”; in the process they privileged language as a site of meaning formation and artificially forced a reflection on meaning. Bloch suggested that the only useful answer that the Zafimaniry could have given to his question about meaning was, “If I were you, mate, I would not be starting from here” (1995:214). Of importance were the multiple acts of carving the post over time that were meaningful and valued because the post stood at the core of the house that matured along with a marriage. House posts did not point “outwards—mutely trying to say something, *voulant dire* as the questions expected—they are an essential element of the material and the social principle on which they occur; they are not referring or signifying” (1995:215). Instead, they form part of a *sensible world of practical knowledge* that language-based scholarly investigations elide or distort.

Although the Zafimaniry example demonstrates that linguistic sources and intersubjectivity do not guarantee robust interpretation, the exemplary studies of Bayly, Breen, and others were possible because of the rich historical record that informs them. Here documentary sources—produced in proximate temporal contexts—served as a proxy for intersubjectivity (in the sense of a lived connection; see Jackson 1998), and offered hope of discerning the meanings with which objects were endowed by the people who produced or consumed them (Gottdiener 1995:29; although intersubjectivity does not guarantee common understanding, for perceptual schemes shape what is heard as we talk “different talk” [Sahlins 1997:274]). What of contexts in which the proximate linguistic sources that render meaning transparent (or less opaque?) are unavailable? How do we probe the meanings of recontextualized objects?

Our understanding of recontextualization depends on knowing something of what went before—what Thomas terms “autonomous preconditions.” But as Thomas (1991: 88) observed, we are confronted by a partiality of sources. Particularly important for Thomas in his Pacific islands study were firsthand European descriptions, partial and biased as they are, because they helped illuminate indigenous reaction to initial encounters. European documents were thus a proxy for intersubjectivity and a platform for discerning meaning. Yet “firsthand” accounts of “first encounters” are notoriously partial and frustrate attempts to flesh out the non-European cultural context; as a result, scholars rely on less temporally proximate sources as proxies for intersubjectivity—for example, on ethnographic sources that document meaning in later periods. As Thomas (1991:37) recognized, these sources often postdate a long history of colonial entanglement and thus the processes of recontextualization whose effects we wish to study.

Elsewhere I have explored how the logic of historical anthropological reconstruction parallels the problems that archaeologists have long confronted in the use of ethnographic analogy (Stahl 1993, 1999b, 2001:19–31). In brief, the logic that informs what I have called “illustrative analogy” (Stahl 1993) is shaped by the idea that if things are alike in some respects, they must be alike in others. The logic, simplified, is as follows. We work from the more accessible to the less accessible. Material patterns are accessible through time regardless of our degree of intersubjectivity with the authors of those patterns. Of course, archaeological sites are not unmediated signatures of the past—their material patterns are transformed by a variety of agents through time. The accessibility of other “dimensions” of culture is eroded by time, largely because of the importance of intersubjectivity in knowing about them. Meaning in the present or recent past seems accessible because of a wealth of linguistic sources. In past contexts for which linguistic sources are wanting, we rely on an analogical model underwritten by the logic, if A, then B—in short, similar material patterns suggest similar meanings. This sort of logic extracts meaning from its salient temporal (political-economic) context, extrapolates it to another context, and, in effect, freezes meaning in time. Obviously, this works against an understanding of how objects were recontextualized and endowed with new meaning.

Analogical modeling need not proceed in such a baldly illustrative way. A comparative approach to analogical modeling (Stahl 1993, 2001:39–40; Wylie 1985, 1989) focuses on the *application* of analogical models and is attentive to points of similarity as well as disjunctures that may inform on how the past differed from the present (Wylie 1985; also Hodder 1991:129). Importantly the question of similarity and dissimilarity is an empirical one, one that requires recourse to diverse sources of evidence past and present. For example, in exploring meaning, we might be attentive to the contextual associations of objects that might signal commonality or disjuncture in meaning (Hodder 1991:53, 143–146). Symbolic archaeologists have stressed the importance of examining patterns across attributes, artifacts, features, and sites in order to identify and interpret meaning, a process that Hodder (1991:145) terms “networking.” Hodder acknowledges that networking is easier in historical archaeology because of the relative wealth of overlapping sources, while the potential for networking in prehistoric archaeology is more limited, making it difficult to “ground hypotheses in data” (Hodder 1991:145–146). Yet this distinction between “historic” and “prehistoric” archaeology is problematic (Lightfoot 1995); if prehistory is defined by an absence or paucity of documentary sources, then colonial entanglements in rural 19th-century Africa are relegated to prehistory. Thus the limitations to Hodder’s networking approach are not confined to deep “prehistory.”

This bears on a problem identified, but then largely ignored, by Nicholas Thomas (1991:37, 88)—that interpret-

ing recontextualization requires knowledge of extant cultural logics, those “autonomous preconditions” that shaped reception of new objects (Figure 1). As Thomas notes, our knowledge of autonomous conditions is typically based on sources that postdate colonial entanglements—“enduring” aspects of culture extracted from sources that postdate entanglement are used to model culture in its “autonomous” conditions (see Dirks 1996 for how this places culture before history). The criteria for distinguishing enduring forms from recent innovations are seldom made explicit, but draw implicitly on typological time (e.g., sorting traditional from modern, precolonial from colonial, precapitalist from capitalist; Fabian 1983: 23–24). In the final analysis, then, the “autonomous preconditions” are often an imagined cultural baseline of enduring structures, practices, or logics constructed from a variety of sources derived from disparate temporal contexts, and therefore different moments in the process of colonial entanglements (see Figure 1; Stahl 1999b; see also Chance 1996 on how this shapes an “ethnographic past”). As Figure 1 suggests, some practices (in this case, meanings), those that speak to the “before time,” are taken *out of time*, excised from the context that lent them saliency to serve as a model of “autonomous preconditions” (often characterized as precolonial or precontact). These same sources are then used in a second analytical moment, to explore the *reconfiguration* of cultural practices (or meanings) *in history*; they thus serve double duty—as a source of insight into a precontact past *and* to the changes wrought by contact (Stahl 1999b, 2001:20–30).

This form of logic is pervasive in meaning-centered studies of recontextualization and reflects the theoretical issue discussed above—the continued privileging of ideas over objects, mentalities over materiality. This privileging affects even those who explicitly embrace practice theory and identify with the effort to overcome subject/object dualities. Consider for example Thomas’s observation that anthropologists are interested in “opening up the neglected area of the cultural constitution of objects” (Thomas 1991:30). This phrase implies sequence comparable to what Dirks (1996) described for culture and history. Culture, then history; culture, then objects. Objects become vehicles for culture, vehicles for meaning, the signified with no necessary link to their signifiers (Saussure 1999), implicitly privileging ideas over objects, “culture” over “materiality.” Yet if this is taken as the primary goal of material culture studies, we risk losing sight of how objects constitute culture and reproduce the split between, what Bourdieu terms, phenomenological and objectivist knowledge (Bourdieu 1977:3, also 1984:467). A focus on meaning—logocentrically conceived—privileges the cultural construction of objects over the role of objects in constituting culture. Thus my concerns with a meaning-centered focus are in part methodological (How can we reliably access meaning in the past?), and in part theoretical (How does a concern with meaning reproduce the privileging of

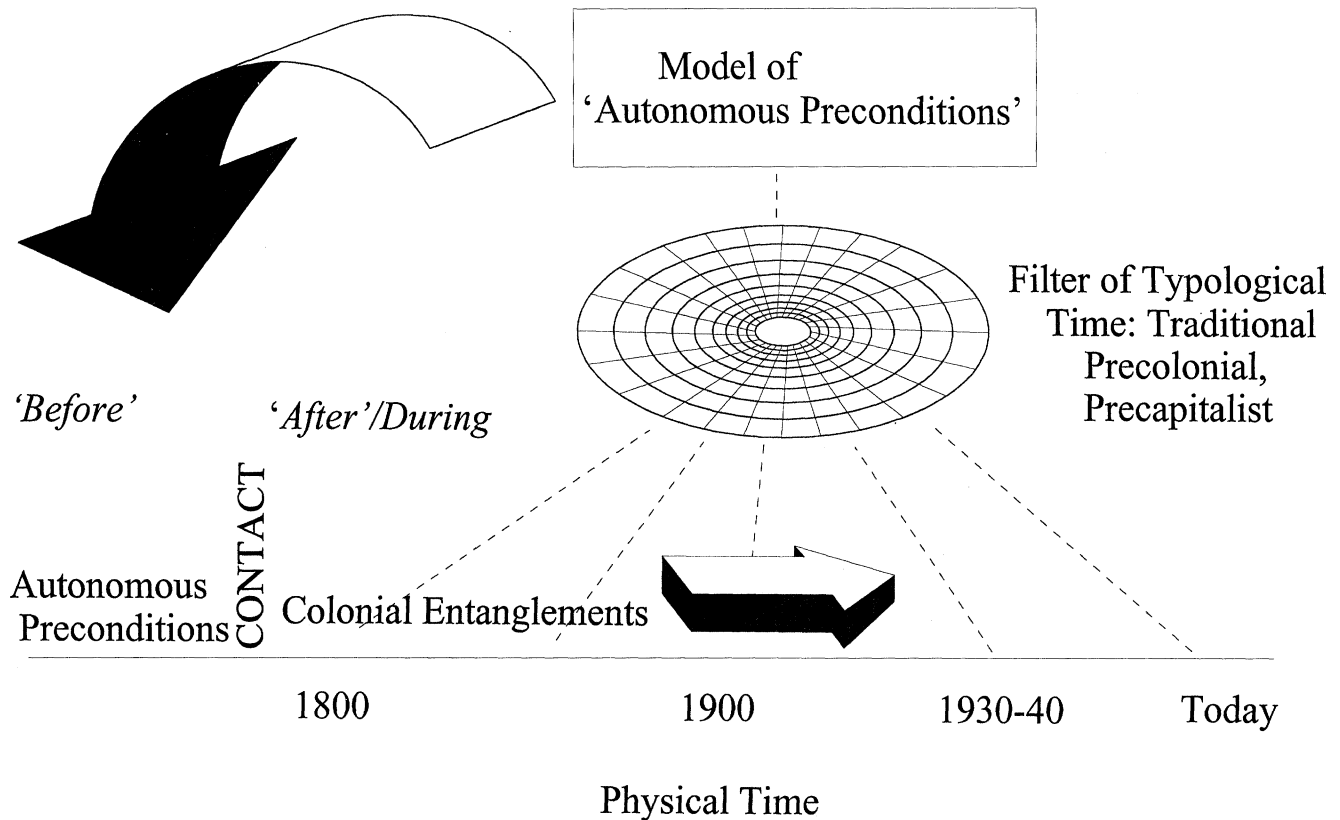


FIGURE 1. Modeling "autonomous preconditions" through the use of postcontact sources.

ideas and mentalities over the object worlds that are implicated in their production?).

To summarize, anthropological analyses of colonial entanglements often direct attention to the problem of meaning logocentrically conceived and analyzed. This privileges language both as a site of meaning formation and as an entry point into the analysis of meaning. As a result, we have not fully delivered on the promise implied in the recognition of object worlds as *active sites of cultural production*. Moreover, as a variety of authors cited demonstrate, the meanings of object worlds vary. If language is a/the primary means through which meaning is constructed, how do we explore meaning without access to language-based evidential sources? Context may help us identify objects or patterns that are *meaningful* (see Glassie 1999:47 on context), but discerning *meaning* with any degree of specificity is highly problematic in contexts where *temporally proximate* linguistic sources are absent.

#### "TASTE" AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO A MEANING-CENTERED FOCUS

The Banda Research Project focuses on how daily life in rural west central Ghana (Figure 2) was affected by global political economic developments that culminated in formal colonization (Stahl 1991, 1999a, 2001; Stahl and Cruz 1998). Banda's involvement in global networks dates back to the period of early trans-Saharan trade (from c. C.E. 1300). Banda was later incorporated into the expansionist

Asante state (Arhin 1967, 1979; McCaskie 1995; Schildkrout 1987; Wilks 1975; Yarak 1990) that mediated Banda's links to the Atlantic trade. Asante fell to the British in 1896, after which Banda was formally placed under British colonial rule after 1896. Banda's involvement in these networks had material consequences. New goods were produced, the organization of labor was altered, foreign goods were consumed, and domestic space was reconstructed through time (Stahl 1999a, 2001). Surely these were meaningful changes to the people who lived them. But because of the theoretical and methodological concerns outlined above, I have sought an alternative to the meaning-centered focus that dominates material culture studies, one that acknowledges the limitations of sources and vagaries of analogical logic. An alternative should help us understand colonial entanglement as a cultural process but resist privileging *from the outset* ideas over objects. It needs to acknowledge the role of *extant practical knowledge* in shaping colonial entanglements, in creating opportunities for certain courses of action and foreclosing others. I suggest that *taste*, as a form of practical knowledge (Bourdieu 2000:51), may be a useful entry point into the problem, one that is empirically more accessible and better mediates the subject/object dichotomy that is reproduced in meaning-centered studies.

My "turn to taste" is shaped by Bourdieu's book *Distinction* (1984, also 1993). What distinguishes taste is that it is *embodied* and *manifest* in practices shaped by choices



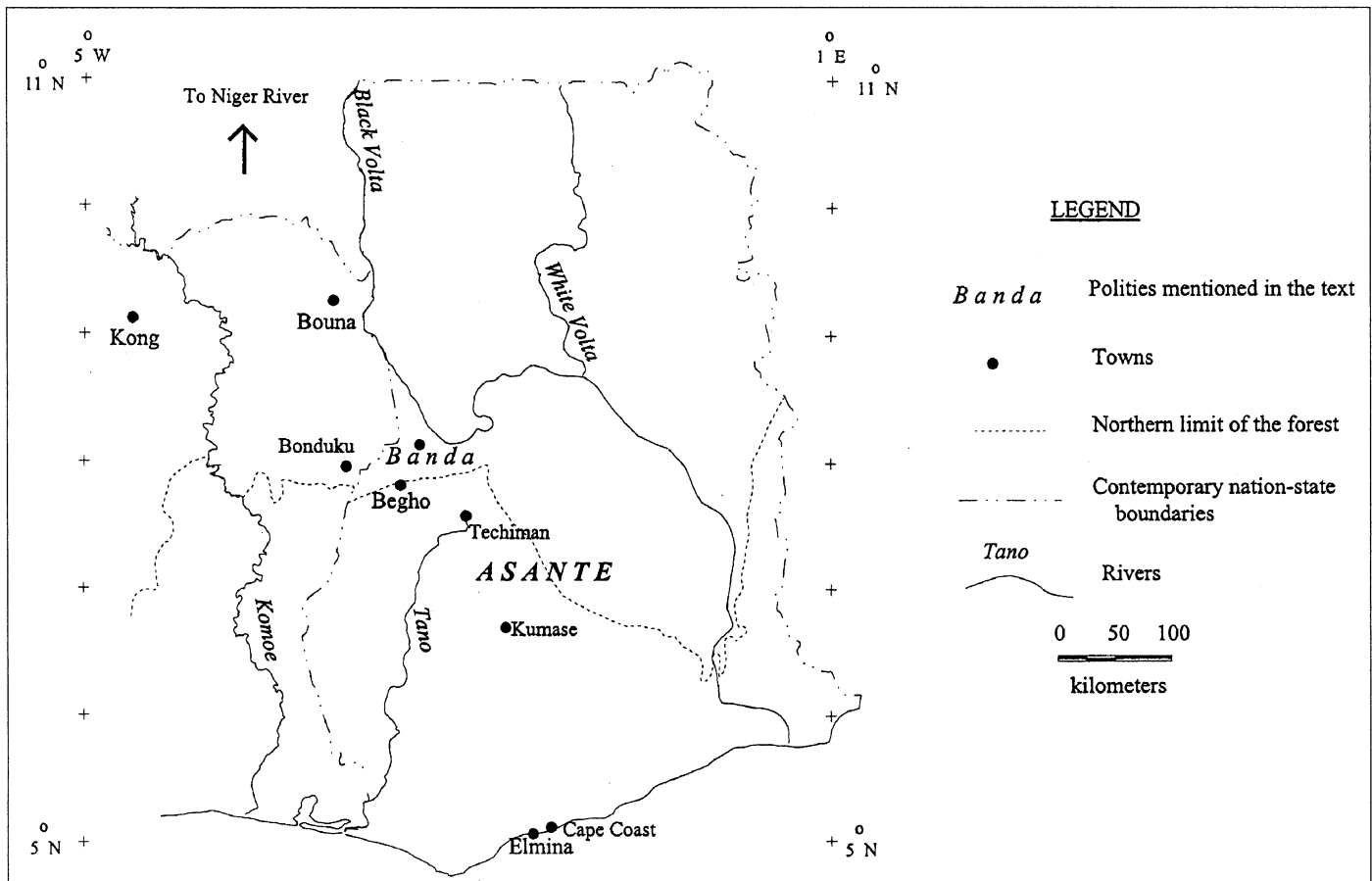


FIGURE 2. Location of the Banda area and major towns mentioned in the text.

made among an array of possible practices and properties (Bourdieu 1984:190, 1993:108). Taste is therefore an embodied preference, a form of practical (and, most often, unconscious) comprehension that is often revealed through refusals (things that are “not to one’s taste”; Bourdieu 1993:109; Hebdige 1988:52). Embodied taste thus emerges dialectically through an encounter with object worlds. The sedimented world (Jackson 1998:5) of past choices shapes the reception of newly encountered objects (Bourdieu 1993:108). These preferences are not fixed but are, rather, locked in a dance of supply and demand, production and consumption, shaped by past choices and dispositions, but continually reframed by social tensions both within and outside the local setting. In this sense, the “canons of taste” (Veblen 1973:87–117) are simultaneously enabling and constraining (Giddens 1976:108). Taste is the product of what Bourdieu (1993:109) terms an encounter between two histories: that of objects (the “objectified state”) and that of incorporated (embodied) preferences (see also Lefebvre 1991:17–18, 39–40). As amplified below, this distinction becomes particularly important as we explore the histories of “entangled” objects (Thomas 1991) produced in one context and consumed in another (Howes 1996; McCracken 1988).

The incorporated preferences of taste are collective. For Bourdieu (1984), taste is based in class, but the nature

of the social collective would seem an empirical question rather than something that can be predetermined. The practices of taste inscribe social distinction on the “physical order of bodies” (Bourdieu 1984:174). It is thus a form of practical “mutual knowledge” (Giddens 1976:107) embodied in ornamentation, dress, food ways, and other material practices that may remain part of the “taken-for-granted” world. In this sense, the practices of taste may be naturalized—distinguished by “their relative invisibility, their appropriateness” (Hebdige 1979:101). It is perhaps when “canons of taste” are articulated, and more so when they are challenged (Hebdige 1979, 1983, 1988), that they enter a conscious cognitive order and the discursive realm of language. Are resulting struggles over taste symbolic struggles, struggles imbued with meaning?—surely; but I reiterate that their meaning in the experience of our subjects may be beyond our reach, especially as we move into a more distant past or work in areas where documentary sources are few. Yet objects recovered by archaeologists manifest the *practices* of taste and their study can contribute significantly to our understanding of the processes of colonial entanglement (e.g., Dietler 1990, 1998). As we look to colonial entanglements, extant practices of taste framed the reception or rejection of objects that subsequently remade the lived worlds of colonized peoples. Taste focuses our attention on consumption, *but not*



*autonomous of production*—rather, it helps us attend to the dialectic of production and consumption (e.g., see Steiner's [1985] insightful analysis of how British textile manufacture was shaped by African tastes in cloth). At the same time, taste is caught up in the politics of value (Appadurai 1986:30) and, often intimately, though not invariably, involved in practices of distinction.

Of course, the study of taste is no “magic bullet.” Like Bourdieu's concept of “habitus,” taste has the potential to be conceived as a generative structure that lies outside the lived reality of human agents (Certeau 1984:58–59; Jackson 1996:18–22). Moreover, the concept has a long history in European thought that I do not discuss here (e.g., Howes and Lalonde 1991). In application, we must struggle against the notion that taste can be defined in generalized or universalizing ways (see below). Yet by embracing a historical, contextual perspective on taste that attends to moments when the habits of taste are diverted or interrupted, we resist the notion of fixity and gain an appreciation for the extent to which the habits of taste are not a “finished set of rules” but rather a “repertoire of possibilities” (Jackson 1996:22).

A concern with taste is of course not new and taste has been conceived of as a dimension of colonial entanglements. Bayly (1986; like Steiner 1985) insisted that taste shaped the consumption of imported cloth in India, while Breen (1988) argued that taste was “colonized” and “standardized” through the consumption of British baubles. Hebdige (1983:11, 1988:46–75) emphasized the importance of taste in studying British youth subcultures, working to produce what he termed a “cartography of taste.” Yet, in each case, taste was treated as a springboard to meaning, to how taste informed “the actual process of meaning construction and symbol manipulation” (Hebdige 1983:11). The result, as I have suggested, privileges mentalities over materialities, reproducing those pesky dichotomies we seek to avoid. I suggest that we work to explore taste as a set of embodied practices that empirically inform on the cultural preferences that shaped the *reception* (or rejection) and *recontextualization* of objects through the course of colonial entanglements. An exploration of taste can inform on how object worlds created and reinforced the “grammars of difference” that shaped colonization (Stoler and Cooper 1997:3–4). Not only is taste more accessible, as I will argue, but it is a conceptual lens through which to view the active production (encompassing reproduction *and* transformation) of culture in practice and thus, to escape the “ritual either/or choice between objectivism and subjectivism in which the social sciences have so far allowed themselves to be trapped” (Bourdieu 1977:4). In what follows, I sketch out some methodological issues before I explore the changing contours of taste in Banda.

### **The Dynamics of Taste**

Taste-making and associated practices of social distinction are not one-way processes. Just as surely as people in the colonies were remade through the colonization of taste and the consumption of exotics, tastes and distinction in the metropole were reframed through colonization (e.g., Cohn 1996; Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, 1997; Mintz 1985; Steiner 1985). That these processes were relational does not imply equality among participants. Exchange, of course, occurred on an unequal footing (Thomas 1991:3), and we need to consider how power is implied in taste-making projects. As Miller cautioned, we must not lose sight of “the links between First World ‘taste’ and Third World suffering” (1995:3). But taste making was worked on at home just as it was in the colonies (e.g., Constantine 1986). The relational quality of these processes runs counter to anthropological preoccupations for “place” and local-level units of analysis (Stoler and Cooper 1997:16). Understanding them requires that we raise our heads from the analytical trenches of place to investigate the practices of taste across a variety of sites. In this sense, our analyses of taste need to be multiscalar in relation to both time and space (Orser 1996:184–190).

How, then, do we approach the study of taste? Here I begin with the local. As virtually everyone who has addressed the problem of recontextualization agrees, the reception of foreign objects is dependent on context (Wesson 2001:98–99). Diversions must be explained and are “meaningful only in relation to the paths from which they stray” (Appadurai 1986:28–29). We can draw two implications from this: (1) the need to consider these diversions in relation to what Appadurai (1986:29) terms “customary paths” and (2) the need to ask what (if any) advantage was conferred by incorporating new elements into existing object worlds. The relevant comparison in addressing diversions is what went before—just as I have outlined above in the discussion of meaning. Where an exploration of taste departs from that of meaning is in the *empirical accessibility* of what went before—the *preexisting customary paths that shaped the reception of new objects*. The object worlds of “before” are accessible to us through a variety of sources, but particularly through archaeology (e.g., Dietler 1990, 1998). Of course, our understanding of “before” is shaped in implicit and explicit ways by what came “after”—I do not proceed from the naive position that past objects “speak for themselves” (Stahl 2001; Stahl et al. n.d.). Analogical argument is still implied. Multiple lines of evidence, including documents, are still valuable. But the material residues of past “customary paths”—the sedimented histories of objects and object classes—make it possible to (1) discern the context and variables that shape taste making from sources that are temporally coterminous with Thomas's “autonomous preconditions.” The resulting “cartography of taste” (Hebdige 1983, 1988) provides a window into the embodied preferences that shaped the reception of new objects and new object classes. And, (2)

drawing on this, we can comparatively and contextually analyze the diversions and continuities in the practices of taste through time.

In the analysis that follows, I explore a series of archaeological assemblages through the lens of taste in order to (1) develop a “cartography of taste” (Hebdige 1983, 1988:46–75) through time; (2) explore whether adoption of novel forms was associated with a diminishing taste for local goods; (3) determine whether exotic objects were used in familiar ways, thereby forging links with the past, or conversely were associated with novel practices; and (4) assess what we can learn about the changing politics of value through time (Appadurai 1986:30). In other words, I work to understand the consequences of colonial entanglements for the character of object worlds and the culture-making practices that they sustained. Before I proceed to the case study, I briefly explore the variables that may help us construct local “cartographies of taste” by studying object worlds from the past.

### **Studying Taste**

What variables shape taste making and how might we comparatively analyze object worlds from archaeological contexts to explore a dialectic of taste through a period of colonial entanglement? What factors might shape the cultural preferences, the choices manifest in the practices of taste? I offer some preliminary thoughts. First, we need to keep the dual histories of objects and tastes in view, and in this sense, our approach needs to be multiscalar (Orser 1996:184–190). *Production*—whether household, specialized craft, or industrial—is intimately involved in the dialectics of taste through time. Production objectifies extant preferences, but is also a site where taste is constituted and a process intimately entwined with the consumption of “ranked and ranking objects” (Bourdieu 1984:230). In other words, production needs to be viewed as a site of “creative engagement” (Ingold 2000:61) in which embodied preferences shape, but are in turn shaped by, objects and their properties in a “mutual involvement of people and materials in an environment” (Ingold 2000:68). Taste is likely shaped by *proximity to source*: The dynamics of taste making will be different if consumers interact directly with producers than if they consume objects produced thousands of miles distant (e.g., Steiner 1985). In order to discern the object properties that were valued at different moments of taste making, we need to explore the patterned variability in those properties. “Patterns of resemblance” (MacDougall 1998:255) may be particularly informative, helping us to discern how embodied preferences were carried through time. *Diversity* draws our attention to the homogeneity or heterogeneity of object classes, helping us to discern preferences for homogeneity/heterogeneity in terms of style, color, form, etc. Archaeologists are accustomed to thinking about a *quantitative* dimension, whether objects are rare or commonplace, and with what implications to wield the power of distinction. Goods that

are commonplace—taken-for-granted—do not distinguish in the same fashion as those that are rare (Bourdieu 1984:247, 1993:113–115; also Veblen 1973 on links between rarity/costliness and “pecuniary canons of taste”). It may be productive to explore *diversity* and *quantity* as producing a gradient of values (Lesure 1999:27) in similar artifact classes. This builds on the observation that items of similar form or material may be differentiated in value and used in different ways: Lesure (1999:28) cites the example of shell beads in California and axes in New Guinea. In each case, “elite” forms of these object classes took on value only in relation to a gradation of objects of similar form or material: “The significance and strategic use of items at different points on the gradient are dependent on the existence of the gradient itself. The social use of an item at one register of value takes place in a framework structured by the existence of comparable items of different value that were used in different ways” (1999:27). Of course, the factors that shape taste making intersect—industrial production is often associated with increased quantities of homogenous goods produced at some distance from where they are consumed. The challenge is to examine these intersections and patterns of resemblance in object properties through time in light of the broader political economic context in which they occur. I offer these variables as entry points but do not imply that they constitute universals of taste nor that there is a universal aesthetic (Bourdieu 2000:73). Rather, they provide a starting point for exploring systematic patterning in artifact classes that may provide a window into embodied tastes.

### **The Practices of Taste in Banda, c. 16th–20th century**

Banda is today considered peripheral in Ghana, its marginality shaped by poor road networks that make it difficult to access. Yet Banda stood in different relation to the regional and subcontinental political economies in the past. Located immediately north of the forest, it occupied a strategic position in relation to caravan routes that linked the area to the trans-Saharan trade (Arhin 1979; Posnansky 1979; Wilks 1982a, 1982b). It was later enmeshed in the Atlantic trade that affected political-economic realignment throughout the forest and wooded savanna from the 17th century. More proximately, Banda’s contemporary situation was shaped by political dislocation in the period of colonial expansion and the development of a colonial political economy. Our long-term project draws on multiple lines of evidence (archaeological, documentary, and oral historical) to understand how daily life in the area was affected by the changing contours of these geopolitical economic developments. Documentary sources on Banda history are few and late; therefore, our project has drawn extensively on archaeological and oral historical sources (Stahl 2001).

Our archaeological work has focused on three discrete village occupations at two sites (Stahl 1994, 1999a, 2001; Stahl and Cruz 1998). These represent different periods in

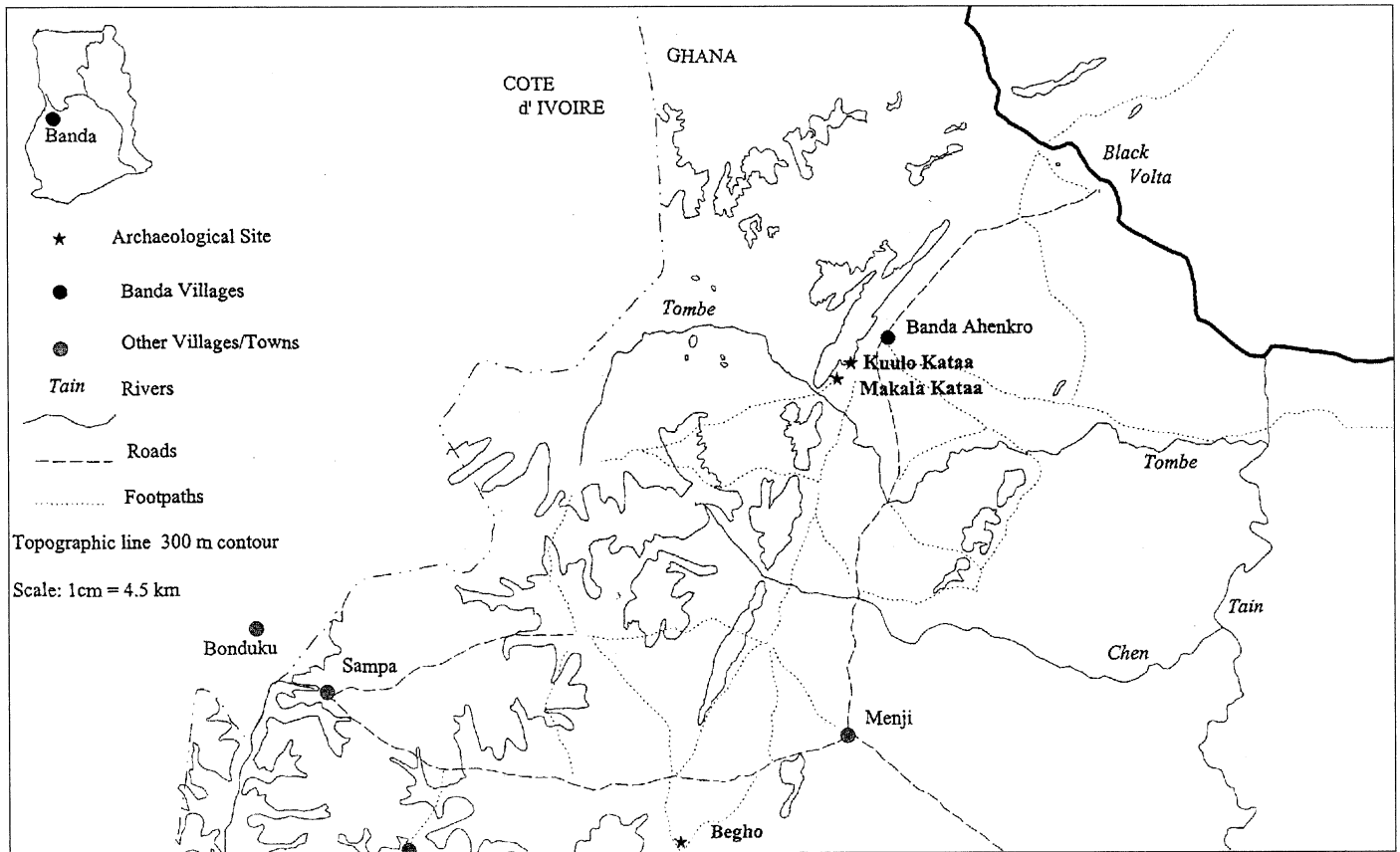


FIGURE 3. Archaeological sites mentioned in the text.

the area’s engagement with the “world system” (Figure 1). Kuulo Kataa (Figure 3) was occupied as the trans-Saharan trade was being eclipsed by the Atlantic trade. Early Makala (Makala Kataa, Figure 3) was occupied at the height of the Atlantic trade and Late Makala on the cusp of formal colonization. Our excavations chronicle shifting taste for objects, locally produced and imported, which are linked to periods of expanding and contracting trade relations.

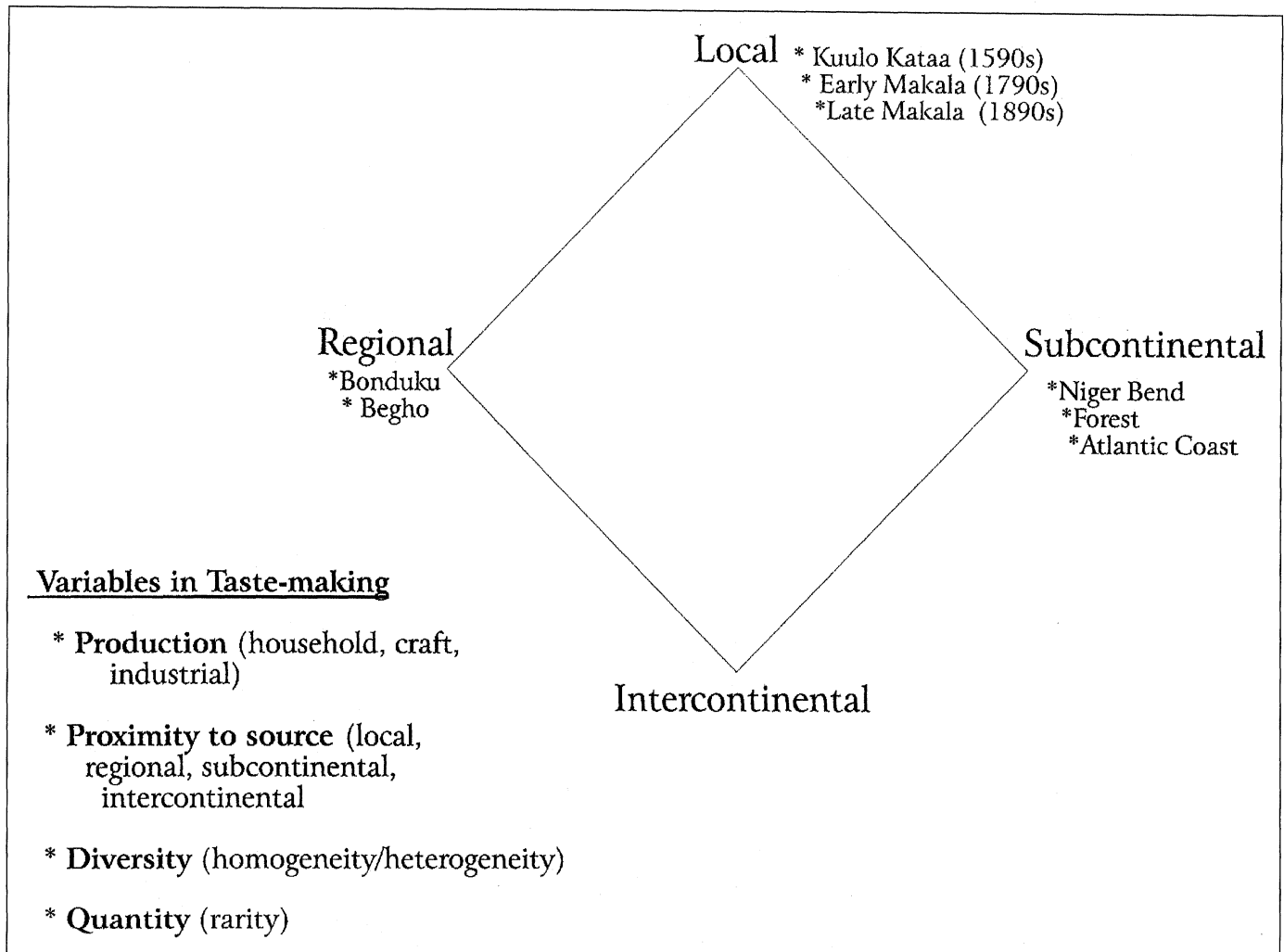
**Cloth, Pipes, and Beads: Toward a Cartography of Taste in Banda**

What can we discern of taste through the period represented by these sites? I begin by charting the changing character of cloth, pipes, and beads over time, drawing on our archaeological evidence as well as limited documentary sources. I then discuss what we can learn from these assemblages about the changing contours of taste through a long history of colonial entanglements.

In Figures 4–7, I employ a series of diamond-shaped diagrams to capture how a series of object classes (cloth, pipes, beads, and containers) relate to the variables of taste making (proximity to source, production, diversity, quantity) in Banda through time (Stahl 1999a, 2001). This represents an initial step in creating a “cartography of taste” for each of our archaeological occupations. Each point on the diamond represents a spatial relation (Figure 4) intended to capture *proximity to source*; whether production

was local to Banda (top of the diamond); regional (left), signaling objects produced within the catchment of transit markets like Bonduku or Begho (Figure 2); subcontinental (right), referring to objects derived from more distant contexts like the Niger River or the Atlantic Coast; or intercontinental (bottom) to designate those objects that were produced outside of Africa. Each diamond also conveys information on *production* (household craft, specialized craft, industrial), *diversity* (homogeneity, heterogeneity), and *quantity*. The stacked diamonds of Figures 5–7 represent time; those at the bottom (1590s) represent patterns at Kuulo Kataa, those marked 1790s represent Early Makala, and those marked 1890s represent Late Makala.

Cloth is among the most potent social objects in West Africa. It is intimately bound up in practices of social distinction, and in creating and maintaining social obligations. Early Portuguese accounts suggest that cotton textiles produced along the forest/savanna margin were in demand on the coast in the 16th century. Intelligence collected on the coast in 1629 identified *Insoco* (Begho, immediately south of Banda; Figure 3) as an important weaving center (Posnansky 1979:28). An abundance of spindle whorls and the presence of dye holes at the archaeological site of Begho (with a peak occupation between the 15th and 18th centuries) corroborate this claim (Posnansky 1979:29). Later sources document that locally produced cloth was made on strip looms, the strips sewn together to



**FIGURE 4.** Variables that shape taste making.

make large cloths that might be tailored into garments (Idiens 1980). Indigo-dyed cloth became an especially valued exchange commodity (Roberts 1984; see Johnson 1980 on cloth strip currencies), and blue-and-white striped cloths of varied design distinguished regional cloth production. The 20th-century colonial sources document the widespread production of cloth in a pattern in which “every man was a weaver, and every woman a spinner” (Stahl and Cruz 1998:209–210).

As might be anticipated, archaeological evidence for textile production is meager. Spindle whorls and dye pits are among the few durable indicators of cloth production. Our earliest site, Kuulo Kataa, located about twenty miles north of Begho and contemporary with that entrepôt, has yielded a single spindle whorl that likely derives from a late (post-Begho/Kuulo phase) occupation of the site (based on its provenience). The paucity/absence of spindle whorls during the Kuulo phase occupation of Kuulo Kataa contrasts with their ubiquity at Begho (Crossland 1976: 48). Here the taste for cloth, intimately linked with social distinction in the Sudanic region, was presumably shaped through Begho’s Niger River connections. Our working hypothesis is that cloth was a product of craft specialists at

Begho, and it may have been a rare commodity in outlying villages like Kuulo Kataa (Stahl 1999a:26). If so, cloth likely served as an object of distinction par excellence.

In our later occupations (Early and Late Makala), spindle whorls occur in modest numbers across the site, consistent with household production described by 20th-century colonial officials. This suggests a growing taste for cloth that would have simultaneously affected its saliency in practices of distinction (Stahl and Cruz 1998). As cotton textile production shifted downward to the household level, its power to distinguish was altered. Some insight into this process is offered by one of the few early documentary references to Banda. In 1820 an envoy of the British Government visited the Asante capital, Kumase, at the same time as the Banda chief (Banna hene) who was there to claim his share of the booty from a war with Banda’s neighbor, Gyaman. Dupuis described the Banda chief as:

simply attired in an African cloth, decorated with amulets &c. sheathed in gold and the skins of beasts. Gold rings ornamented his fingers and toes, and little fillets of gold and aggrry beads encircled the thick parts of each arm. . . . A warlike band, who guarded . . . [him] were martially habited in the skins of beasts, chiefly the hides of leopards, and panthers. . . . Many were in a state of nudity,

excepting the shim or girdle, three or four inches wide, that passes between the thighs. [Dupuis 1966:76–77]

Thus the Banda chief was distinguished from his entourage by dress—the use of African cloth (distinct from skins and a “shim or girdle”), gold ornaments, and beads. Yet this description derives from a time when archaeological evidence suggests that cloth production was becoming more widespread, local cloth more commonplace and therefore diluted in its power to distinguish (Bourdieu 1984:247). Dupuis’s account offers us a glimpse into the shifting dynamics of taste that was to come. Among the gifts bestowed on the Banda chief by the Asantehene were several lengths of imported cloth: “two pieces of brocade, some damask and fine cotton goods” (Dupuis 1966:164). This represents a moment of taste making that must be viewed in relation to the broader political–economic context. Brutally vanquished 40 years before by Asante, but now having proved itself loyal as an ally in a war with Gyaman, Banda’s loyalty demanded recognition. The gifting of imported cloth by the Asantehene speaks of its power to reshape political relations at the same time as it supplied a new means for the Banda chief to materially produce his distinction at home. It also anticipates a shift in the source of prestige textiles, away from the locally or regionally produced indigo-dyed strip woven cloths that were becoming a household craft (signaled by the ubiquity of spindle whorls at our later sites) to strip-woven *kente* cloth produced in Asante and sumptuous textiles from further afield. As cotton cloth production became intimately entwined with household reproduction (Stahl and Cruz 1998), social distinction was created anew through the consumption of imported fabrics that simultaneously forged a dependent relation with Asante to the south. Both these changes can be traced to the early 19th century and drew first chiefs and, later, commoners, into a sustained engagement with subcontinental and international trade. As Figure 5 summarizes, strip-woven cotton cloth was transformed from a relatively rare, regionally produced object with the power to distinguish local elites (in the 16th century), to a household-produced object bound up in the production of household relations (by the 18th century). At about the same time, new forms of imported cloth imbued with the power of social distinction added depth to the “gradient of value” (Lesure 1999). Yet Africans were discriminating consumers of European textiles as merchants quickly learned (Steiner 1985) and the social and political saliency of imported cloth drew on extant practices of taste.

Pipes are another object class that can usefully be examined in terms of a “cartography of taste.” We recovered a sizeable sample of short-stemmed ceramic smoking pipes from our early site (occupied as Atlantic trade began to compete with long-standing trans-Saharan trade). These pipes were patterned after New World forms (as was common throughout West Africa; Ozanne 1969; Philips 1983; Shaw 1960). We assume that these were used to smoke tobacco, and as such signal new bodily practices.

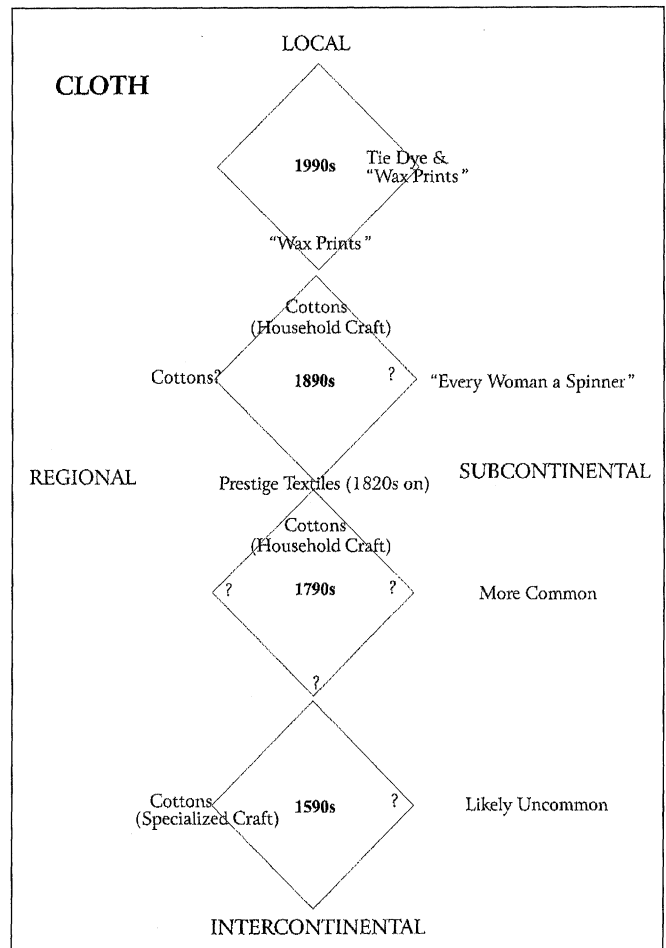
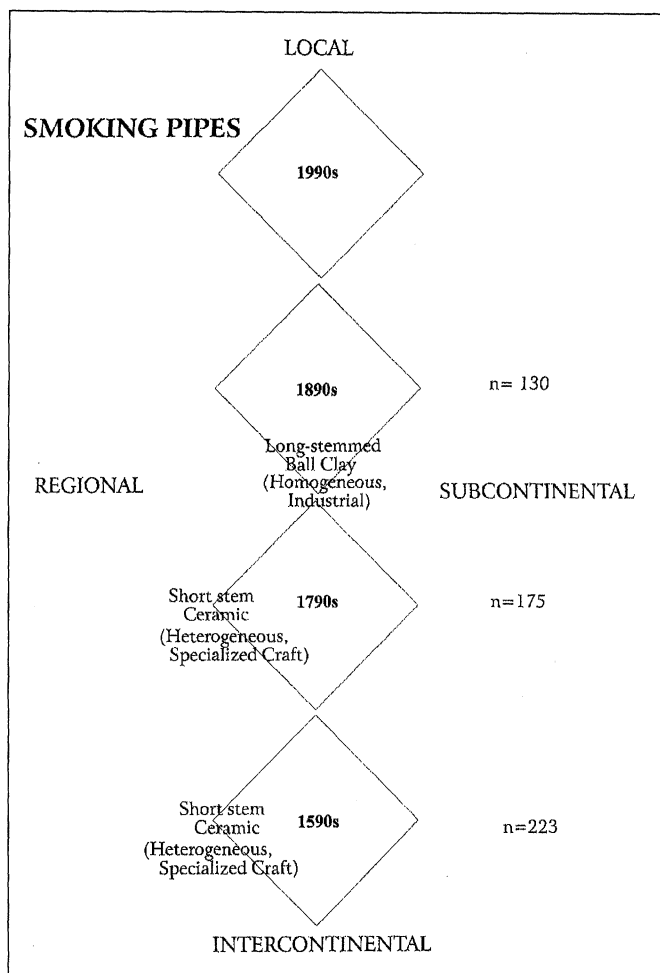


FIGURE 5. Changing taste for cloth, 16th to 20th centuries.

We cannot say at present whether tobacco was produced locally/regionally or imported, though phytolith data suggests that Kuulo villagers were at this time experimenting with other New World crops (maize; Stahl 1999a). We recovered a small number of pipe fragments ( $n = 21$ ) from our 1995 excavations at Kuulo Kataa, which gave us the impression that smoking was uncommon; however, expanded excavations in 2000 yielded many more pipe fragments ( $n = 202$ ). We have not as yet pursued a detailed contextual analysis of pipes, but disparities in the quantities and locations of pipes may yield insights into whether smoking was a practice that was differentially engaged in across the site. Nonetheless, despite their quantity, pipes were heterogeneous in style. Source analysis (planned for 2002) will help determine whether they were locally or regionally produced; however, we presume they were the product of craft specialists. Short-stemmed pipes were also common in 18th-century contexts (Early Makala) and were similarly diverse in stylistic detail. Neutron activation data indicates that they derive from a variety of regional sources (Stahl 1999a:50). By the 1890s, on the eve of Banda’s formal incorporation into Gold Coast Colony, long-stemmed ball clay pipes had virtually replaced African styles. These pipes were very common, extremely homogeneous, and obviously produced in industrial contexts in

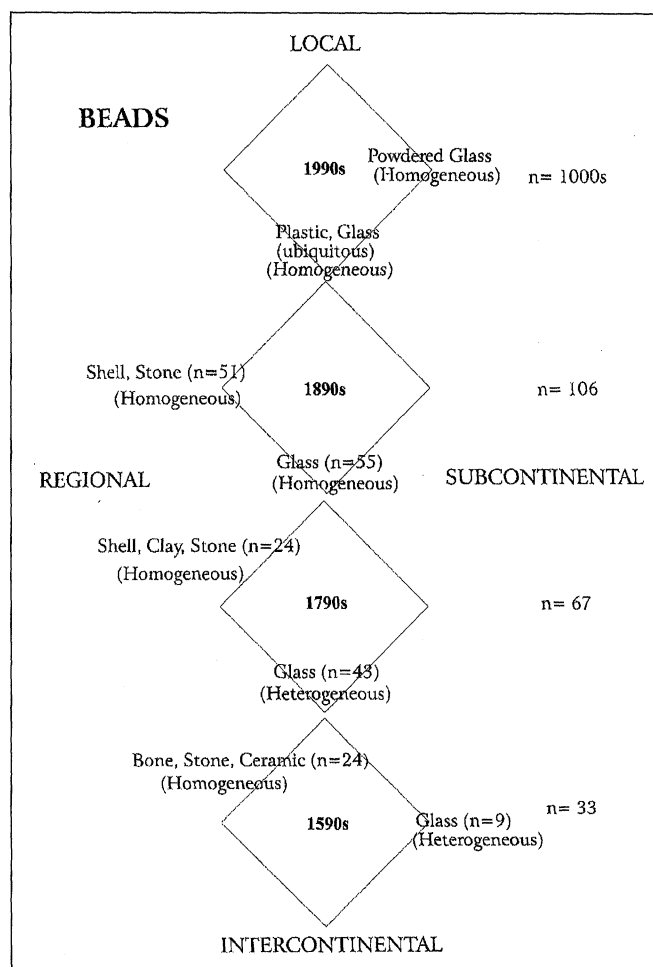


**FIGURE 6.** Changing taste in pipes, 16th to 20th centuries.

Europe. Their presence speaks to the process of monetization that was to shape taste-making practices from the early 20th century. Viewed diagrammatically (Figure 6), we see that (1) the source of pipes shifts from local/regional to intercontinental; (2) the new taste for industrially produced pipes during the 1890s eliminated a local/regional craft tradition, a casualty of a changing politics of value (Appadurai 1986:30); and (3) there is a shift from extreme diversity to extreme homogeneity in the style of pipes linked to shifts in source.

Beads show a somewhat different pattern. In our early assemblage we have small numbers of locally produced bone and ceramic beads ( $n = 24$ ), as well as a few imported glass beads from Islamic contexts (Caton 1997). Locally made beads were homogeneous, while the small sample of imported glass beads ( $n = 9$ , inclusive of 2000 excavations) was rather diverse. By the 1790s, there were few locally or regionally produced beads (24 shell, clay, or stone); this bead assemblage, though still small ( $n = 67$ ), was dominated by diverse wire wound and drawn glass beads ( $n = 43$ ) from Europe—no two were alike. The glass bead assemblage resembles the composition of sacred bead assemblages that are carefully curated by elder women today and used in female rites of passage—heterogeneity is clearly valued in these curated assemblages (Caton 1997).

The incorporation of imported European beads into local ritual practice represents a recontextualization that perhaps diminished the ritual potency of locally and regionally produced beads, a change that likely occurred during the 19th century. By the eve of formal colonization, beads were more common ( $n = 106$ ) though less diverse. Imported glass beads ( $n = 55$ ) were dominated by homogeneous, monochromatic, industrially produced forms. These beads were discarded in a variety of contexts across the site, and their numbers and contexts of disposal suggest that the growing taste for beads was accompanied by changing uses (i.e., worn in everyday contexts and perhaps therefore more likely to be lost). Like the pipes, we see a trend (Figure 7) toward *reduced diversity* and *increasing quantity* through time in archaeological contexts; we can imagine that the late 19th-century practices of taste were modified in relation to a changing gradient of value created by the influx of monochromatic, industrially produced beads in large quantities that may have been put to novel uses (e.g., in bodily adornment). At the same time, the taste for imported beads was surely shaped by extant bead making and using practices.



**FIGURE 7.** Changing taste for beads, 16th to 20th centuries.

	<u>1590s</u>	<u>1790s</u>	<u>1890s</u>	<u>1990s</u>
<b>Imported Pipes</b>			++ (I) H	-----
<b>Local Pipes</b>	{++ (SC) D}	++ (SC) D	-----	-----
<b>Imported Beads</b>	<b><u>+ (SC) D</u></b>	<b><u>++ (I/SC) D</u></b>	{+++ (I) H}	+++ (I) H
<b>Local Beads</b>	+ (?) H	+ (?) H	+ (?) H	-----
<b>Imported Cloth</b>	?	<b><u>+ (I) D</u></b>	+ (I) D	+++ (I) D
<b>Local Cloth</b>	<b><u>+ (SC) H</u></b>	++ (HP) H	++ (HP) H	-----

Quantity: + Present; ++ Significant Quantity; +++ Abundant; ----- Disappears

(Production): (?) Unknown; (HP) Household Production; (SC) Specialized Craft; (I) Industrial

Diversity: D Heterogeneous; H Homogeneous

***Bolded, Italicized Entries***: Likely Objects of Distinction

{ } Novel Uses

FIGURE 8. A preliminary "cartography of taste" for pipes, beads, and cloth in the Banda area, 16th to 20th centuries.

**Discussion**

What do these trends in cloth, pipes and beads indicate in terms of a "cartography of taste"? Figure 8 summarizes trends across object classes in relation to production (specialized craft, household, industrial), quantity (+ signs) and diversity (heterogeneous/homogeneous) of imported compared to locally produced objects. Arrows signal diversions from customary paths of taste as suggested by earlier material expressions. Object classes indicated by bold italicized type are those that we suspect played a role in creating and maintaining social distinction, insights that need to be assessed in relation to contextual data.

Smoking pipes are unique in that they represent an object class associated with a post-Columbian practice, and therefore represent an innovation in the practices of taste during the 16th century (indicated by the brackets in Figure 8). Yet their production was embraced by local/regional craft producers, and heterogeneity was clearly valued in this object class. Their marked heterogeneity in both 16th- and 18th-century contexts suggests that pipes were bound up in some form of social distinction, perhaps at the individual level (Vivian 1998). Yet pipes were the first object to fall victim to the changing politics of value, as smokers from the 1890s embraced new, homogeneous,

imported pipes that were accessed through growing involvement in a monetized economy. In this case, the embrace of a novel form was associated with diminished taste for local goods signaled by the disappearance of locally/regionally produced pipes.

Cloth and beads are two object classes with deeper roots in West African cartographies of taste. Both locally/regionally produced beads and cloth were homogeneous across time, while imported objects of the same class were heterogeneous. Beads are the first object class where we see a foreign form of a locally produced artifact incorporated into local practices of taste. This begins with limited incorporation of Islamic manufactures and later more abundant European wire-wound and drawn glass forms. The first influx of exotically produced glass beads represents a diversion (indicated in Figure 8 by the arrow) from a customary pathway in the practices of taste. At some point, as yet undetermined, heterogeneous European glass forms came to play a crucial role in female puberty rites and became the ritually potent form of beads. Here Leasure's (1999) gradient of value may be important, with locally/regionally produced homogeneous ceramic, bone, and stone beads creating a preexisting value for beads whose gradient was deepened by the addition of heterogeneous



imported glass forms derived from subcontinental and intercontinental exchange. Again, the desirability of imported forms was likely predicated on the existing practices of taste for beads, which were subsequently transformed by the incorporation of new bead forms. Whether deliberately or unwittingly, these new beads inscribed transatlantic connections on the bodies of young female initiates, serving to distinguish initiated from uninitiated. Consumption practices associated with imported beads were further transformed through the influx of homogeneous monochromatic beads in the 1890s. Their appearance in multiple contexts across the site suggests that their use was increasingly quotidian, not confined to ritual occasions. The brackets around the 1890s and 1990s imported bead assemblages signals their association with novel practices. Curated assemblages of diverse glass beads existed alongside these new, more disposable forms, but are rare in archaeological contexts presumably because of the value assigned to them by elder women in particular. Yet the growing taste for imported beads did not impact the taste for locally/regionally produced shell and ceramic beads. These homogeneous beads appear throughout our sequence, although never in large quantities—continuing, perhaps, to anchor a gradient of value that was a legacy of earlier practices of taste.

Local cloth, despite its homogeneity, likely served as an object of social distinction in the Begho period. Its potency was diminished by the growing taste for cotton cloth that is marked by a shift to household production. Here we see a diversion/disjuncture in objects of distinction as heterogeneous, imported cloth became productive of power and social distinction. This diversion did not lead to a declining taste for local cloth. If anything in the period from the 1790s, cloth became highly potent in its role in creating and maintaining household relations and only after World War II did local production of cloth become a causality of the changing politics of value and monetization.

Figure 8 captures an emerging cartography of taste that helps us chart how the reception of new objects was framed by existing conditions, and how the contours of taste were altered as a consequence. Although it informs on consumption, it simultaneously raises questions about production. The cartography remains partial—it collapses temporality into blocks of time using statistical summaries that Bourdieu (1984:245–246) and Certeau (1984:xviii, 31, 34) critique for distilling and freezing practice. Moreover, there are chronological gaps that reflect the current state of archaeological investigations in the area. It does not acknowledge variability by gender, age, or other social parameters. It does not, in current form, draw from the contextual associations of these objects in archaeological context (Lightfoot 1995). It is also partial in that it does not account for the multiscale processes that shaped the practices of taste in Banda. Archaeological signatures of past practices provide insight into consumption and therefore the “positive choices” of taste, but they do not

show what was rejected (and as Bourdieu [1993] noted, taste is often most apparent in what is *not* selected, *not* “to taste”; also Hebdige 1988:52). Here a multiscale perspective is necessary (Orser 1996:184–190). Steiner (1985), for example, used documentary sources to identify the kinds of imported textiles that *failed* in West African markets and how those failures reshaped productive strategies in Europe. European merchants did not initially share in the “mutual knowledge” (Giddens 1976:107) of West African tastes, and only came to apprehend those tastes through their initial marketing failures. At the same time, however, European initiatives to produce cloth suited to “African tastes” simultaneously transformed them (Steiner 1985). If we are to capture the multiple histories (of objects and tastes) that shaped colonial entanglements, we require a better processual understanding of the mutually transforming effects of these material interactions (e.g., Mintz 1985; Steiner 1985).

Yet, partial as it is, the cartography helps us to identify diversions from Appadurai’s “customary paths” that were arguably linked to practices of social distinction (see also Dietler 1990, 1998; Wesson 2001). It helps us sort out whether a growing taste for imports was associated with a declining taste for local or regional products and, therefore, provides a platform to interrogate the changing politics of value. It also provides us with a tool for thinking about the multiple sites of taste making in relation to production—whether within the domestic unit, in regional craft centers, or in factories a world away. Viewed in relation to cartographies of taste from other areas, it can provide us with an analytical tool to compare how practices of taste shaped colonial entanglements elsewhere. And, as this preliminary exploration of taste making in Banda suggests, we should anticipate a complex picture of continuities and change in the practices of taste through the history of colonial entanglements.

While there are numerous points of overlap between the perspective advocated here and a phenomenologically informed sensorial anthropology, there are important points of departure. The methodological challenges to recovering meaning outlined above similarly hamper our ability to access the sensory experience of historical subjects. The intersubjective knowledge on which a sensorial anthropology is predicated (Jackson 1998; Stoller 1998) is inaccessible in past contexts given the partiality of sources and lack of intersubjectivity with historical subjects. Moreover, if, as Jackson suggests, “phenomenology is less concerned with establishing what actually happened in the past than in exploring the past as a mode of present experience” (1996: 38), a study of taste as a dimension of colonial encounters departs from phenomenology in its concern with “what actually happened” (Stahl 2001:1–2, 41–43, 219–223).

## CONCLUSION

Contemporary anthropology has been indelibly marked by a “gradual transferral of ‘culture’ to the cognitive and

symbolic domains" and a concomitant shift of emphasis "from visible artifacts and behavior to invisible knowledge and cognition" (MacDougall 1998:255). With this shift has come a preoccupation with meaning, linguistically construed. Yet language, although central to social life, does not fully encompass it, for social life is lived before it is conceptualized (Lefebvre 1991:34). Practice theory, phenomenologically informed sensual anthropology, and renewed attention to object worlds all work to capture these other dimensions of social life, thereby broadening our perspectives on social process and change. Yet there is an enduring preoccupation with meaning that presents both theoretical and methodological problems for a study of colonial entanglements. Meaning-centered approaches typically privilege language both as a site of meaning formation and an entry point into studying meaning. The search for meaning is typically reflective and retrospective, dislocating meaning from its constitutive practices. In light of these limitations, I have suggested that we identify alternative priorities in studying colonial entanglements, particularly in cases where linguistic sources—so valued as sources of insight into meaning—are few and inherently biased. I have suggested, instead, a concern with the embodied practical knowledge that shaped colonial entanglements by studying taste as a useful alternative to meaning. Of course, an exploration of taste is not without limitations. Although a cartography of taste is a useful conceptual tool, it too is constructed from a retrospective analytical standpoint that makes sense of past choices through the lens of the present. Such a standpoint is necessary, but we should not confuse the view from our analytic standpoint for how the world works (Lefebvre 1991:38, 105–108; also Turner 1974:25–31). It also founders on the conundrum of exploring nondiscursive activity discursively; we can assume that much is lost in "translation" (Certeau 1984:61; Stoller 1997). Still, a focus on the practices of taste promises to help us attend to the separation of ideas and objects. It helps us plumb the rich potential of archaeological sources for understanding colonial entanglements by exploring taste in relation to broader political economic circumstances and taste-making mechanisms (Appadurai 1986:32). In sum, taste helps keep in view the tension between production and consumer choice, supply and demand, and the choices and practices (conscious or unconscious) of social life that shaped the history of colonial entanglements.

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## NOTES

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