Chapter 18
An Archaeology of Predation. Capitalism and the Coloniality of Power in Equatorial Guinea (Central Africa)

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Introduction

In this chapter, I explore the long-term effects of global capitalism in a small region of Central Africa from an archaeological point of view. The region in question is the Muni Estuary, in Equatorial Guinea, a former Spanish colony. A multidisciplinary research project was carried out there by the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC), between 2009 and 2012. The project allowed us to document the history of the area between the beginnings of the Iron Age (first century BC) and the present post-colonial regime. It also revealed both the predatory and unsustainable nature of capitalist exploitation, which is particularly clear in non-Western contexts, and the strong relationship between the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial political economies of capitalism. The concept of "coloniality of power", proposed by Aníbal Quijano, will be used here to make sense of this relationship. I would argue that the micro-history of the Muni, far from being an anecdote in the global history of capitalist depredation is, in fact, an eloquent example of the form in which capitalism operates in the world. Therefore, I will try to demonstrate the usefulness of archaeology in understanding the destructiveness inherent to capitalism in the long term.

When one thinks of colonialism, post-colonial dictatorships, predatory capitalism or the slave trade, Congo, Angola or Nigeria come to mind. Few would think in the first place in Equatorial Guinea. This is quite understandable for many reasons; the main one is that Equatorial Guinea is one of Africa's tiniest countries, with only 28,000 km^2. The other is that it was not colonized by any of the major colonial powers in the Age of Empires, but by a nation-state in decline, Spain, a country that was losing its colonies precisely when the world's superpowers were acquiring or expanding theirs. However, it is my contention that Equatorial Guinea has much to

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tell about the processes of interaction between Europeans and other societies during modernity. In a reduced scale, Equatorial Guinea epitomizes the trajectories of depredation that have characterized these interactions from the late fifteenth century to the present.

Theory and Politics

For making sense of my data, I will combine two different theoretical perspectives: on the one hand, the decolonial school of thought from Latin America, as represented by Aníbal Quijano, Walter Mignolo, Enrique Dussel and Ramón Grosfoguel. Decolonial thought intends to put the dark side of modernity back into the picture and this means paying more attention to the colonized and exploited by European powers in the constitution of modernity. Thus, decolonial thinkers consider the conquest of America, with all its atrocities and abuses, a pivotal episode in the making of modernity—an episode in which Iberians had a leading role that has been forgotten by theorists, who have focused both in northern Europe and in the intellectual development of modernity. From this perspective, modernity would be a process pinpointed by the Protestant Reformation, the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, and the French revolution (Dussel 1993). The dark side of modernity is thus elided (Mignolo 2003). Moreover, unlike most post-colonial studies, this theory offers a long-term perspective that covers not only the period of colonization proper, but also pre-colonial interactions between the West and other societies, as well as the post-colonial period. What unites all these diverse times and places is a specific politico-economic regime, which Quijano (2000) has called the "coloniality of power." Grosfoguel (2007) suggests that coloniality is characterized by a set of hierarchies: racial, sexual, gender, spiritual, epistemic and linguistic. As for Quijano (2000), he sees in race the foundation of all subsequent iniquities of coloniality: the master element of classification that divides subalterns and rulers from the fifteenth century onwards.

The other theoretical line that I would like to use here is Norbert Elias' work on the process of civilization. According to Elias (1989), what we understand by civilization (a mixture of institutions and manners) is based on an exercise of self-repression, which is progressively extended from the upper classes to the lower classes. The tools of civilization are at the same time a technology of domination of the self and of society at large. Material culture is particularly relevant here: dress, bedrooms, forks and dishes are inseparable from the sociogenetic and psychogenetic processes of civilization and they act as material agents of coercion. Elias (1989, pp. 516–517) saw the application of his theories to colonial contexts, although neither he nor later students of colonialism have tried to develop his ideas.

What I propose is that the notion of both civilization/modernization as self-repression and modernity as unrestrained depredation of the non-European world are not incompatible, but complementary, and that this complementarity is perhaps best seen through material culture and in colonial contexts. Such a proposal might sound awkward in the current panorama of post-colonial studies, where there is a tendency

to celebrate consumption as a form of agency, a sign of local ingenuity and even empowerment. Consumption, from this perspective is equated with the creative appropriation of things produced by dominant economies (Miller 1995). The idea is to explore the creativity of communities and individuals under capitalism, irrespective of their political or economic position. Let us see a typical statement of this perspective: “A rather pessimistic productionist bias is evident in characterizations of capitalism as a concatenation of forces that rather like a juggernaut or steamroller, flattens everything in sight… this includes the idea that industrial manufactures are damaging to their hand-crafted equivalents and the artisans who make them” (Schneider 2006, p. 210). The words belong to an anthropologist referring to clothing, but they could have been uttered by an archaeologist referring to pottery or glass. Thus, Ogundiran and Falola (2007, pp. 42–43) caution against “the one-sided view that avaricious capitalism overwhelmed Africans in all situations and led to the loss of authentic African culture.” Likewise, Keneth Kelly (2011, pp. 134–135, 142), sees the period of Atlantic trade as one of “opportunities”, “choices” and “negotiated response.” My impression is that such perspectives, while purportedly aimed at doing justice to the ingenuity of Africans and to the complexities of the interaction, downplay the effects of colonialism and capitalism and in the last instance help to exonerate them (see Orser 2013). By emphasizing self-repression and depredation instead, I do not want to rule out the creativity of intercultural encounters propitiated by the expansion of capitalism, but rather to call attention to the long-term negative repercussions of such expansion. In a pure decolonial way, I would like to look at the dark side of consumption, as Walter Mignolo (2003), for instance, has revealed the dark side of literacy in coloniality.

In relation to this, my research has another goal, which is political in nature. During the last decade, there has been a growing amount of literature that blames Africans for the current state of Africa. Perhaps, the most eloquent defendant of this perspective is journalist Martin Meredith (2005), but others are following suit. According to these authors, after a century has passed from the end of the colony, the troubles of Africa can no longer be pinned down on Europeans: they have to do more with endemic corruption, authoritarian politics, predatory economies, warlordism, etc. It is hard to understand, however, why this aberrant political economy has emerged in Africa and not in northern Europe. If Africans are to blame, there are only two possible explanations: either there is a biological reason, which nobody would dare to defend today, or there is a cultural one. Corruption, warlordism and despotism would then be inscribed in the cultural DNA of Africans. Both options are equally disturbing. I prefer to understand the troubled fate of Africa, and Central Africa in particular, from a historical (or rather archaeological) long-term perspective, for which decolonial thinking is particularly well suited. Therefore, although it is, of course, true that all sorts of vernacular predatory systems have proliferated during the last 50 years, I would argue that they are mostly the product of over five centuries of coloniality of power (not just one century of colonialism). In that, I will follow the path opened in Africa by Achille Mbembe (2001). Neoliberalism and its apologists, like Martin Meredith, are interested in a historical amnesia that frees Europeans from guilt and in this way, gives witting or unwitting ideological coverage to the continuous exploitation of the continent.

Towards an Archaeology of Predation

What do slavery, colonialism and capitalism in Atlantic Africa have in common? I contend that they all have to be understood as part of the same phenomenon: the rise of a particular form of political economy, which I will call predatory. To define a predatory regime as a political-economic formation, I start from Paul Veyne's idea, elaborated by Achille Mbembe: referring to the degeneration of politics in the Late Roman Empire, Veyne argues that "when things reach this pass, it is pointless to speak of abuses or corruption: it has to be accepted that one is dealing with a novel historical formation" (cited by Mbembe 2001, p. 84). Following Mbembe (2001, pp. 72–93), we can describe predatory regimes as "characterised by the militarization of power and trade, pillage as an economic strategy, the pursuit of private interest under public command and the conversion of brute violence into legitimate authority" (González-Ruibal 2011, p. 275).

It is worth exploring archaeologically the characteristics of such novel historical formations as are the predatory systems from the sixteenth century onwards, so as to understand their conditions of emergence and assess their long-term effects in society and nature. The usefulness of an archaeological perspective is twofold: archaeology allows us to appraise predation in the long term and to examine the crucial role played by materiality in it. This role is obvious in the exploitation and circulation of goods (through raids and trade), the large-scale transformation of landscape (including its destruction), and the material, sensuous expressions of predatory power, which includes what Mbembe (2001) calls the "aesthetics of vulgarity."

I would tentatively define a predatory system as the political or para-political organization that is founded upon the generalized exploitation of people and nature, provides scant returns, if any, to subjects, and invests little or nothing in ideological apparatuses of legitimization with regard to those being exploited. The latter point is crucial. Predatory regimes do not aspire to hegemony (in a Gramscian sense) and, in that, they differ from many ranked societies and states, which have captured the attention of most archaeologists interested in the origin and development of inequalities. A predatory regime can be a state (such as a post-colonial dictatorship or a colonial power), but also a non-state society (such as a slavery-based chiefdom), a group (a band of raiders, pirates or warlords) and an autonomous organization that is politically dependant on a non-predatory state (such as the European chartered companies). Nevertheless, the emergence of non-state predatory formations is almost always the after-effect of a previous state intervention. The manifold predatory formations that can be found in sub-Saharan Africa from the sixteenth century onwards (African, European, Muslim and American) are a good case in point. Thus, the Dutch East India Company is a perfect example of an organization based on unrestrained depredation. It does not justify its actions on any moral grounds, just economic—in pure capitalist fashion. They do not owe anything to society (except the society of stockholders). On the other side of the spectrum, we have the Jaga marauders of Angola, "a group entirely devoted to war" and whose moral and social values were based on "extreme predatory principles" (Vansina 2004, p. 1999).

The Jaga were a short-lived, collateral product of the capitalist expansion in Africa: for a while they looted, killed, raped and moved around devastating the country—and then vanished. Predatory activities can be destructive (pillage, slave raids, total war) or productive (trade, mining, plantations). In the latter case, however, they always imply a systematic exploitation of resources beyond the threshold of social or natural sustainability. Predatory activities also involve violence and deep power asymmetries.

Different societies and political systems (from bands to states, to use the well-known evolutionist categories) engage from time to time, or even systematically, in predatory practices such as wars of aggression, slave raids, cattle rustling or piracy. However, only the political or para-political systems that have in predation their *raison d'être* can be considered real predatory regimes. Of all predatory activities, those that have been more thoroughly researched in are slavery and the Atlantic trade. However, while much excellent research has been carried out on the archaeology of slavery in North and South America and the Caribbean, comparatively less work has been undertaken in Africa, which is the source and testing ground for many of the predatory and repressive technologies of modernity and capitalism (Mbembe 2003). Within Africa, research has massively focused on the West (e.g. DeCorse 2001; Ogundiran and Falola 2007; Richard 2010; Monroe and Ogundiran 2012), whereas Central Africa is virtually unexplored. In addition, compared to the early modern period, the predatory practices of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries (the Age of Empire) have been much less studied in general (but see Croucher and Weiss 2011). It is important to look at imperialism in order to understand the obvious material and political links between the Atlantic trade, the scramble for Africa and neocolonialism, as part of the same regime of predation that decolonial thinkers have called "coloniality."

Before Predation

To understand the effects of the coloniality of power in Equatorial Guinea, as in other places in Africa, it is necessary to go far back in time. It is necessary, among other things, to assess to which extent what we see after the late fifteenth century is the result of the coloniality of power or of local politico-economic developments under the effects of European expansion.

In the Muni Estuary, we traced down the last 2000 years of history. This history is characterized by a series of booms and busts, periods in which population grows and communities thrive and others in which there is a steep demographic decline and population dispersal. The Iron Age archaeological record of the Muni Estuary is extraordinarily rich and important to understand the pre-contact history of the Bantu peoples. I will not enter into details here, but would like to stress a few points that are relevant for understanding the later evolution of the area. Unlike in Nigeria or Congo, we have not documented the emergence of large chiefdoms before the arrival of the Europeans. The region was occupied by segmentary societies between

the first millennium BC (at least) and the nineteenth century. We have discovered several burial areas in the largest of the Muni islands, Corisco, which offer us a glimpse into notions of power during the Iron Age (González-Ruibal et al. 2013).

There are two different burial traditions: during the Early Iron Age (ca. 50 BC–AD 550), only a few people were buried. Their corpses were interred or exposed first and after some time the bones dug up and buried in small pits with their personal belongings, including large and heavy axes, thick collars, bracelets and anklets and ritual artefacts such as spoons and sickle-knives. The few people that were buried, both men and women, were probably influential individuals, endowed with magical powers, as most traditional leaders in this part of Africa. Their social influence and prestige, rather than power, was predicated on their capacity to bring welfare to the community through their control of supernatural powers. It is for this reason, too, that they were buried: if we use modern ethnographic analogies, we can infer that the bones of these great ancestors held beneficial power for the community. Their social status, however, was based on something else: wealth. In the Fang language, the main language spoken in Equatorial Guinea today, the word for wealth, *akuma*, is the same as the word for power. *Akuma* has traditionally been masculine wealth in people (women and clients), although women could contribute with their labour to the households' *akuma*. Guyer and Belinga (1995) also suggest that wealth in knowledge was equally important to material and human wealth and that they were all related. Until the early twentieth century, then, those men who wanted to achieve social prominence had to obtain wives and clients, but also have an expert knowledge of some kind. Wives were obtained through the payment of bridewealth, which was materialized in special purpose money (Fig. 18.1). The more currency one had, the more wives one could get (and thus increase agricultural production, obtain more currency units, etc.). In our excavations of Early Iron Age burials, we discovered several tombs with iron ingots (González-Ruibal et al. 2012, 2013), identical to those in use until the twentieth century. However, the fact that the currency (or at least part of it) was buried, and therefore destroyed, indicates that there were social limits to the accumulation of riches. If iron currency somehow indicates the wealth in people of the deceased, the ritual artefacts with which important people are buried bear witness to their wealth in (esoteric) knowledge.

After AD 550, we document a material and social collapse in the archaeological record and Corisco is largely abandoned until around AD 1000. During the Late Iron Age (AD 1000–1250), funerary rites changed dramatically. We find primary inhumations and burial becomes socially widespread, as opposed to the previous phase. This allows us to see differences between wealthy, powerful people and people who were less so. Thus, whereas 15 inhumations have from 1 to 8 pots (mostly bottles for drinking palm wine), a couple of circumcision knives and one adze; only one burial had 18 pots and four thick and heavy iron collars, a traditional emblem of chieftancy in the area (González-Ruibal et al. 2012, pp. 253–254). Nevertheless, these chiefs, as those of the Early Iron Age, had their power socially curtailed, as we know from later historical evidence. They are certainly not comparable to the Central African rulers of the territorial states of Kongo or Loango. Their power was limited to a village or a few villages. Actually, the chief's burial that we excavated

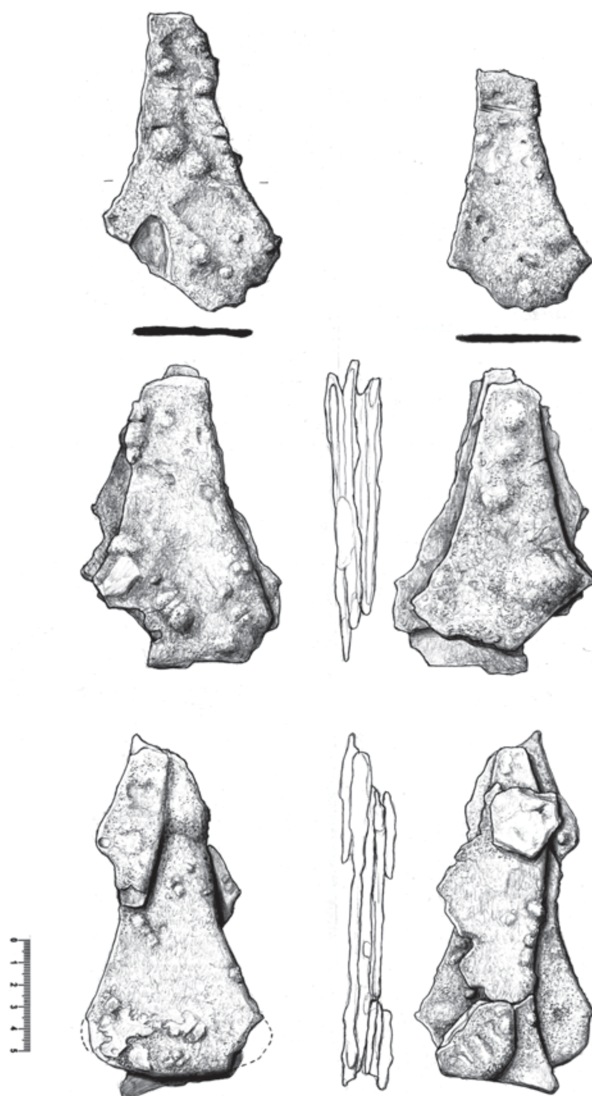

Fig. 18.1 Special-purpose money from the early Iron Age (ca. 100–400 AD). From the site of Nandá

is not isolated, but surrounded by other burials and in shape and size is not too different from other tombs. The funerary offerings, while richer, are not strikingly so: even the chief is buried with the customary adze and circumcision knives—not the regalia of the tombs found in kingly African burials (De Maret 2012, pp. 319–323). This was clearly a leader who had to negotiate his power and who was part of the community: a big man, using Jan Vansina's term (1990, pp. 73–78), rather than a paramount chief.

There are two elements that I would like to retain from the Iron Age: first, the restrained nature of power; we have no kings, but rather people whose status was

based on their social and spiritual skills, which were recognized by the community as long as the community obtained benefits from them. Decentralized polities, which Vansina (1990, pp. 158–162) locates in the area comprised between southern Cameroon and Gabon, persisted in the region under study until the effective Spanish colonization of the Muni, as late as the 1900s, when up to three "kings" are attested in the Corisco, ruling over different parts of the island (which has 15 km^2!). Their power was necessarily restricted. In fact, the Benga systematically refused the imposition of a paramount chief by the Spaniards.

The second point that I would like to emphasize is the convertibility of material wealth and people, as seen in iron currency units, and its implications for the future slave trade. This requires more explanation. Anthropologist Wendy James (1988) has argued that the refusal of some African groups to accept bridewealth and their insistence in maintaining sister-exchange marriage at all costs has to do with a staunchly egalitarian moral economy. Those who practise this kind of marriage regard the exchange of a woman for goats, spears or money as tantamount to selling her as a slave. Conversely, we could say that a society in which currency is employed to pay bridewealth, be it iron ingots, bronze bracelets or cowrie shells, is at least cognitively more prepared for the slave trade than one that ignores or rejects the idea of currency altogether. In societies with sister-exchange marriage (which also happens to be the most egalitarian), only humans can be exchanged for humans. In societies with bridewealth, people can be exchanged for non-humans (goats or bracelets).

Now, the West and Central African societies that have special-purpose currency present a further complication. On the one hand, currency implies a process of abstraction; it is a pure materialization of value and as such it can only be used as a token of value in specific transactions (this is the reason why we call it currency in the first place) and in that it is very different from spears, cows or cloth, which have exchange value but also use value, to use Marxian terms (Marx 2010, pp. 79–97). On the other hand, when an object is raised to the status of abstract materialization of value, it undergoes an ontological change of enormous consequence, because it becomes autonomous, a separate sphere of reality (as opposed to cows and spears, which are deeply enmeshed in ordinary life) and, potentially, an agent of change. In the modern world, we are well aware of this eventuality, as we feel that capital has acquired a life of its own in the financial markets and has turned against society.

This latter point, the autonomy of currency, is especially relevant to my argument. David Graeber (2011, p. 133) would disagree with my thesis on the dangers of iron money, because he argues that special-purpose currency used as bridewealth "is presented not to settle a debt, but as a kind of acknowledgement that there exists a debt that cannot be settled by means of money." He says that, "only a human could ever be considered equivalent to another human" in the context of what he calls "human economies." I would argue that Graeber's theory fails to convincingly explain this conundrum: why some groups in human economies do use hoes or ingots in their marriage transactions if a person can only be equivalent to another person. I see Graeber's point and agree that it generally applies to the situation in the Gulf of Guinea before contact with Europe. However, I also see—perhaps because I am an archaeologist—a problem inherent to this materialization of an abstraction

that we call currency. A form of value made simultaneously abstract (and therefore convertible) and tangible can have at some point unforeseeable effects—as I said, taking a life of its own. The problem (and the advantage) of an object made abstract is that it renders convertibility more feasible. This is not only an economic issue (as expressed above in terms of use and exchange value). It is also an ontological one. A cow will always remain a cow, in addition to a currency form, and therefore never fully convertible into a human; it has a being in its own. But the being of currency lies in its not having a being other than being convertible to other things. This is the danger of iron currency that, in my opinion, Graber fails to see.

But this is a danger that becomes manifest as soon as Europeans set foot on the African coasts. They soon discovered the privileged role of metal units in key social exchanges and, even if they were not able to grasp their intricacies, they managed to use them to disrupt local social systems and human economies. This would have never been possible in a region without material currency in the first place.

I would like to make it clear that I am in no way defending that having iron currency *determines* that one will eventually participate in the Atlantic slave trade when the opportunity comes. What I am saying is that iron currency implies a certain disposition, in Bourdieu's terms (1977). It should be regarded as a part of a pre-colonial habitus that orients relations between people and things before and under coloniality; it is a specific material expression of an underlying principle, which generates and organizes social practices and representations effectively but unconsciously. Before the upheaval that was the development of Atlantic trade, special purpose money remained (mostly) within limits. When the Europeans came, iron or copper currency, due to its abstract yet tangible character, became an ideal mechanism to subvert the social order and open the way to exchanges between people and things that surpassed pre-colonial limits.

The work of different pre-colonial habitus can be glimpsed in the travelogues of earlier European visitors to African coasts. The *Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis*, written by Portuguese sailor Duarte Pacheco Pereira in 1506 is based on travel and trading experiences gathered during the fifteenth century (Pereira 2004). What we have for Atlantic Africa is a catalogue of peoples classified according to their willingness to participate in the trade with the Europeans and the number and kind of copper manillas and other objects that are used in the transactions. What is inferred from the narration is that some people asked for more manillas, others for less and others simply refused to enter the trade, probably because they did not have currency in the first place (as is the case with the Bubi, see below). From these sources, historians tend to depict a largely incomprehensible market in which Africans undoubtedly rang the tune with their sophisticated demands on European goods, but they tell us little about pre-colonial political economies and cultural values (e.g. Herbert 2003). Archaeology here is crucial to assess pre-colonial habitus: only the discipline can provide well-dated empirical data to discern the time depth and geography of special purpose currency and thus understand better why some African groups never entered the Atlantic trading systems and those who did, participated in different degrees and in different ways.

The European Contact

Iron Age society in the Muni collapsed well before the arrival of the Europeans, around AD 1250. The fast demographic growth during the late Iron Age probably led to the overexploitation of the small islands of the estuary. People simply left for the mainland, where there is evidence of continued human occupation (Clist 2005, pp. 681, 687–688), and the forests recovered quickly (Fig. 18.2): when the Portuguese arrived at the estuary in 1471, they noted that the islands were completely empty. The sailors called the biggest one Corisco, “Lightning”, due to the gigantic gales that they met there. They did not show much interest in the estuary, which was heavily forested and lacked powerful chiefs with whom to trade easily, as those they had met on the Gold Coast or Angola. The Iron Age moral economy was still strong during the sixteenth and the seventeenth century: rather than slaves, it was honey, ivory and wax that were purchased by Europeans (Pigafetta and Duarte 2002, pp. 46–48). Still by the late eighteenth century, the blacks from the Muni were said to be “very fierce and it is not possible to go ashore” (Castro and Calle 1992, p. 43), although some trade in ivory, wax and dywoods was carried out from boats. Instead, it was reported that between 600 and 800 slaves were leaving from the Gabon estuary every year, that is, just in front of the island of Corisco (Castro and Calle 1992, p. 54).

During those centuries, many British, French, Dutch and Portuguese traders, explorers and slavers would sail along this coast, but few would settle (Merlet 1990, pp. 20–27). The islands were used for fetching wood and drinkable water, but they continued uninhabited. In the Estuary, several forts were built by Europeans, probably the Dutch; we have documented traces of two: one in the island of Elobey Chico and the other in the continent, near the town of Kogo, and we know of a third one in Corisco that we were unable to locate. These forts are small—nothing to do with the monumental castles of the main African slaving areas (DeCorse 2010). Still, it is telling that the first European traces in the landscape belong to the militarization of trade, a typical characteristic of predatory regimes (Mbembe 2001, pp. 56, 72).

Fig. 18.2 Ngaña Point. The dense coastal forest of Corisco would have looked very much like this after the collapse of pre-colonial Iron Age societies

The most ambitious slaving enterprise was the Corisco Company, founded in 1723 by a French merchant licensed by the Portuguese king to provide slaves to Brazilian plantations (Silveira 1954, pp. 7–11). A fort was built and business started with promising results. However, after a couple of years marked by conflicts with other nations, especially the Dutch, the company failed.

It is worth noting that the places where the French, Dutch and Portuguese managed to purchase slaves, especially from the seventeenth century onwards, were those where iron currency has been attested archaeologically during the Iron Age, such as the coasts of Cameroon and Gabon. These were places where large amounts of currency were used in marriage transactions, if we judge by the number of iron ingots and axes that are deposited in some of the burials during the Early Iron Age, but also from what we know through colonial sources for the nineteenth and the early twentieth century. We have an outstanding document for Corisco: a list of the bridewealth paid by a Benga around the 1810s to acquire his best wife (Boteler 1835, p. 404). A total of 55 items are described, of which 20 are iron objects obtained through the slave trade: bars, knives and cutlasses. The iron bars are the industrial equivalent of the currency units that we have identified archaeologically for prehistoric times. In fact, when we showed the ancient currency to the Benga, old men immediately identified it as *mabanja*, the iron items traditionally used in marriage transactions.

The situation was quite different in those areas where no iron currency has been attested during the pre-colonial period. The best example is the Bubi people from the island of Bioko. The islanders of Bioko, which lies 200 km to the north of the Muni, refused systematically to sell slaves. No iron currency ever existed in the island. In fact, iron was only gradually incorporated from the late eighteenth century onwards (Martín del Molino 1965, p. 51) and polished stone axes were still employed during the early twentieth century (Tessmann 1922, Fig. 1, p. 5). Not only that: although the Bubi did have bridewealth (*voolo*), this seems to have been of less importance in social and economic terms than among the peoples of the mainland—at least until the changes brought by the colony— and, in fact, payment of bridewealth could be circumvented in different ways. In addition, what the Bubi were paying through bridewealth was not a woman, but her virginity (*eótó*; Aymemí 1942, p. 38). This is an important difference. The local population of Bioko—the Bubi—managed to resist social transformation until the plantation economy and colonialism finally penetrated and destroyed the traditional order during the nineteenth century (Sundiata 1994). Interestingly, it is only in this context of social and demographic collapse, around the 1850s, when the use of shell money (*chibo*) is reported among the Bubi in exchanges with the whites (Sundiata 1994, p. 513), whereas the iron-using populations of the Gulf of Guinea had been employing currency with white traders from the late fifteenth century. Early Bubi resistance to the unequal Atlantic trade can be glimpsed in the European sources, who complain about the difficulty of trading in Bioko: thus, Dutch entrepreneur Willem Bosman who visited the island during the late seventeenth century writes that "The island of Fernando Po [Bioko], is inhabited by a savage and cruel sort of people, which he that deals with ought not to trust" (Bosman 1705, p. 399). Decades later, in 1778 the

first attempt to colonize the place by Spaniards ended in disaster: the Bubi revolted, ravaged the entire colony, killed almost all Europeans and those who survived fled. After this "fatal period", writes Captain Landolphe (Quesné 1823, pp. 349–350), "the Negroes do not bear that any European individual disembarks."

A Certain Degree of Civilization

The case of the Benga could not be more different. According to their oral history, they decided to abandon the interior of the continent where they used to live and travel to the coast with the purpose of trading with the Europeans (Andeke 2005, p. 15). We can speak, then, of a pre-colonial disposition towards exchange with foreigners. For that, they settled first along the shores of the Muni Estuary and then in the islands. We believe that the occupation of Corisco by the Benga took place around 1770, based on archaeological materials, oral data and historical documents. Ironically, the date roughly coincides with the acquisition of the area by Spain after a treaty with Portugal (1778). The Spanish possession was as nominal as had been that of the Portuguese. In fact, during the first decades of official occupation, few Spanish traders ventured into these waters, whose commerce was still monopolized by other nations.

The transformation undergone by the Benga upon arrival to the Muni is striking for its intensity and speed. Thus, Andeke (2005, p. 61) writes that one of the Benga chiefs of the late eighteenth century, Bodipó bwa Gikwe, was known as "King of the Portuguese", for his connections and his European lifestyle. When we discovered the first Benga settlements in Corisco, we thought indeed that they were European outposts, since absolutely all material culture that we recovered was of Western origin: crockery, porcelain, bottles, glass, beads, tools, etc. (Fig. 18.3). This situation has been attested in other coastal areas that acted as commercial enclaves, such as Elmina (DeCorse 2001), but it is not frequent and local artefacts also turn up in these places, even if in smaller quantities. In many other instances studied by historical archaeologists in Africa, locally made objects tend to predominate centuries after contact (e.g. Croucher and Wynne-Jones 2006; Richard 2010). In our case, even iron tools, like knives, machetes and axes, were industrial already during the first half of the nineteenth century. Local iron production, despite the degree of refinement that had been achieved during the Iron Age, vanished without a trace in the blink of an eye. This should be a note of caution to overoptimistic visions regarding the vibrancy of African technological traditions under the Atlantic trade. Thus, Ogundiran and Falola (2007, p. 26) criticize "the misconception that African technologies declined as a result of the encounter with European iron technologies… Instead African iron technologies improved." It might well be a misconception to argue that *all* African metallurgy declined with European pressure. But it is equally misguided, and more dangerous from a political point of view, to assert that, "African iron technologies improved." As a large and multicultural continent, local responses to European material culture varied wildly, but the combination of mass-

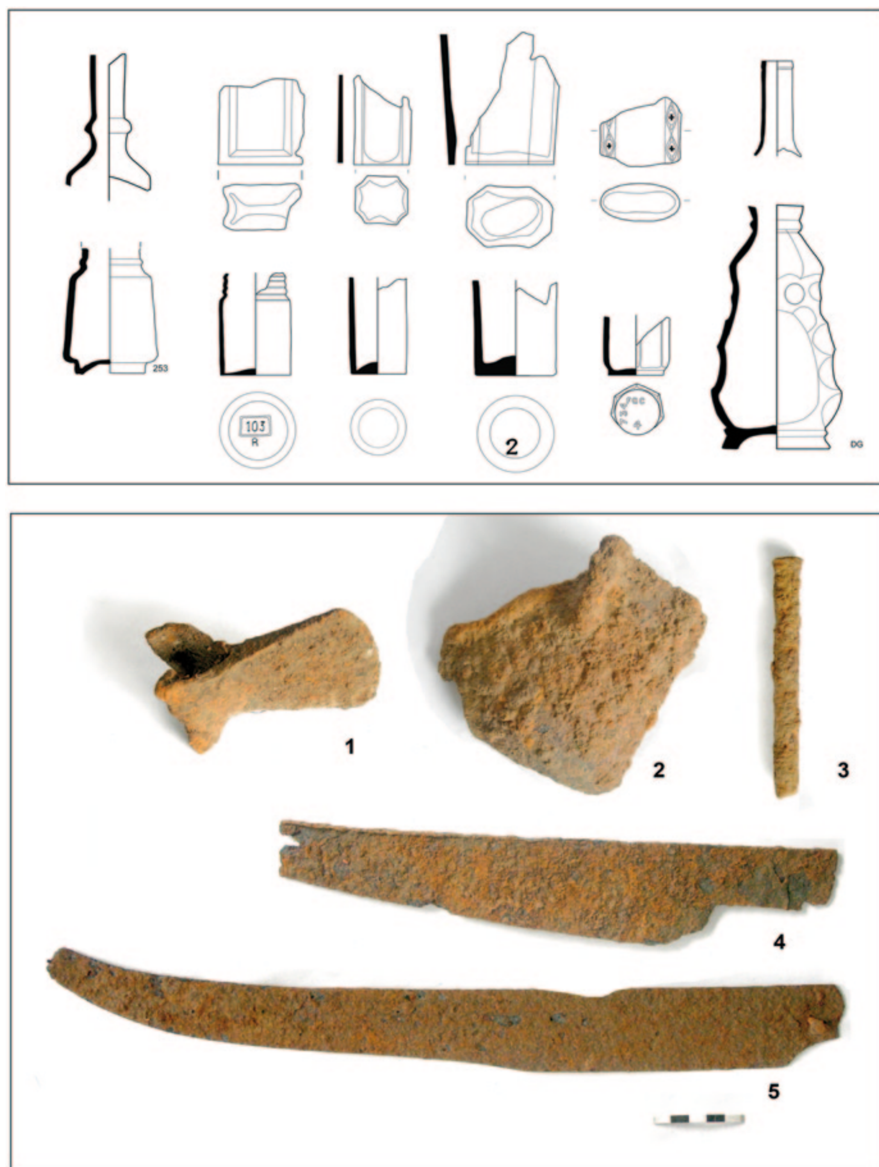

Fig. 18.3 European artifacts from a nineteenth century Benga site. *Above*: perfume bottles and medicines. *Below*: iron tools (*1* axe; *2* Iron pot; *3* chisel; *4–5* machetes). From the site of Biameno

production and political aggressiveness that characterize capitalist expansion make the scenario that we found in Corisco more likely in the long term than protracted resistance or creative hybridity. Other examples of material and technological impoverishment as a result of the Atlantic trade exist (e.g. Rodney 1972, pp. 104–105; Deme and Guèye 2007, p. 137).

In the dozen historical sites with representative archaeological materials that we have documented in Corisco, there is not a single artefact that can be considered indigenous, although the archaeological record has not preserved wooden objects and baskets that undoubtedly existed. Nevertheless, it is out of the question that the Benga embraced with passion foreign objects and products, including dress, alcoholic drinks (wine and spirits), tobacco and foodstuff. What is more surprising is the pace with which this occurred. In the archaeological record, we have not been able to document a gradual process of incorporation of imported objects. Even in the sites that were pointed out by oral tradition as the earliest Benga settlements, we could only identify European-made material culture.

What we see in the archaeological record is not just the acquisition of some artefacts, but also the development of new cultural patterns regarding hygiene, table manners, ways of cooking and ideas of intimacy and the self. Thus, throughout the nineteenth century we document drinking glasses, perfume, chamber pots, ink bottles, medicines and sewing machines for mending and making clothes. They all speak of bodily behaviours and manners that are in keeping with ideas of civilization in the sense proposed by Norbert Elias.

Benga architecture was also influenced by the Europeans. In general, most people in the Gulf of Guinea abandoned round or elongated huts for rectangular ones from the sixteenth century onwards. But the Benga went a step further: they introduced inner divisions: different members of the household had different bedrooms—an important change in ideas of privacy and individuality. They also incorporated Western-style furniture, like iron-framed beds, tables and chairs, with all their social implications (Johnson 1989, p. 201; Deetz 1996, p. 166). By the early twentieth century, a few well-to-do Benga were able to adopt colonial-style houses, which in the Muni Estuary were made with iron beams and columns and concrete walls, often decorated with moldings and covered with corrugated iron roofs. Some of the Benga houses that we studied are versions of commercial and administrative buildings (Fig. 18.4). With the success of Christianity around the late nineteenth century, the Benga started to bury people in cemeteries, too, following the custom introduced by missionaries. In the continent, people continued living in

Fig. 18.4 Ruins of an early twentieth century house belonging to a well-to-do Benga (Buma)

non-partitioned houses of wood and palm leaves and to bury their dead inside the domestic compound. They continued eating in communal pots and drinking palm wine, instead of gin.

The divergent material culture and the practice of the slave trade created a rift between the Benga and the groups of the continent, which were not in direct contact with the Europeans, such as the Fang. Many communities living in the interior of Equatorial Guinea, only a 100 km away from the sea, had never seen a white and were living as in pre-colonial times, even if they felt the far-reaching effects of the coloniality of power. They were raided and enslaved by the coastal peoples and they gave ivory in exchange for firearms and powder. When they were captured or purchased by the Benga, their conditions of enslavement in the Muni were terrible (Nerín 2014). Ogundiran and Falola (2007, p. 22) warn that the mere presence of abundant imported objects "does not mean that a society or a group forsook its cultural autonomy to imitate a culture implicitly or explicitly regarded as superior by the contemporary scholar." This is correct. Yet the problem here is that it is not the contemporary scholar who considers European civilization as superior—far from it— but the people studied, the Benga themselves.

The Benga adopted an attitude of superiority, which was based as much on their role as traders as on their access to and knowledge of European customs and artefacts, that is, on predation and civilization. It could be said that they became the equivalent of an aristocratic or high bourgeois class while the Fang and other continental groups remained proletarian: wild people with no manners from the Benga's perspective. Civilization was about taste, which was in turn used to create distinction, as in Europe (Bourdieu 1979). Ways of eating foods, the types of food that were eaten, forms of dressing (or simply dressing) and bodily behaviour demarcated the lines between the high and the low. Yet under conditions of coloniality, the consequences of taste are far more dramatic. As in this context, it is not just an issue of different social groups drawing on a variety of sources of social, symbolic or economic capital in order to compete for a place in the social ladder. Here the participation or not in the economy of symbolic goods meant belonging to the realm of humanity or being cast outside.

This does not imply that the Benga accepted foreign customs wholesale. They refused for over a hundred years to accept Christianity and monogamy. However, they took advantage of what the missionaries had to offer: education. Girls were sent to the mission school so that more wealth could be obtained in marriage exchanges, because the girls had the added value of being "civilized" and, therefore, self-repressed and compliant (Nerín 2014). Speaking about Europe, Norbert Elias (1989) emphasizes the fears and anxieties of the higher classes towards the pressures of the lower ones: there is a similar fear among the Benga towards the "primitive" peoples. In this case, the fear increased from the 1850s, when the Spaniards finally started the colonization of the Muni in earnest. The Benga strove to be recognized as civilized by the colonizers and therefore different from the continental tribes. They were successful in their efforts. However, this was not necessarily positive for the Benga: they were despised by the whites as half-civilized, mimic-men. More despised, in fact, than the wild and brutal (but innocent and authentic) peoples of

the interior—a typical example of stereotype-as-suture (Bhabha 1994, p. 115). The colonizers encouraged imitation/civilization and at the same time feared its effects: "mimicry is at once resemblance and menace" reminds Bhabha (1994, p. 123). The contempt expressed by the colonizers to the civilizing efforts of the Benga is nowhere better expressed than in the words of José de la Gándara y Navarro (cited in Arnalte 2005, p. 110), governor of Equatorial Guinea between 1857 and 1861. Referring to the inhabitants of Corisco he said, "Dealing with slave traders and merchants has given them some ideas and a certain degree of civilization, which is far from morality and good customs." Almost the same, but not quite.

Civilization and Savagery

For the Benga and many other coastal peoples, then, civilization was primarily about a certain aesthetical behaviour, appearance and material choices; it was about distinction. But it was about predation as well: those predatory practices that allowed the Benga to obtain luxuries and commodities in the first place. If the material traps of modern civilization were imported, so were the unsustainable economic activities in which the Benga engaged. If they were able to become "civilized" this was thanks to its active participation in the global predatory economy of capitalism. First, they benefited from the slave trade. The position of Corisco on the Equator line became an asset that was exploited by the Benga, since the treaties for the abolition of the trade were enforced only north of that line. While the traditional slave outposts in the Slave Coast started to fall under the pressure of the British Navy, Corisco was for the first half of the nineteenth century a safe area, where commerce in humans thrived. After the abolition of the trade during the mid-nineteenth century, the Benga participated in the ivory and rubber booms to maintain their consumption practices. Yet their exploitation proved to be unsustainable in the middle term.

For many scholars studying colonial consumption, the Benga could be empowering themselves by entering the Atlantic trade not as victims, but on an equal footing with Westerners. The trade was in fact an opportunity for them. It may be so if we look at the short term, but if we look at the wider picture, the situation turned disastrous for the Benga, the Balengue, the Baseke, the Mpongwe and the other coastal groups of Gabon and Equatorial Guinea. To start with, they developed a great dependence on European goods. Becoming civilized had a cost. Indigenous people did not only stop making pots and forging iron tools, which were massively replaced by British wares and implements, they also stopped cultivating the land and fishing, as these practices were considered unworthy of a man (Unzueta y Yuste 1945, p. 111). Even basket making was abandoned: still today, baskets have to be imported from the continent, where the Fang make them adapted to Benga taste. Historian Gustau Nerín (2014) has discovered that by the late nineteenth century the people of the Muni were importing huge amounts of canned food. Ironically, one of the preferred products was a pre-cooked dinner set produced in England called *Imperial Dinners*. Fresh fish was replaced by imported salted fish. When, due to problems with the

supply or local conflicts between groups or clans, imported food could not arrive to the Muni, the risk of starvation was serious. In 1860, the Spanish governor of the Muni notes that the Benga of Corisco and Elobey, despite all their luxury, are often hungry. In 1885, there was a great famine among the Benga in Gabon.

We have found little evidence of cans in our surveys and excavations, but have documented the large amount of alcoholic drinks that were making their way to Equatorial Guinea during the late nineteenth century. The ubiquitous product from the 1880s, as elsewhere in the Western African coast, was German gin, shipped from Hamburg. Unlike other nations, Spain did little to stop the profitable alcohol trade: it is not a coincidence that today there is a very high percentage of alcoholics in the country—larger than in neighboring countries (Perlasia i Botey 2009).

Despite their success as traders and slavers, the truth is that it was precisely the coastal peoples that suffered most from the economic boom. Their numbers declined alarmingly. Some peoples, such as the Baseke, which were dominant during the early nineteenth century, were virtually extinct by 1900. The Benga and others suffered a demographic catastrophe as well, a fact that is clearly seen in the archaeological record: the abundance of the late eighteenth and nineteenth century sites has no match during the twentieth century. Settlements became fewer, smaller and poorer. Corisco had around a thousand souls by the late nineteenth century, but only 600 in 1911 (Unzueta y Yuste 1945, pp. 139–140). Today the islanders number around 150. The reasons for this population decrease are manifold: conflict between the different communities engaged in commerce; violence within the community, with witchcraft, ordeals and poisoning skyrocketing throughout the nineteenth century; disease (especially smallpox and syphilis, brought by prostitution and concubinage); alcoholism; and mass migration. The populations in the interior suffered these problems less acutely, but in turn lost many members due to the slave trade. The area of the Gabon and the Muni estuaries officially exported 30,000 individuals between the eighteenth and mid-nineteenth century (Nerín 2014). Many more were sold without appearing in the records. This is a huge number for a thinly populated rainforest region.

The dependence on European goods meant a general dependence on the global cycles of capitalism. The end of each of these cycles (slaves, ivory and rubber) is marked in the archaeological record by an impoverishment in the Benga livelihood and material culture. The first blow, the end of the illegal slave trade during the mid-nineteenth century, lead to a dramatic decline in the archaeological record of imported luxury wares. Between 1770 and 1850, we have an astonishing variety (blue monochrome, polychrome, annular, shell and feather-edged and transfer-printed creamwares and some fine stonewares), but by the late nineteenth century, there are just a few, plain whitewares and cheap spongewares and hand-painted ceramics made purposefully for the colonial market (Fig. 18.5). The end of the ivory and rubber trade, along with the outbreak of the First World War and the end of the first wave of globalization, is attested archaeologically in the disappearance of German gin and other liquors as well as perfume and imported wares. German gin is substituted by a cheap Spanish one, which is much less abundant, and perfume bottles become rare. The process of decline goes hand in hand with the progressive

Fig. 18.5 Imported ware in Corisco. *Above*: transferware from Staffordshire, ca. 1840; *below*: cut spongeware and cheap hand-painted bowls, ca. 1890 (Upé). The arrival of Staffordshire wares coincides with the apogee of the slave trade in Corisco

development of effective colonization in the Muni, a process that meant less freedom and less wealth for the Benga, a process of loss that is materialized in military barracks and missions.

The contrast between the nineteenth and twentieth century was eloquently documented in a site in the northernmost part of the island, Biameno, which has two phases of occupation. They do not overlap spatially; the first corresponds to the pre-colonial and early colonial period (ca. 1770–1910) and the second to the late colonial period (ca. 1930–1970). The cosmopolitan material culture of luxury wares, gin and sherry, ink bottles, medicines, and perfumes of the first phase give way to cheap enamel pots and cheap wine, gin and beer, produced in Spain, during the second phase (Fig. 18.6). The variety of artefacts declines sharply, and alcohol bottles end up making the bulk of the assemblage for the late colonial phase. The surface occupied during the second phase is also smaller than the first. The same shrinking in size and quality of imports is observed in the village of Ulato, located in the southern coast of the island: based on sherd dispersal, the heyday of the site must have been during the mid-nineteenth century, when the homesteads occupied around

Fig. 18.6 Spanish bottles of wine from a dump in Biameno, mid-twentieth century. The massive arrival of cheap Spanish imports coincides with the impoverishment of the Benga

two hectares. By the early twentieth century, there were still a dozen huts in the site (Unzueta y Yuste 1945, p. 143). Today only two families live in the settlement.

When one looks at this history of material decay, one has the impression that the Benga have been hoodwinked. They engaged eagerly in a capitalist economy from which they were expelled as soon as effective colonialism developed. As in other areas of the Gulf of Guinea, after the Europeans took hold of the territory, there was no longer need of middlemen for the capitalist exploitation of the country (Kaplow 1977, 1978). Predation was for the whites, and so was civilization. The Benga had been allowed to play as long as they were useful in the game. By the early twentieth century, they were regarded by the colonizers as mere parasites, lazy people with no occupation. The racial hierarchy of the coloniality of power makes clear what is the role of blacks in the global order (Quijano 2000). Archaeology is useful here to deconstruct the discourse of civilization developed by European powers for internal consumption in the metropolis: the archaeological record in Equatorial Guinea shows that with the period of effective colonization (since 1880) the process of material civilization was, in fact, ground to a halt. The vernacular bourgeois culture that had started to develop during the early nineteenth century gradually disappeared.

The final cycle of depredation started in 2003. This time it has been triggered by oil. With the revenues from petroleum (Equatorial Guinea is Africa's third producer), a plan was devised by the government of the country to develop the Muni Estuary. A large international airport started to be built that occupies one third of the island. Small hotels, harbors and piers are being constructed in many places. If the planned resort ever takes off, which is highly doubtful given the present political situation, the Benga will be the boys, waiters and servants of the rich, white tourists, menial jobs which perpetuate the role of Africans in the coloniality of power. As for now, they are employed as unqualified workers, whereas all technical jobs are taken either by Europeans or Africans from other nations.

I have studied contemporary garbage dumps, too. In them, there are no longer luxuries. What one can find in those dumps is cheap Spanish wine, made for export to the Third World, and cheap Spanish beer. The material culture of coloniality: heirs of the rum brought by the Dutch in the seventeenth century and the German

gin of the nineteenth. Coloniality in Equatorial Guinea is still played out in the present: in the low-quality Spanish foodstuffs that the Guineans consume everyday (even vegetables come from other countries and the most common meat is frozen chicken from Spain); in the Spanish, Chinese or Moroccan contractors that build cities, harbors and airports, and engage in unrestrained commercial logging; in the American and French oil platforms that suck dry the wealth of the country, most of which ends up in the pockets of a few powerful people (Okenve 2009), as in the colony ended up in the pockets of a few whites.

Conclusions

A post-colonial archaeologist who looked at an early nineteenth century dump in Corisco might think that the Benga were being empowered; they were actively participating in a changing world. But this is a mirage or a trick: one of those so characteristic of the coloniality of power in its liberal avatar. A trick to make us think that things are going just fine, that even the subaltern are agents that can shape their own world. It is the fallacy of multiculturalism today. The image of the modern dump tells us why historical archaeology is not enough. We need prehistoric archaeology to show what was happening before the coloniality of power entered the scene, to know whether Africans have predation in their cultural or genetic DNA. But we also need archaeology of the contemporary past to complete the story; a historical archaeology that stops short in the nineteenth century is insufficient. The archaeology of the present allows us to check whether the promise of the past, as creative and empowering, was fulfilled. Or, if it was actually a promise in the first place -or a warning.

The problem with the present celebration of subaltern agencies under conditions of coloniality is that it does not take seriously into account how subjectivities are produced. Historian and activist Walter Rodney (1972, p. 88) saw it clearly: "no people can enslave another for centuries without coming out with a notion of superiority," which means that perpetrating sustained violence shapes subjectivity at a deep level. It would be surprising that suffering sustained violence would not transform the subject likewise. Several authors, such as Jean Genet, Frantz Fanon or Hannah Arendt (Caygill 2013) have, in fact, reflected on the effects that the continuous abuse of power have on those who suffer it. Decolonial thinkers have similarly explored the resilient colonization of the mind, that makes the subaltern think and live with the categories imposed by the hegemonic order. In the case examined here, we have people that inflicted colonial violence and suffered from it in equal measure. Their troubled self today is but the result of a long process of coloniality of power. There is no way we can understand the social attitudes of the colonized, their consumption patterns, their cultural creativity and so on without taking into account the effects of coloniality in the subjectivity of the colonized. We can wonder, what has archaeology to do with subjectivity? A lot, because the ideas of superiority or inferiority that shaped subjects before and after the establishment of the colonies

did not rest on discourses alone. As we have seen, these ideas cannot be dissociated from their materiality. Indeed, it was their materiality that gave them credibility and made them truly effective. The material culture of coloniality is not just forts or slave plantations, but dishes, forks, bottles, dress, transferware and perfume.

Chattel slavery and porcelain seem to belong to two different realms. Decolonial thinkers insist on slavery and racism when they speak of modernity, while Norbert Elias emphasizes dishes and forks, but both speak about the same thing: modernity and capitalism as coercion—of society in the first case, of the self in the second. Elias, however, thinks of self-repression in the West, and decolonial thinkers of predation in the rest. Therefore, Norbert Elias' theory of civilization as self-repression, a process in which the raw, the bloody and the violent are gradually rejected and concealed needs a decolonial turn. It is true that the civilized people of Europe removed from sight what was perceived as brutal and uncouth. But the brutal was not simply repressed, it was also displaced. Actually, it was displaced twice: an inner displacement to the interior of the self and an exterior displacement towards the lands under a regime of coloniality (Africa, the Americas). There, the raw and the violent continued to exist. There, they were part of the normal order of civilization, confirming Benjamin's dictum: "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (Benjamin 1968, p. 258).

It is not simply that civilization and barbarism coexisted; they cannot be conceived in isolation. Dussel (1993) has argued that for understanding modernity we cannot separate philosophy, the reformation or science from colonialism and chattel slavery. The same can be said of material culture: the slave quarters and the Staffordshire plate are not just part of the same world, but impossible to think without the other. It is in the context of the colony where this inextricable relationship appears more forcefully, as it happens with the entanglement of modern philosophy and racial hierarchies pointed out by decolonial scholars. Archaeology is particularly well suited to perform the operation of linking the realms of barbarism and civilization that ideology wants to conceal (Leone 1996, p. 386): the links between gardens and slavery, English creamwares and colonial plunder, the Spanish wine industry and African alcoholism. It was predation that allowed the Benga to acquire the material trappings of civilization as defined by the West. It was these material trappings that legitimated their claims to a superior status vis-à-vis the "savages" of the mainland and it was these material trappings that justified the European contempt towards those Benga with a "certain degree of civilization" but no morality. Material culture, then, is fundamental in the regime of coloniality: it is involved in every operation of predation, legitimation and ideological cleansing.

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