Hybrid Material Culture: Methods for Understanding the Creation of New Traditions

A proposal by
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Material culture incorporating attributes of multiple existing stylistic or technological traditions appear in numerous contexts and guises in archaeology, and not limited to initial culture contact or recent European colonial encounters. These encounters and the longer-term systems of interaction that follow have been increasingly addressed, primarily though not exclusively from the field of historical archaeology, with more sophisticated and productive models and theory. Rather than focusing on more traditional frames such as assimilation or attempts at preserving indigenous culture, creolization studies of borderlands (Cusick 2000; Lightfoot and Martínez 1995) and colonial societies (Delle 2000) have increasingly focused on ethnogenesis. By examining a wide range of situations of social and cultural interaction and transformation, many which bear little resemblance to modern European colonialism (Gosden 2004), the creation of new cultures in a complex and multipolar web of interaction has replaced old unilinear ideas of replacement and resistance (Wells 1999).

But while the creation of a new culture has become the explicit focus of theoretical models of contact and colonialism, methods and theory concerning the creation of a new material culture have been implicitly less visible. In practical terms many models of assimilation, acculturation, or ethnogenesis are archaeologically operationalized by measuring the persistence or adoption of material culture traditions. Patterns of persistence or adoption may be mapped against gender activities (Deagan 1998), rural or urban settlement (Charlton, Charlton, and Fournier García 2005), or time (Gasco 2005). But the markers for these patterns are often artifact classes either imposed on the encounter from outside or in existence at the encounter point in advance of contact.

By contrast studies of the hybridization of material culture are less common or productive. One reason for this may be the distaste for archaeology’s past use of “diffusion” as an explanatory device, resulting in its minimal consideration in theoretical exploration of material culture evolution (Ames 1996: 126). And traditional interpretations of hybrid material culture have typically reflected issues in the study of European colonialism such as the consumption desires of European settlers faced with limited transportation networks (Gámez Martínez 2003; García-Arevalo 1990; Lister and Lister 1982; Vernon 1988; Vernon and Cordell 1991) or religious conflict and conversion (Capone 2004). But there are numerous reasons why hybrid material culture should be a major part of understanding ethnogenesis and culture change.

Hybridization provides one of the best markers for identifying material culture in flux. In an analogy to the origins of creolization studies in linguistics (Bickerton 1984; Dawdy 2000), by tracing individual aspects from multiple material traditions and how they
combine to form a new whole, hybridization studies can be a key to understanding the mechanisms and pace of change, in a culture contact situation or not. Previous creolization studies have utilized the idea of a cultural “grammar,” for understanding the consumption of goods within a society containing multiple subcultures, where attributes of goods from one tradition may appeal due to similarity to those from another (Otto 1977; Wilkie 2000). This approach would be even more persuasive and productive in application not to consumer choice, but to the production of new material culture. One case where this approach has been productive is that of “colonoware.” The recognition of West African roots in ceramics of the postcolumbian Caribbean and American Southeast has led not just to an “ethnic marker” but been part of a paradigm shift in regards to ethnicity in the American colonies and early United States, opening new windows for studying not just domestic lifeways but cognitive worldview and identity (Ferguson 1992; Meyers 1999).

This approach to hybrid material culture requires an in-depth understanding and examination of potential influences and sources for the creation of new traditions. Without tracing specific relationships, technologies, and stylistic attributes, such analysis can be fraught with danger (Hauser and DeCorse 2003; Rodríguez-Alegría 2002). On the other hand, this level of detail can yield important information. Chronological information from one of the “donor” material traditions can be used to cross-date hybrid materials with a precision not possible using other means (Card 2007). Archaeological investigation can combine with documentary evidence to directly illuminate historical relationships (Hauser and DeCorse 2003). Variation in specific cases also provides critical insight into who created and consumed hybrid material culture, such as the relationship between forced resettlement and widespread indigenous adoption of hybrid serving vessels (Card 2007; Cordell 2002; Saunders 2000).

The creation of hybrid material culture also emphasizes the choices of active participants. Agency has been invoked for explaining consumption choices involving multiple material traditions, typically for political purposes (Bollwerk 2006; Cheek 1997; Lightfoot and Martinez 1995; Rodríguez-Alegría 2005). But agency and cultural choice involves both producers and end-consumers in cases of material hybridization. Rationale for creating a new whole out of existing parts is one of the most difficult aspects of investigating hybrid material culture. In some cases, a new source of raw material may become available (Ehrhardt 2005). The appeal may be for the foreign, the exotic, or perhaps a playful creativity of making the new (Beaudry 1984; Charlton, Fournier, and Cervantes 1995).

Because of the potential hybridized material culture has for understanding not just culture contact and colonialism but material culture change in general, I am proposing a conference dedicated to this topic. Previous studies of hybrid industries have generally been only one part of larger concerns, with methods and theory developed idiosyncratically to fit the needs of the specific investigation. As noted above, one of the exceptions to this has been the study of colonoware and the African diaspora in the Americas, and the resulting comparative regional approach to colonoware has been productive. A similar consideration of hybridization processes and cases as a whole,
constructed from the collaboration of scholars analyzing data across a considerable span of space and time, would be an important contribution to archaeology.

**Potential topics to be covered in the proposed conference**

- Methodology for identifying, categorizing, and analyzing influences in hybrid material culture. A major goal of this conference would be providing a methodological guide for future studies, whereas analysis of hybrids has typically been idiosyncratic.
- Relationship and differences between style, function, and technology in choice of influences, with implications for not just hybrid material culture, but models of culture change and selection in general.
- Chronological implications of and for hybrid material culture industries, including cross-dating between otherwise disparate archaeological sequences, speed of technology and stylistic transfer, and gauging colonial conservatism or experimentation.
- Evidence for the initial motivations (economic, political, cultural) to create new material culture, with an emphasis on the nature of social interaction and individual agency
- Conditions and cases where new hybrid material culture had limited success, and cases where new traditions were more widely adopted. In turn, can evidence for minimal or widespread success of hybrids act as evidence for certain sociopolitical conditions and events?
- Establishing any shared stages of hybridization and innovation. Are there predictable patterns of adoption and deletion of material culture attributes, and in what contexts?

**Conference Structure**

The proposed conference, taking place over two days, will be organized by method and medium of study. While numerous time periods and regions will be represented, the goal of the conference is to cross these lines, whereas methodology for studying different classes of material culture would make better divisions. Participants will be encouraged to explore similarities in research methodology and theory, and suggest methodological principles for future application to hybrid culture studies in general. The participants focusing on adoption of existing material culture (see below) would also be a topic apart. Discussants have been chosen to address the place of hybrid material culture studies in the larger context of the archaeology of cultural creolization and ethnogenesis.

The conference will emphasize discussion between invited participants. However, I believe the conference would be most effective if it was also opened to professional attendees, with registration and an attendance fee to help defray operational costs. Paper abstracts would be posted at the conference website sometime in advance as part of the conference announcement. Full papers would be made securely available to all
participants in advance of the conference, so that questions and ideas could be considered in advance of the actual presentations.

Conference Participants

The following is a potential list of scholars to be invited to the proposed conference. Most of the participants have conducted research on hybrid material culture in areas including North America (including the Southwest, the Southeast, the Pacific Northwest, California, and the Midwest), the Caribbean, Mesoamerica, Andean South America, Europe (Roman Europe, Britain, the Alps), North Africa, Southwest Asia, East Asia, Australia and the Pacific Islands. They have studied hybrid categories of material culture including architecture, ceramics, lithic and glass tools, metallurgy, and personal adornment. The time periods of interest range from fourth millennium BCE Mesopotamia to nineteenth century Australia. In addition to scholars specifically studying hybrid material culture, this list also reflects my intention to invite a minority of participants who have studied adoption of foreign material culture, who I believe can provide important insights on the mechanisms of adopting aspects of foreign material culture in the creation of new hybrid forms and categories.

Sevil Baltali (University of Virginia)  
Elizabeth Bollwerk (University of Virginia)  
Baruch Brandl (Israel Antiquities Authority)  
Melissa Chatfield (Stanford University)  
Hillary Cool (Barbican Research Associates)  
Ann Cordell (Florida Natural History Museum)  
Elin Danien (University of Pennsylvania)  
Kathleen Ehrhardt (New York University)  
Andrew Gardner (University College London)  
Sarah Ginn (University of California – Santa Cruz)  
Anthony Graesch (University of California – Los Angeles)  
Mark Hauser (Visiting at University of Notre Dame)  
Rodney Harrison (Open University)  
Patrick Hunt (Stanford University)  
Luisa-Elena Mengoni (University College London)  
Stella Nair (University of California – Riverside)  
Robert Preucel (University of Pennsylvania)  
Margaret Purser (Sonoma State University)  
Enrique Rodriguez-Alegria (University of Texas at Austin)  
Rebecca Saunders (Louisiana State University)  
Uwe Sievertsen (University of Tübingen)  
Noah Thomas (University of Arizona)  
Jane Webster (Newcastle University)  
Robin Wright (University of Washington)
The following is a list of potential conference discussants

Kathleen Deagan (University of Florida)
Leland Ferguson (University of South Carolina)
Kent Lightfoot (University of California – Berkeley)
Stephen Silliman (University of Massachusetts – Boston)
Peter S. Wells (University of Minnesota)

Conference Volume

Participants will be provided two months to turn their conference papers and presentations into chapter manuscripts for the volume. They will be encouraged to incorporate what they have learned during the process of the conference itself and exposure to data and analysis from the other participants.

As in the conference itself, book sections will be organized by class of material culture and the relationship of hybrid studies to methods and theories for understanding culture transformation and creation. In addition to their individual submissions, I will ask one or more of the participants in each section to write a short synthetic chapter summarizing the findings of that section and outlining useful methods and ideas for studying that type of material. I will author an introductory chapter to the volume.
Works Cited

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Beaudry, Marilyn P.  

Bickerton, Derek  

Bollwerk, Elizabeth  

Card, Jeb J.  

Capone, Patricia  

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Charlton, Thomas H., Patricia Fournier, and Juan Cervantes  

Cheek, Charles D.  
Cordell, Ann S.

Cusick, James G.

Dawdy, Shannon Lee

Deagan, Kathleen

Delle, James A.

Ehrhardt, Kathleen L.

Ferguson, Leland

Gámez Martínez, Ana Paulina

Garcia-Arevalo, Manuel

Gasco, Janine
Gosden, Chris

Hauser, Mark W. and Christopher R. DeCorse

Lightfoot, Kent G. and Antoinette Martinez

Lister, Florence C., and Robert H. Lister

Meyers, Allan D.

Otto, John Solomon

Rodríguez-Alegría, Enrique


Rodríguez-Alegría, Enrique, Hector Neff, and Michael D. Glascock
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Vernon, Richard and Ann S. Cordell  

Wells, Peter S.  

Wilkie, Laurie A.  