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The Social in the Circum-Caribbean: Toward a Transcontextual Order

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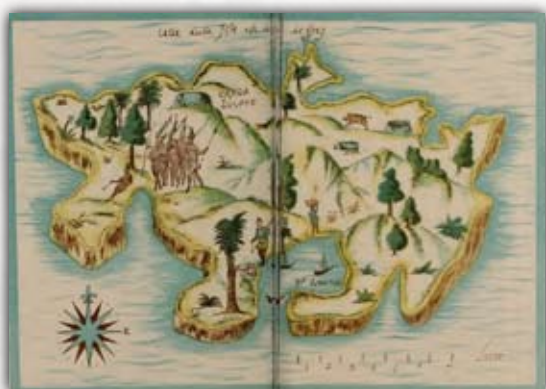
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Communities in **contact**

Essays in archaeology, ethnohistory & ethnography of
the Amerindian circum-Caribbean

edited by
Corinne L. Hofman &
Anne van Duijvenbode



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Foreground image: Coral artefact with human face in relief found at the site of Anse à la Gourde, Guadeloupe, AD 1000-1400 (Photo by J. Paupit).

Background image: Detail of feature layer with postholes cut into the bedrock at the site of El Cabo, Dominican Republic, AD 1000-1500 (Photo by A.V.M. Samson).

Back cover, left to right: Artistic, life-sized interpretation of the archaeological site El Chorro de Maíta, Cuba , AD 1200-1600 (Photo by A. van Duijvenbode). / Wooden stool or duho recovered from the island of Dominica, dated between AD 1315-1427. Catalogue number ECB40669, Economic Botany Collection, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, UK (Photo by J. Ostapkowicz). / Clay Figurine found at the Lavoutte site, St. Lucia, AD 1200-1500 (photo by M.L.P. Hoogland).

Front cover, left to right: Map of Guadeloupe published by Champlain in 1859 (Photo by A.J. Bright). / The Trio-Okomoyana village of Amotopo in the midwest of Suriname in 2007 (Photo by J.L.J.A. Mans). / Frontal view of the upper incisors and canines of individual 72B from the site of El Chorro de Maíta, Cuba, AD 1200-1600, showing intentional dental modification (Photo by H.L. Mickleburgh).

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PREFACE

Communities in contact is the outcome of the fourth edition of Leiden in the Caribbean, a series of symposia organized by the Caribbean Research Group of Leiden University with the aim of bringing together researchers from all over the world to discuss methodological and theoretical advances in Caribbean research. The first edition was organized in Leiden and Paris in 2002 in collaboration with André Delpuech, then associate of the French Ministry of Culture in Paris. This symposium culminated in the edited volume entitled *Late Ceramic Age Societies in the Eastern Caribbean* published by the British Archaeological Reports in 2004. The second and third editions both took place in Leiden in 2006 and 2007 and focused on current archaeological research in the Lesser and Greater Antilles. Special guests to these symposia were William F. Keegan, John Crock, David Watters, Glenis Maria Tavaréz, André Delpuech and Jago Cooper.

Leiden in the Caribbean IV has taken a somewhat broader regional perspective (Caribbean islands, Amazonia, Central America) and brought together archaeological, ethnohistorical, and ethnographic studies. The symposium hosted many internationally renowned scholars and students and served as a platform to discuss the diverse and complex topics with which Caribbean archaeologists are confronted today. These topics are elaborated upon and reflected in the three sections constituting this volume: *mobility and exchange*, *culture contact* and *settlement and community*. The symposium and the volume have been financed by the Netherlands Foundation for Scientific Research (NWO) in the context of the VICI project “Communicating communities” (NWO-no.-277-62-001).

We are grateful to all international participants of the Leiden in the Caribbean IV symposium for their stay in Leiden during which they shared their expertise, ideas and knowledge with us. These are: Emilie Chatrue, Jago Cooper, André Delpuech, Eugénie De Zutter, Sonia Duin, Bernard Grunberg, Michael Heckenberger, José Oliver, Joanna Ostapkowicz, Jaime Pagán Jiménez, Reniel Rodríguez Ramos, Stéphen Rostain, Eric Roulet, Benoît Roux, and Roberto Valcárcel Rojas. Two presenters could unfortunately not participate in the volume, i.e. Eithne Carlin who presented on nested identities in the Guianas and José Oliver who discussed a framework for his upcoming research in the northwestern Dominican Republic. We are, however, delighted that José Oliver has accepted our proposition to write a foreword to the volume. We were also particularly honored with Michael Heckenberger's presence at the symposium and would like to thank him for ‘wrapping up’ the sessions and critically accessing each of the presentations and the many new ideas that were put forward. His appreciations and critiques are provided in the epilogue to this volume.

The papers presented here have been submitted for review and editorial comments by the Caribbean Research Group (UL). In this respect we would like to thank in particular Arie Boomert, Alex Geurds, Jason Laffoon, Hayley Mickleburgh, Angus Mol and Alice Samson for their excellent job. We would like to acknowledge Stéphen Rostain, Micheline

Blancaneaux and Anna Blancaneaux-Flores for their translations of the abstracts to French and Alex Geurds and Isabel Rivera Collazo for revising the Spanish abstracts. Finally, we thank the many students who helped to organize the symposium in March 2010. Special thanks in this respect go out to Rachel Schats, Floris Keehnen, Samantha de Ruiter, Marlieke Ernst and Hedwig van den Berg.

The editors

Corinne L. Hofman and Anne van Duijvenbode

FOREWORD

A key objective of the Leiden in the Caribbean series of symposia is to share and exchange information of current research interests on wide-ranging topics among scholars working in the circum-Caribbean. It is the informal and lively face-to-face exchanges that take place in between and around the formal presentations that are a valuable contribution to Caribbean archaeology. This symposia series affords not only an opportunity for European-based scholars and research students to interact but, equally stimulating, selected guest scholars based in the New World add significantly in what otherwise would be a local exchange. It is in such an informal and international ambiance that ideas are debated; strategies and plans for new angles or insights to on-going projects are gestated or strengthened. The lively question/discussion period that follows each of the symposia sessions gives it a seminar/workshop ambiance.

The twenty-seven different contributions contained within the present volume are an outcome of the Leiden in the Caribbean IV symposium, entitled 'From prehistory to ethnography in the circum-Caribbean and Amazonia' and are representative of the current scholarly activity in the Caribbean and its neighbouring mainland regions.

For the better part of the twentieth century the notion of 'mobility' was largely debated in terms of a dichotomy between diffusion and migration and based entirely on comparative ceramic analyses to the point where ceramic styles 'migrated' from region to region. Peoples were defined largely as a passive vessel or container, a vehicle for the movement or diffusion of ceramic potsherds and styles. From the 1990s the social, political and economic dimensions and the dynamics of the mobility of both human beings and material culture (not just potsherds) through time and space, however, have become central to a much more enriched understanding of the pre- and post-Columbian history of the Caribbean. Moreover trade and exchange, instead of merely the 'diffusion' of things from one place to another, are now firmly rooted in Maussian theories of reciprocity, of what must be kept or be given, on the circulation of not only prestige valuables but also more mundane commodities, and on the effects of this circulation over different scales of time and of space. And, of course, all such exchanges are transactions that engage human beings in social relations.

The archaeological evidence, once focused almost exclusively on pottery, is now of the most diverse nature: stable isotopic analyses of human remains to ascertain whether individuals are local or exotic and to document diet preferences; sourcing the petrological and mineralogical signatures of ceramic and lithic materials to infer patterns of distribution; starch residues to identify and trace the origin and distribution of plant resources. Interest is not only on teasing out the nature of the mobility and exchange, but on the consequences, such as contacts between traders and exchange parties as a process of socio-cultural and bio-cultural transformations. Syncretism, transculturation, assimilation (mimicry, masking) are conceptual tools wielded to contextualize fundamental questions about continuity and change, the rejection or resistance to the new and exotic at one end and/or its negotiated adoption, transformation and incorporation. These are all topics addressed in this volume. In this first decade of the twenty-first century, and clearly reflected in this

volume, a key consequence of all of this re-invigorated approach to mobility and exchange and the resulting cultural contact has resulted in the reopening of the West Indian 'insularized theatre' to a truly pan-Caribbean scope, and not just looking at the north-eastern Venezuela and Guiana as the only theatre of interaction. This opening-up of the radius of action and reaction of the Amerindian Caribbean, to some extent restoring Julian Steward's original Circum-Caribbean theatre, is one of the most exciting aspects of the symposium and captured in various papers in this volume.

Indeed, the contributors to the Culture Contact section in this volume further expand the pan-Caribbean theatre to consider the European and African actors and their material culture, not just on what their impact was upon the indigenous societies but as well how the latter were perceived and portrayed to diverse European audiences. Issues of personhood, embodiment, ethnicity, individual as well as cultural and even multicultural identities of all the actors pre-colonial, colonial and even post-colonial are themes explored by various papers in this book. And by 'actors' I do not mean only human beings, but also the sentient objects (*cemís* in the shape of *duhos*, iconic figures) that form part of the socialising network of the Amerindians, as is explored by some of the contributors to this volume. The analyses of ethnohistoric text and narratives by French, English and Spanish colonial authors, are concerned with a number of the issues of culture contact (and impact) just mentioned. In this volume the re-examination of the well-known texts, such as Bishop Las Casas, are given a fresh outlook by focusing not so much on what the text comments about the Caribbean Amerindians, but on why the writer portrayed and interpreted them in this or that way. The texts and documentation gathered by the team at the University of Reims and presented in this volume, further enriches our understanding of the complexities of cultural contact in the Caribbean and in the European metropolis.

Mobility, trade, exchange, the circulation of materials, peoples, and ideas and the transformations that can result from cultural contacts, of course, do take place in the context of communities and their settlements, the third topic of research interest covered in this volume. And settlements, of course, are embedded in a natural as well as culturally constructed landscape, not just a sociological one. The papers on this topic do reflect these concerns in terms of expressions of community, of their engagement with each other in their settlements and with their history-laden land-and-seascapes.

I am confident that you, the reader, will find within this pages food for thought, a range of refreshing (multi-dimensional and multi-scalar) perspectives that will resonate with your own research interests.

José R. Oliver
University College London

THE SOCIAL IN THE CIRCUM-CARIBBEAN

Toward a transcontextual order

Alexander Geurds

Past archaeological interpretations of the pre-Colonial occupation on the Greater and Lesser Antilles sketch indigenous societies as relatively isolated from the pan-regional circum-Caribbean. This model is disputed in the recent proposals for pan-regional interaction in the Caribbean; a more seaward oriented perspective, incorporating large parts of the Central American and South American Caribbean coast. This article reflects on the ideas put forward in this cultural configuration to examine how they incorporate material culture from these mainland regions. This reflection will be used to show that these studies show an imbalance emphasizing homogeneity and similarity at the level of the individual object at the expense of diversity and difference in regional and local-level contexts, and to propose the integration of contextual information from the Caribbean littoral in analyzing the resemblance and meaning of objects.

Interpretaciones arqueológicas existentes de la ocupación prehispánica en las Antillas Mayores y Menores representan a las sociedades indígenas como aisladas del Mar Caribe. Este modelo es discutido en propuestas recientes de interacciones pan-regionales en el Caribe, una perspectiva más orientada al mar, que incorpora gran parte de las costas Caribeñas de América Central y el Norte de Sur América. En este artículo se reflexiona sobre las ideas presentadas en esta configuración cultural para examinar cómo incorporan la cultura material de estas regiones continentales. La reflexión se aprovechará para mostrar que dichos estudios muestran un desequilibrio en enfatizando la homogeneidad y la similitud a nivel del objeto individual a costa de la diversidad y la diferencia en los contextos regionales y locales, y de proponer la integración de la información contextual del litoral Caribe en el análisis de la semejanza y el significado de los objetos.

Jusqu'à présent, les interprétations archéologiques de l'occupation préhistorique des Antilles dressaient le portrait de sociétés amérindiennes relativement isolées du reste de la région circum-caraïbe. Ce modèle a été remis en question par les récentes modélisations de l'interaction pan-régionale dans les Caraïbes, davantage orientées vers l'interface maritime et intégrant une grande partie des côtes caraïbes de l'Amérique centrale et du nord de l'Amérique du Sud. Cet article s'intéresse aux théories développées dans ce cadre culturel et examine la manière dont elles intègrent la culture matérielle de ces régions continentales. Cette réflexion aboutira, à la fois, à une mise en relief du déséquilibre montré par ces études, privilégiant l'homogénéité et la similarité à l'échelle de l'objet individualisé au détriment de la diversité et des différences observées aux échelles régionales et locales, mais aussi à proposer la prise en compte d'informations contextuelles sur le littoral caraïbe dans l'analyse des similitudes et de la signification des objets.

Introduction

The puzzle of how to perceive the relation between indigenous societies that surrounded the Caribbean Sea during the pre-Colonial era remains vexing. Now, more than sixty years after Julian Steward proposed a solution to this pan-regional problem to which he referred as the Circum-Caribbean thesis, this pan-regional perspective has seen a renaissance of some magnitude in the concept of a Greater Caribbean culture area (in line with Rodríguez Ramos 2007a,b; Rodríguez Ramos and Pagán Jiménez 2007; Wilson 2007; Callaghan 2001; Curet 2004). This chapter will discuss the progress made since the mid-twentieth century regarding trans-Caribbean comparisons (see also Hofman and Hoogland, this volume), and analyse some of the recently proposed evidence for pan-regional contact across the Caribbean littoral.

Cultural diversity in the circum-Caribbean

Recently, the archaeology of pre-Colonial societies in the regions surrounding the Caribbean Sea has witnessed an important trend. Diversity and fragmentation are no longer perceived as an epistemological problem, but rather acknowledged as a longstanding feature of cultural interaction. In the context of the lower Central American countries for example, Robert Drennan proposes to put “the diversity of the Intermediate Area to good use” (Drennan 1996:115). This is good advice when investigating the Caribbean area which is united in unforeseen ways. We can speak of a cultural mosaic united, in spite of the fragmentary aspects, by identities formed through object and people movement rather than *stasis*; through contact rather than isolation. Such a perspective of frequent and durable contact between socio-politically comparable communities makes more sense in view of the diverse material culture recovered in the region. Flexibility or ‘cultural pluralism’ (Rodríguez Ramos and Pagán Jiménez 2007) is likely to have been a core trait in the region, between communities, with long-distance traders, or when obtaining non-local objects. The ability to understand more than one language, the willingness to interpret non-local objects in different ways, and the freedom to translate cultural difference were probably defining characteristics in the circum-Caribbean.

Until now, all of the proposals for pan-regional frameworks of indigenous cultural developments in the circum-Caribbean emphasize comparability. Scholars implicitly pave the way for the presence of a certain cultural form, whether this is called the Circum-Caribbean Culture Area, the Chibchan Area, Greater Antilles, or Greater Caribbean. In doing so, these concepts conceal the cultural practices of engagement of difference and strategic behaviour in light of others.

Culture-Historical beginnings

Julian Steward was well aware of the complex task of evidencing his ‘Circum-Caribbean thesis’, as he informs the reader during the introduction to Volume 4 of the Handbook of South American Indians: “[...] few of the aboriginal tribes survive today; ethnologists have largely ignored the area. Archaeologists have done little but make surveys, except in the West Indies” (Steward 1948:xvi). Steward is clearly troubled in his introductory text; according to him ethnohistoric sources are poorly described, archaeological work is limited and fragmented; ethnologists have visited only a few localities in the region. In his analysis, the contemporary indigenous cultural scene, used for historical analogies, suffers from

similarly challenging issues: villages are small; weaving is simple, pottery plain, political leadership absent, and social structures from the past gone with the exception of the continued presence of the shaman. In spite of viewing these cultural traits as discouraging, Steward managed to develop his 'Circum-Caribbean thesis', strongly basing it on comparable socio-political organization both on the mainland and the (Greater) Antilles (Steward 1948:1-4). The proposal however did not stand the test of time. During the heyday of classificatory-descriptive archaeology, quickly questions arose about the practical implications of such similar social and political patterns. Says William Coe suspiciously: "One can only ponder whether or not the stimulation of actual contact is necessary to account for such similarities" (1957:280).

The developmental trajectory proposed by Steward, which saw the emergence of chiefdom-level societies along the Caribbean Sea, was quickly overshadowed by an alternative model proposed by Irving Rouse (1953, 1992). Rouse's conclusion that the cultural and linguistic origins of indigenous societies were to be found in the Amazon and Orinoco river basins quickly became the favoured model in insular Caribbean archaeology. In Central America, archaeologists looked for local developmental trajectories and underscored boundaries and frontiers in analyzing the links to the neighbouring Mesoamerican and Andean culture areas instead (Sheets 1992:36; Willey 1971:254). The idea of a 'Circum-Caribbean Culture Area', united through its similar ecological settings, implicitly stated by Paul Kirchhoff (Steward 1948:note 1) and developed by Julian Steward, never gained a foothold in subsequent publications. Even though shared trait complexes were recognized and the socio-political nature of Circum-Caribbean societies seemed comparable, the archaeology on the Caribbean islands, in Central America, and Colombia went their separate ways. Archaeologists focused on either the Greater and Lesser Antilles or the region comprising most of the Central American countries. The end result was that 'Caribbean Archaeology' or 'The Caribbean' and 'Lower Central America', 'the Intermediate Area' and currently the Isthmo-Colombian Area (e.g. Hoopes and Fonseca 2003) are now referential shorthand in the discipline.

In recent years, the pan-regional concept of the Greater Caribbean has regained some of the interest it had lost for more than half a century. Certainly the rate and frequency at which goods and people moved around at a pan-regional scale has been underestimated, and an explicit focus on such social dynamics holds potential to disclose them. Hofman and Hoogland (this volume) address this complex task by proposing a multi-scalar approach and considering regional or pan-regional solutions to local necessities. I consider it an evocative concept since it enables research to look across regional disciplinary boundaries in exciting new ways and since it traces back pan-regional dynamics to local origins. Resulting research can benefit by going beyond a reliance on formal and stylistic similarities observed in certain material culture categories and semiotically between some of those categories. To argue for object circulation is one thing, to interpret what this meant socially is another. In this chapter I suggest that circum-Caribbean interaction studies can benefit from the current insights from social theory regarding the flexibility and flux of cultural values of material culture. Encounters, travel, and contact are emphasized as discrete events for acting out these interpretations and establishing 'same' and 'other' (Butler 1990; Keane 1997; Latour 1993; Munn 1986). In addition, formulations on practice theory (Bourdieu 1977; Schatski 1996) emphasize that artefacts must be used in order to be effective; and preceding understanding is needed to use them - they must become part of local social

practice. The practical understanding is the defining element in the links between individuals (or communities) and the object at hand. I suggest that these findings from social theory are suitable in better understanding mobility and exchange in the circum-Caribbean. In considering that particular objects do not allow just any practical use and interpretation – they cannot be suitable for arbitrary practices – we can analyse and compare practices and potentially their change through time through investigations of archaeological contexts.

The relevance for invoking a pan-regional perspective is to illustrate what kind of relation mobility and exchange at this scale had with the local context at hand. Paradoxically then, debating whether a site, region or object belonged to a macro-region is a debate which is far removed from understanding social contexts in the pre-Colonial circum-Caribbean. I believe that the recent focus on wider regional contexts of archaeological settings have provided a stimulating answer to the proverbial island perspectives which had become a central tenet of archaeologies around the Caribbean Sea in the second half of the twentieth century. In contrast to these separated regional archaeologies, research into circum-Caribbean interaction promises to regroup the micro-level locus of analysis to form part of the wider pan-regional focus. It is the relations between micro segments (e.g. domestic settlements, ceremonial sites, river valley settlement systems) of these macro regions which can best serve to illustrate the use of non-local objects.

A view from the Central American mainland

When viewing for example lower Central America (e.g. Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua and parts of Honduras) the regional perspectives in looking at the archaeology of this region is enlightening. In recent years, the unifying rationale argued for defining for example the Isthmo-Colombian area, which builds a link between long-lasting diachronic symbolic principles and synchronic social relations in potentially useful ways for circum-Caribbean investigations.

Zooming in on the regional level of southern Central America it becomes clear that researching a contextualized model of pan-Caribbean interaction is considerably restricted by the neglect in research projects that the Caribbean watershed has suffered when compared to the Pacific side (Lange 1996). The reasons for this neglect relate to poor infrastructure and climatic conditions that do not favour archaeological research, in particular when compared to the significantly drier and more accessible Pacific, featuring the Pan-American Highway and all of the major modern cities dating to early colonial times. In many parts of Central America the Caribbean – referred to as *El Atlántico* – is poorly accessible by means of motorized transport; dense tropical forests cut by major rivers have impeded research during much of the twentieth century. Heavy rainfall, occurring throughout most of the year, makes traversing this part of the Caribbean littoral a decidedly complicated affair. The presumed scarcity of archaeological sites on the Caribbean side of the isthmus though, is not merely caused by a data imbalance. In central Panama, the most extensively researched region in this regard, habitation on the Pacific side has consistently been shown to have started earlier and was more intensive than on the Caribbean coast (e.g. Cook and Ranere 1992; Drolet 1980). Thus the paucity of settlements cannot be explained by data imbalance alone, it does seem to have been the less densely populated side of Central America.

This data imbalance has impeded investigating the proposed model of pan-regional mobility and exchange in the Caribbean, but in recent years a handful of archaeological survey projects (Griggs 2005; Geurds 2009) and excavations (Gassiot and Ballbé 2004;

Wake *et al.* 2004) have started work on the Caribbean littoral or in the riverine coastal hinterlands, building on pioneering research projects (e.g. Drolet 1980; Magnus 1974). Early research hypothesized comparable patterns in material culture stretching along the Central American Caribbean coast (Epstein 1957; Stone 1941; Strong 1948); yet more recent studies that take regional questions into consideration were unsuccessful in confirming this idea by more local testing. Instead, archaeological and linguistic data point toward a social and economic integration with the more inland regions (Constenla 1991; Magnus 1974; Snarskis and Ibarra 1985) rather than a form of coastal Caribbean archetype. Overall, the evidence points to contact and exchange from the Caribbean coast to the Pacific side, as is argued in the example of central Panama (Linares and Ranere 1980; Chavez *et al.* 1996; Cooke 2005).

Evidence for circum-Caribbean interaction

“The Mesoamerican ball game seems to have leapt the Yucatan Channel in the Classic [Period] and quickly spread eastward from island to island” (Canter 2006: 2).

A focus on the formal similarities of architectural features between Middle America and the Greater Antilles forms the basis for recent suggestions of contact across the Caribbean Sea (Canter 2006; Wilson 2007). The ceremonial site of Rivas, documented in Costa Rica (Quilter 2004), is contrasted to ceremonial sites on Puerto Rico (i.e. Caguana and Tibes) and a number of similarities are observed in the intra-site layout of the sites and materials used in the construction of the ceremonial areas. In a similar vein, the cultural practice of ritual ball games is argued to have diffused from the Yucatán peninsula to the Greater Antilles (Canter 2006). Wilson concludes his comparisons by stating that interaction across the Caribbean Sea is “a question that deserves to be taken seriously, even with the difficulties in making sense of the archaeological evidence for long distance contact” (Wilson 2007:384).

Where Steward’s description of ‘Circum-Caribbean tribes’ was mainly defined by means of similar ecological habitats and socio-political character, the present push for a wider Caribbean interaction perspective is more particular in its approach in focusing on culture contact rather than culture comparability. The ‘Circum-Caribbean Culture Area’ was a classic example at an attempt to identify a culture – in this case determined by its environment – and portraying the people pertaining to this culture as behaving along the patterns prescribed by it (e.g. chiefly authority). The problem of essentialism looms large in this approach. Scholars behind the recent renewed interest in a pan-regional perspective for the Caribbean Sea are aware of these essentialist notions and instead stress the mobility of cultural formations across geographical and perhaps political boundaries (*sensu* Clifford 1997). The Caribbean Sea forms such a boundary and, increasingly, links spanning this body of water are hypothesized.

A full survey of all hypothesized links across the Caribbean Sea is beyond the scope of this chapter, but they can roughly be subdivided into three strands: (1) contact hypothesized on geographical grounds, for example favourable maritime currents; (2) contact hypothesized on ground of comparative similarity, for example three-pointers encountered in both the Antilles and the South American mainland; and (3) chemical provenience studies, for example on greenstone objects.

The geographical reasoning is based on a number of publications dealing with the maritime currents and viewshed analyses in the Caribbean Sea (Callaghan 1993, 2001; Torres and Rodríguez Ramos 2008). It argues in favour of a crossing by means of canoes between the Guajira peninsula on the eastern coast of Colombia and the southern coast of Puerto Rico, in addition to other maritime 'shortcuts' along the coast of the Central and South American mainland as well as between Costa Rica and Colombia (Callaghan and Bray 2007). These maritime current studies, involving evaluations of travel duration, time during the year, vessel types used, propulsion, and likely direction have their background in comparisons made to indigenous seafaring in Oceania (see Thomas 2001 for a recent overview). For pan-regional Caribbean inquiries they are an often quoted source and represent the only line of reasoning that looks at the potential location of communication routes in combination with patterns in the archaeological record rather than comparing those patterns. In the latter studies, to which we will now turn, the patterns are used to identify endpoints of interaction routes.

Hypotheses based on comparative resemblance in material culture, both from the mainland and the Antilles, are the most commonly encountered type of hypothesis and have the longest history. An early example was based on the qualities of brilliance encountered on polished wooded artefacts in both the Antilles and Central America (Helms 1987). This research was subsequently expanded upon in a thesis on the importance of brilliance as an aspect of objects materiality (Saunders 1999, see also Keehnen, this volume).

Using a diachronic perspective with examples from Mesoamerica, Lower Central America, Amazonia and the Andean culture area, the central argument in Nicholas Saunders' discussion on the sacrality of object brilliance is that indigenous peoples appeared to share a common disposition toward shiny things. Saunders locates this disposition (or 'indigenous philosophy') in a primordial timeless past. The importance of shininess of objects is induced from their frequency in the archaeological record (often in fact unprovenienced objects in museum collections) and references from ethnographic contexts. The conclusion is that these objects were valued through age-old notions passed on through time in a universe conceived and governed by continuity of symbolic meaning (Saunders 1999).

Much in the same way, the stylistic resemblance of particular objects is by far most frequently utilized to hypothesize ties across the Caribbean Sea. Looking principally at stylistic and semiotic data, these resemblances are taken as indications of contact and coherence in a geographically and linguistically diverse area. Comparisons of macro-blade technology for the time-period of earliest occupation between the Greater Antilles and lithic data from Belize are presumed to suggest some form of contact given the perceived likeness of the Belizean materials and the lithics from the Greater Antilles (Wilson *et al.* 1998, but see Callaghan 2003).

The perspective of comparison has a longer history than the recent surge in publications. An early example is the reference to a single three-pointer stone discovered in the Santa Marta region of north-eastern coastal Colombia. Marcio Veloz Maggiolo and Bernardo Vega drew on this Malaboide series three-pointer to suggest a relation between the tradition of three-pointers from the Greater and Lesser Antilles (Veloz Maggiolo and Vega 1982). It is noteworthy that the views of researchers are almost exclusively from the Greater Antilles toward particular areas of Central America or Caribbean South America with objects flowing from the latter regions to the islands and hardly vice versa. Also, the comparisons are usually made solely for one object category at a time.

Finally, the exchange of greenstone between Central America and the Antilles has been approached along similar lines of reasoning. Greenstone, a vernacular concept for a complex of lustrous minerals and rocks, is ubiquitous in Central America and has a long history of stylistic as well as geomorphological and chemical analysis (for an overview see Lange 1993). Jadeitite, with its limited amount of potential points of departure in regional exchange networks, is invoked as a form of material desired throughout the circum-Caribbean (Petit 2006). Rodríguez Ramos has argued that lustrous stones that visually resembled jadeitite were used interchangeably and valued for similar purposes. Drawing on a distinction proposed by Lange (1993), Rodríguez Ramos distinguishes between ‘true jades’ (being jadeitite and nephrite) and ‘social jade’ being an array of other greenstones (Rodríguez Ramos 2007a) and considers that the latter is fundamental in analyzing potential exchange networks in the wider Greater Caribbean, a term proposed by Rodríguez Ramos.

The proposition to incorporate the ‘social jade’ concept has opened new avenues of analysis for pan-regional analyses. However, the concept in my view also raises an ontological problem. In essence, this concept presupposes a lack of emic distinctions between lustrous stones dating back to the pre-Colonial time under investigation. In other words, it is assumed that indigenous societies surrounding and navigating the Caribbean Sea, perceived no fundamental distinction between the greenstones grouped under those of the social jades. This then naturally facilitates the – etic – recognition of some form of Greater Caribbean common experience, which is begging the initial question under consideration. It seems that, in order to come to a more contextualized understanding of jades, social or not, more localized contextual studies are called for which provide insights into the practical situations in which particular qualities of these stone objects were valorized and how some of those qualities diachronically shifted in importance.

Keane (2003) refers to this aspect of object materiality as the ‘condition of possibility’ and it is closely related to Kopytoff (1986) and Appadurai’s (1986) biography of things. The utility and value of objects in different settings and time periods tends to shift. Objects exchanged throughout the Greater Caribbean are ‘flexible’, analogical to the regional flexibility mentioned by Drennan, and should not be viewed as hostile to local systems of knowledge in the Durkheimian sense. Newly arrived ‘strange’ objects then, synthesize cultural elements at their place of arrival, reminiscent of the *bricolage* mechanism proposed by Claude Lévi-Straus ([1949] 1969). However, I consider the exchanged material things neither only as containers of meaning, nor as its ultimate determinants. They can be a conduit of meaning, but may be just as powerful in enabling new ones.

Discussion

It seems reasonable to assume that contact occurred across the Caribbean Sea at some stage during the two millennia of habitation along its littoral. Even if only by chance, it is likely rather than unlikely that at some stage people from different extremes or regions established contact with each other, initiating a motion of objects. The matter at hand then becomes how to go about this likelihood; can we attest this contact archaeologically and avoid the pitfall of only arguing it through object resemblance? The answer cannot be *not* to compare, for archaeological investigations are in essence always comparative. The question then is how similar two objects must be, to be considered the ‘same’, in the sense of being related either through contact or influence (Geurds and Van Broekhoven 2010).

The thesis of a primordial cultural scheme as bearing responsibility for these resemblances undermines the function of 'similarity = contact' (see McGinnis 1996 for a discussion of primordialism as examined for circum-Caribbean material culture).

The reasoning entailed in many of the comparative investigations of circum-Caribbean mobility and exchange is suggestive of some form of interaction. However, in all cases, except for the arguments based on provenance studies of artefacts, they are not based on samples of a particular data-set; they are a form of probable argument, perhaps a conjecture. In essence, the growing list of publications arguing pan-Caribbean interaction is predominantly built around comparisons of resemblance. This resemblance is deemed sufficient to warrant these conjectures. This is *abduction*, in Peircian terms.¹ By themselves, abductions cannot warrant any particular conclusion, they need to be accompanied by follow-up research taking a regional and site level perspective (see Boomert, this volume; Hofman and Hoogland, this volume; Knippenberg, this volume; Mans, this volume). If surprising resemblances between objects across the Caribbean Sea are observed in pre-Colonial material cultures, and if we *assume* that these resemblances coincided with the existence of a Greater Caribbean interaction sphere (*sensu* Rodríguez Ramos 2007a), or a primordially shared Caribbean worldview (*sensu* McGinnis 1996) and so forth, such resemblances are rendered obvious, and we can assume that the Greater Caribbean thesis is true. Whilst archaeological reasoning holds abduction as part of its essence of reasoning about the past, not furthering initial probable arguments by means of local scale case studies will have the Greater Caribbean thesis fall short of being convincing.

The problem with cultural primordialism is exemplified by the explanation offered by Saunders concerning the comparability of objects through space and time. This is attractive since we *do* see these similarities through form and iconicity, and we *do* consider that they are somehow related. However, the explanation presented here strikes as oddly circular in nature: Shininess was important to many indigenous peoples and communities throughout Central America because that is the way it has always been. The question one is left with here is *how* this importance came about in the first place, and *how* it maintained its importance. Is this shininess a deep, permanently internalized element of indigenous societies in Central America and perhaps in the circum-Caribbean? What to do with the relevance of shininess in the Andean region or Mesoamerica in this regard?

As Latour mentioned, for an object to have relevance to an individual, it needs to be handled. It is not primarily a question of interpretation by that individual (1993:Chapters 3 and 4). This handling occurs in contexts of practice, which in turn are in part accessible through archaeology. I consider that we need to first study these contexts, in order to learn how these exchanged objects were used. Through excavations, archaeology has access to these social practices. In these practices, material things are routinely drawn upon and applied by different agents in different situations. The objects handled again and again endure, thus making social reproduction beyond temporal and spatial limits possible. This endurance can also be approached through archaeology and it is perhaps the closest to what scholars can look for when they conceptualize mobility and exchange in the Caribbean.

1 Charles Peirce introduced the concept of abduction to deal with the initial stages of the scientific method (Eco *et al.* 1984). Abductions can only be proven meaningful when they are followed by deductive inferences and finally inductive testing of the hypotheses, in this case the thesis of the Greater Caribbean.

Human perception is a continuous process of creating categories of ‘others’. All that is strange and unknown is inherently different from all existing frames of perceptual reference, thus becoming alien, rare, exotic, and perhaps desirable and prestigious. This is essentially Mary Helms’ thesis (1979), and the relation she draws between converting such ‘esoteric knowledge’ into political potential is often cited in pan-regional Caribbean arguments.

The objects mentioned in arguments in favour of circum-Caribbean interaction (i.e. ball courts, jade celts, copper/gold alloy figurines, stone three-pointers and others) are more than conveyors of cultural ‘representations’ of exotic foreignness (*sensu* Helms 1979): they are used and have effects through their materiality. Future research into the pan-regional interaction in the Caribbean would benefit from seeking out objects holding a highly specific materiality (see for example Mol, this volume), for example a particular form of tool for a particular technology - one which cannot simply be replaced by some other arbitrary ‘symbolic object’ to which the same ‘meaning’ is ascribed. I consider comparing contexts of usage of resembling objects throughout the circum-Caribbean to lead to more inductive reasoning than merely individual (decontextualized) objects.

Conclusion

The archaeologies of respectively Central America, Colombia, Venezuela, and the Greater and Lesser Antilles only infrequently exchange data. Other than a handful of scholars who have had the opportunity to address interregional topics between for example the archaeology of Colombia and Costa Rica, archaeologies are ‘nationalist’ and distinctively local in focus. There is no professional conference for an ‘archaeology of the Caribbean Sea’, nor is there a peer-reviewed journal explicitly offering a forum for investigations into Greater Caribbean topics.² To a large degree, a comparable situation exists in Central American archaeology. Despite an archaeological history that is largely fragmented, the lower Central American region and Colombia were recently associated in the definition of a Chibchan area (Hoopes and Fonseca 2003). This constituted a major conceptual shift in comparison to past projects and studies. Until now, the difficulties of evaluating contextual data were primarily caused by a lack of communication between archaeologists working in Central America and those working in the Antilles. Notes Antonio Curet: “Without a general frame of reference about [Lower Central America] it is difficult to recognize possible evidence of interaction” (Curet 2004:95, my translation).³ This current lack of interaction between scholars working in either area is indeed a major impediment toward a critical evaluation of evidence for interaction during the pre-Colonial era.

Debates on the existence of a pre-Colonial network of interaction spanning the Caribbean fall into two opposing perspectives: many scholars have no regard for its potential existence, while some visualize a Caribbean Sea dotted with trading canoes hitchhiking on the currents. This paper did not seek to either validate or discredit a Greater Caribbean notion. Nonetheless, a subtle reflection on the relationships that would constitute pan-regional networks in the Caribbean seems in order. The supposed movement of material culture at a significant scale does not show up with convincing frequency in the Caribbean

2 The annual conference of the International Association for Caribbean Archaeology occasionally features speakers from the Caribbean coast of Central America. Still, it is essentially a venue for papers on insular Caribbean archaeology and studies on the South American tropical lowlands.

3 Original quote in Spanish: “Sin un marco general sobre la [sic] otra área es difícil reconocer posibles evidencias de interacción”.

archaeological record, complicating definitions of contact. It might be more beneficial to take pre-Colonial regional and local human geographies around the Caribbean Sea into consideration, and consider them to be made up of societies united in their inclination and technological expertise toward navigating rivers and crossing different contexts by seafaring (*sensu* Boomert and Bright 2007). As mentioned, these societies will have been inclined to explore new horizons on the Caribbean Sea or along its coastline, and this predisposition necessitates the multi-scalar approach proposed here (Hofman and Hoogland, this volume). On the question how this occurred, sea current studies can provide suggestions, but the fundamental understanding is to be found in the social dynamics entailed in the arrival of a canoe bringing objects to new shorelines. Are these objects restricted to serving as carriers of an exotic symbolism, having arrived from beyond meaningful horizons, or do they add to the establishment of a transcontextual social order, for example through gift-giving? For now the latter remains questionable (Mol, this volume). Referring to these exchanged objects as meaningful structures or symbols alone cannot offer a satisfactory answer to this question. Contextualized studies of such objects do hold the potential to reveal the effect of trans-Caribbean objects in a receiving setting. For now the majority of the referenced artefacts do not yet qualify for this requirement, but with scholars increasingly beginning to collaborate and tying different scales of research together around the Caribbean Sea the opportunity for a better understanding lies ahead.

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