

Pieter ter Keurs, *Condensed Reality. A Study of Material Culture* (Leiden: CNWS Publications, 2006)

Condensed Reality is a book which genuinely spans two disciplines, ethnography and material culture studies. It is therefore of note to scholars of both fields whether curators or academics, and also anyone with an interest in traditional Pacific cultures and societies. The book performs two functions: first, it comprises a genuinely original and critical approach to objects within the larger fields of material culture and cultural anthropology; second, it presents two in-depth case-studies of the societies of Siassi in Papua New Guinea and the island of Enggano in Indonesia.

Pieter ter Keurs is curator for Indonesian collections at the National Museum of Ethnology (Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde) in Leiden, the Netherlands and the book rose out of his doctoral thesis. His case-studies bring together fieldwork conducted in the Siassi Islands of Papua New Guinea in the early 1980s and on the Enggano in 1994. He notes in his foreword that he had not returned to Enggano since 1994 and therefore was not able to include an account of the impact of the 2000 earthquake in the book.

Overall the book is extremely well-structured and clearly written, avoiding unnecessary jargon and moving at a good but not galloping pace, at least for the reader seasoned in material culture theory and museology. It is organised into six chapters. The first two are brief appraisals of principal philosophies of objects and materiality; chapter three introduces the reader to the author's own theory of *condensation* and *evaporation*; chapters four and five deal with each case-study in turn, on Siassi and Enggano material culture and society. The book ends with a two-part final chapter consisting of the author's conclusions and lastly, and perhaps most importantly to curators of ethnographic collections, an analytical piece on '**A Curator's Position**' where he emphasises the importance of materiality (discussed below) in the study and use of museum objects and collections.

The main text, comprising approximately 200 pages, is accompanied by two appendices which do not comprise what one might expect, data and detail to accompany the main argument of the book, but are two short pieces of text which sit a little awkwardly in the work, almost as if they were added as an afterthought just before the book was going to press. While the first (**What is so special about materiality**) could have easily been brought into the discussion in chapter two, or omitted altogether, the second (**The story of Manipa**) is of interest to the Enggano case-study but again ought to have been brought in at that stage. The book is well-produced with clearly set-out text and notes, complemented by high-quality black and white photographs and simple line-drawn maps.

The seeming brevity of the book is both a virtue and a limitation of its use. Clearly there was more detail to be included. As a simple record of these two genuinely interesting societies and their relationships with their artefacts, the book could have been several times its current length. However, its brevity also

means that it has been written succinctly and with intelligence. Particularly for curators who lack the time for keeping up with current scholarly ideas about objects and material culture, this book will provide a very accessible reference and treatise to consult.

The book is introduced against the author's theoretical context. It is set within a long tradition of Western philosophy and cultural anthropology which has explored the relationship between subject and object and materiality. Of particular interest is the opposition of the culture of objects in museums and the culture of objects in the societies which made and used them. Ter Keurs argues that following the millennium, many museums have been concerned with renovation, collections management and related problems, however these changes have almost been left aside in intellectual debates on material culture because the curator is still considered to be both partial and an 'object freak'.

Chapter one (**Objects, Matter, and Materiality**) reviews the history of philosophies which have informed anthropological approaches. From this short discussion, it becomes evident that the Heideggerian approach and that of Wariner will be important for the formation of the author's own theory. What is refreshing about Ter Keurs' discussion of philosophy and theory is his honesty, particularly in using a Eurocentric philosophical framework to discuss people, places, things and ideas from outside his broad intellectual sphere (Papua New Guinea and Indonesia). He acknowledges that many an anthropologist would not be impressed by this but, in my opinion, his arguments for doing so are convincing. By bringing his own intellectual culture to the forefront of the study, he makes a good case for using a Western framework over one, say, from the New Guinean Highlands. What is perhaps a little disappointing is that this opposition is not discussed in any further detail. The reader is left a little wanting.

Chapter two (**Anthropological Approaches to Material Culture**) is in itself a very useful précis of current theories in both cultural anthropology and museology, however, again, the brevity is frustrating, but perhaps necessary given the constraints of word limits. The key to this chapter is the issue of materiality, so often an amorphous term, misused at times, but here ter Keurs is clear about its importance to his own theory and the important role of the object in the creation of the subject. Amongst other material culture theorists he discusses Van Beek, Miller and, of course, Appadurai's *The Social Life of Things* (1986) and some of the classic essays contained therein.

The author's own theory on material culture is presented in chapter three (**Materiality, Condensation and Evaporation**): *material condensation* and *material evaporation*. By placing the object in the middle of these two processes, which are irreversible and evolving, a material complex is created. This complex changes according to the ideas which formed the objects, intentions of old producers and consumers, the intentions of new consumers and new meanings given to objects. The complex cycles matter into ideas (*evaporation*) and ideas into matter (*condensation*), with the passage of time and changes of context. The final aspect of the theory is based on intentions, choices and strategies. These are identified as material resources, individual creativity and skill (part of the

subject's 'inner self'), human relations comprising economic, social and political ones, and cultural values, also consisting of religion and ritual. While these factors are not in themselves new or revolutionary in material culture thought, his consideration of unconscious influences gives the reader a tantalising taste of how this might affect people of all times and cultures.

The case-studies presented in chapters three (**Siassi Material Culture, Papua New Guinea**) and four (**Interpreting Enggano Culture, Indonesia**) will not be discussed in any detail here, both for the sake of brevity and because I am not a specialist in contemporary Pacific cultures. Both chapters are methodically presented, though not equally so. The first, on Siassi, is divided into three parts: background of the culture and society, an outline of the material culture and interpretations of the relationships between the people and their objects and practices which embodied them. The second, on Enggano culture, begins with an explanation of the study's methodology and sources, followed by the description of the culture and ending with some interpretive work using classification and certain aspects of the material culture.

The significant changes Siassi has undergone in the twentieth century include the introduction of the outboard motor, which transformed trade with the place. Whereas many people from Siassi have lost an understanding of the meaning of traditional designs of Mandok wooden bowls, a principal Siassi export, they still form part of a larger material complex of *mariam*, a central and defining concept embodied also in masks, bullroarers and dance staffs. Ter Keurs therefore identifies *Mariam* as the concept that is condensed in this material culture. Here, the theory of *condensed reality* works very well as the material complex is shown to genuinely encompass many important aspects of Siassi life.

In contrast, the author applies a slightly different methodology to the second case-study for which he had much less personally-collected data, relying heavily on a re-examination of old literature on Enggano culture, including the use of museum catalogues. Here is another place in which profound changes have resulted in a complete transformation of architecture (from beehive house to cement block), a drastic change in population with large numbers of immigrants moving here from Sumatra and Java and the introduction of Christian and Muslim faiths which have masked almost forgotten Engganese cultural traditions. A *material condensation* is identified as the 'slain enemy', a theme which recurs in nineteenth-century headdresses, amulets and the lids of containers, originally a design of a squatting figure. However by 1994, no one on Enggano could, or would, tell ter Keurs the meaning of the slain enemy on these items. The slain enemy has now *evaporated* into nothing, even beyond memory.

While the different treatments of the case-study make comparison difficult, both work relatively well to expound ter Keurs' theory of *condensation* and *evaporation*. However, I would have liked to have seen more examples of *condensation* from the cultural case-studies as it would be, by the author's own admission, too simplistic to identify just one. Nevertheless this is a novel book, about a novel theory of material culture, while imparting very valuable knowledge about two fascinating cultures.

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