

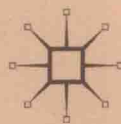
Engaging Colonial Knowledge

Reading European Archives in World History

RICARDO ROQUE AND KIM A. WAGNER



CAMBRIDGE IMPERIAL AND POST-COLONIAL STUDIES



Engaging Colonial Knowledge

Reading European Archives in World History

Edited by

Ricardo Roque

*Research Fellow, Institute of Social Sciences,
University of Lisbon, Portugal*

and

Kim A. Wagner

*Lecturer in British Imperial History at Queen Mary,
University of London*



palgrave
macmillan

Cambridge Imperial and Post-Colonial Studies Series

General Editors: **Megan Vaughan**, King's College, Cambridge and **Richard Drayton**, King's College London

This informative series covers the broad span of modern imperial history while also exploring the recent developments in former colonial states where residues of empire can still be found. The books provide in-depth examinations of empires as competing and complementary power structures encouraging the reader to reconsider their understanding of international and world history during recent centuries.

Titles include:

Sunil S. Amrith
DECOLONIZING INTERNATIONAL HEALTH
India and Southeast Asia, 1930–65

Tony Ballantyne
ORIENTALISM AND RACE
Aryanism in the British Empire

Peter Fibiger Bang and C. A. Bayly (*editors*)
TRIBUTARY EMPIRES IN GLOBAL HISTORY

James Beattie
EMPIRE AND ENVIRONMENTAL ANXIETY
Health, Science, Art and Conservation in South Asia and Australasia, 1800–1920

L.J. Butler
COPPER EMPIRE
Mining and the Colonial State in Northern Rhodesia, c.1930–64

Nandini Chatterjee
THE MAKING OF INDIAN SECULARISM
Empire, Law and Christianity, 1830–1960

Andrew Dilley
FINANCE, POLITICS, AND IMPERIALISM
Australia, Canada and the City of London, c.1896–1914

Michael S. Dodson
ORIENTALISM, EMPIRE AND NATIONAL CULTURE
India, 1770–1880

Jost Dülffer and Marc Frey (*editors*)
ELITES AND DECOLONIZATION IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Hilary M. Carey (*editor*)
EMPIRES OF RELIGION

Ulrike Hillemann
ASIAN EMPIRE AND BRITISH KNOWLEDGE
China and the Networks of British Imperial Expansion

B.D. Hopkins
THE MAKING OF MODERN AFGHANISTAN

Ronald Hyam
BRITAIN'S IMPERIAL CENTURY, 1815–1914: A STUDY OF EMPIRE AND
EXPANSION
Third Edition

Iftekhar Iqbal
THE BENGAL DELTA
Ecology, State and Social Change, 1840–1943

Brian Ireland
THE US MILITARY IN HAWAII
Colonialism, Memory and Resistance

Sloan Mahone and Megan Vaughan (*editors*)
PSYCHIATRY AND EMPIRE

Javed Majeed
AUTOBIOGRAPHY, TRAVEL AND POST-NATIONAL IDENTITY

Gabriel Paquette
ENLIGHTENMENT, GOVERNANCE AND REFORM IN SPAIN AND ITS EMPIRE,
1739–1808

Jennifer Regan-Lefebvre
IRISH AND INDIAN
The Cosmopolitan Politics of Alfred Webb

Ricardo Roque
HEADHUNTING AND COLONIALISM
Anthropology and the Circulation of Human Skulls in the Portuguese Empire,
1870–1930

Ricardo Roque and Kim A. Wagner (*editors*)
ENGAGING COLONIAL KNOWLEDGE
Reading European Archives in World History

Michael Silvestri
IRELAND AND INDIA
Nationalism, Empire and Memory

John Singleton and Paul Robertson
ECONOMIC RELATIONS BETWEEN BRITAIN AND AUSTRALASIA, 1945–70

Aparna Vaidik
IMPERIAL ANDAMANS
Colonial Encounter and Island History

Kim A. Wagner (*editor*)
THUGGEE
Banditry and the British in Early Nineteenth-Century India

Jon E. Wilson
THE DOMINATION OF STRANGERS
Modern Governance in Eastern India, 1780–1835

Acknowledgements

The origins of this volume may be traced back to our commitment to engage and understand colonial accounts of Thugs and headhunters during our time as doctoral students of imperial history. Numerous conversations about 'knowledge and empire' and a mutual dissatisfaction with conventional treatments of the subject, by both postcolonial critics and imperial historians, convinced us of the significance of devising alternative ways of exploring the productivity of colonial knowledge. It soon became clear that this perception was shared by many other scholars, from across various disciplines, within and beyond Europe or the US. In September 2006, the interdisciplinary workshop 'Beyond Deconstruction – Engaging Colonial Knowledge', held at King's College, Cambridge, and generously supported by King's College Research Centre and the George Macauley Trevelyan Fund, went some way towards the realization of this project. The workshop brought together young and established historians and anthropologists to discuss recent research and the theoretical and methodological issues related to the use of colonial archives. This volume presents a selection of the papers originally presented at the workshop, in addition to several new contributions, unpublished as well as previously published. In collecting these papers, it has been our purpose to present works that combine empirical research with conceptual ambition, comparative potential, and interdisciplinary scope.

This volume is the result of a collective effort and would never have been possible without the kind support and participation of colleagues and friends. First, we would like to express our gratitude to the authors and the original participants of the workshop, as well as to those who have been otherwise involved during various stages of this admittedly drawn-out project: Manan Ahmed, C. A. Bayly, Susan Bayly, Eric Lewis Beverley, Niels Brimnes, Leigh Denault, Richard Drayton, Pauline von Hellermann, Martin Holbraad, Elizabeth Green Musselman, Rosalind O'Hanlon, Caroline Dodds Pennock, Steven Pierce, Anastasia Piliavsky, Marshall Sahlins, Ann Laura Stoler, Alan Strathern, Nicholas Thomas, Helen Tilley, and Andrew Zimmerman. In more than one sense this book is a product of the unique intellectual environment of Cambridge. During 2006, the reading group of King's College Research Centre, meeting informally at Robin Osborne's office, provided us with a stimulating

forum for discussing many of the issues raised in this volume (not to mention the excellent wine!); thanks to Simon Goldhill, James Leach, Robin Osborne, and Soumhya Venkatesan, for their intellectual generosity and insights. We owe a further debt of gratitude to our close friends amongst the anthropologists who provided a much-needed diversion from the inertia of 'high-table' academia: Patrice Ladwig, Ashley Lebnor, Matthew Carey, Hugo Reinert, and Giovanni da Col have all shared our anxieties and enthusiasm over the years and have since continued to listen to us. Julie Hartley, Gavin Schaffer, and Simon Yarrow made heroic efforts to improve the introduction and without their comments and suggestions the text would have been even more obtuse than is presently the case. We would also like to thank the editors of the Palgrave Cambridge Imperial and Postcolonial Studies Series, Megan Vaughan and Richard Drayton, and Michael Strang, Alison Howson, Ruth Ireland, and the staff at Palgrave Macmillan for their help and patience. Last, but not least, our families tolerated our absent-mindedness and provided the necessary encouragement for us to complete the project – thanks for everything.

Ricardo Roque and Kim A. Wagner
London and Lisbon, September 2011

The editors and publishers are pleased to acknowledge the following for their permission to reproduce articles included in this volume:

Andrew Zimmerman for '“What do you really want in German East Africa, Herr Professor?” Counterinsurgency and the Science Effect in Colonial Tanzania,' *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 48 (2006), 419–61.

Ann Laura Stoler for '“In Cold Blood”: Hierarchies of Credibility and the Politics of Colonial Narratives,' *Representations*, 37 (Winter 1992), 151–89.

Nicholas Thomas for 'William Hodges as Anthropologist and Historian' in Geoff Quilley and John Bonehill (eds.) *William Hodges 1744–1797: The Art of Exploration* (Greenwich: National Maritime Museum/New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

Ricardo Roque for Chapter 3 in *Headhunting and Colonialism: Anthropology and the Circulation of Human Skulls in the Portuguese Empire, 1870–1930* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

Susan Bayly for 'French Anthropology and the Durkheimians in Colonial Indochina,' *Modern Asian Studies*, 34, 3 (July 2000), 581–622.

Jacket illustration: Cover from *La Difesa della Razza*, 1938 (reworked by KAW). Reproduced with kind permission of Maria Teresa Milicia.

Contributors

Susan Bayly is Reader in Historical Anthropology in the Department of Social Anthropology, Cambridge University. She has been conducting ethnographic research in Vietnam since 2000 and also has a long-standing research interest in India, where she has focused on caste, religious conversion, and a variety of translocal social and cultural movements. Her publications include *Asian Voices in a Postcolonial Age: Vietnam, India and Beyond* (2007) and *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age* (1999). She was editor of the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* from 2001 to 2004.

Niels Brimnes is Associate Professor at Aarhus University, Denmark. His research has focused on the history of law, cultural encounters, and medicine in India. He is the author of *Constructing the Colonial Encounter: Right and Left Hand Castes in Early Colonial South India* (1999).

Leigh Denault is a Fellow at Churchill College, Cambridge, and Research Associate at the Centre for History and Economics, King's College, Cambridge. She completed her PhD on household and family in colonial North India in 2009 at the University of Cambridge.

Pauline von Hellermann is Lecturer in Anthropology at Goldsmiths University in London. She has conducted extensive ethnographic and archival research on the politics of landscape change in West and East Africa. Her publications include *Multi-sited Ethnography: Problems and Possibilities in the Translocation of Research Methods* (2011), co-edited with Simon Coleman.

Caroline Dodds Pennock is Lecturer in International History at the University of Sheffield specializing in Aztec history and the Atlantic world. She is the author of *Bonds of Blood: Gender, Lifecycle and Sacrifice in Aztec Culture* (2008), and is researching indigenous American travelers to Europe in the sixteenth-century.

Ricardo Roque is Research Fellow at the Institute of Social Sciences, University of Lisbon. He is the author of *Headhunting and Colonialism: Anthropology and the Circulation of Human Skulls in the Portuguese Empire, 1870–1930* (2010). He is working on the history of colonialism

and anthropology in East Timor, and on a larger-project on colonial mimesis in the late Portuguese empire in Asia and Africa.

Ann Laura Stoler is Professor of Anthropology and Historical Studies at the Graduate Faculty of The New School for Social Research in New York City. Her books include *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (1995), *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power* (2002), and the edited volumes *Tensions of Empire* (with Frederick Cooper, 1997), *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History* (2006), and *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination* (forthcoming).

Alan Strathern is a Fellow, Tutor and University Lecturer in History, Brasenose College, Oxford. He is the author of *Kingship and Conversion in Sixteenth-Century Sri Lanka: Portuguese Imperialism in a Buddhist Land* (2007) and is currently working on a comparative history of elite conversion to monotheism across the early modern world.

Nicholas Thomas is Professor of Historical Anthropology and Director of the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Cambridge. He has published widely on the anthropology and history of the Pacific. His books include *Entangled Objects* (1991), *Colonialism's Culture* (1994), and *Possessions: Indigenous Art/Colonial Culture* (1999).

Kim A. Wagner is Lecturer in British Imperial History at Queen Mary, University of London. He has published extensively on crime, rebellion, and intelligence gathering in British India, including *Thuggee: Banditry and the British in Early Nineteenth-Century India* (2007), *Stranglers and Bandits: A Historical Anthology of Thuggee* (2009), and *The Great Fear of 1857: Rumours, Conspiracies and the Making of the Indian Uprising* (2010). He is currently working on a larger project on colonial anxieties and intelligence gathering in British India, 1818–1919.

Andrew Zimmerman is Professor of History at the George Washington University in Washington, DC. He is the author of *Anthropology and Antihumanism in Imperial Germany* (2001) and *Alabama in Africa: Booker T. Washington, the German Empire, and the Globalization of the New South* (2010).

Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	vii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	viii
<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	x

Introduction: Engaging Colonial Knowledge <i>Ricardo Roque and Kim A. Wagner</i>	1
---	---

Part I Epistemic Fissures

1 'In Cold Blood': Hierarchies of Credibility and the Politics of Colonial Narratives <i>Ann Laura Stoler</i>	35
2 North Indian Lives in the Archives of the Colonial State <i>Leigh Denault</i>	67
3 Reading Farm and Forest: Colonial Forest Science and Policy in Southern Nigeria <i>Pauline von Hellermann</i>	89

Part II Indigenous Voices and Colonial Records

4 Insights from the 'Ancient Word': The Use of Colonial Sources in the Study of Aztec Society <i>Caroline Dodds Pennock</i>	115
5 'In Unrestrained Conversation': Approvers and the Colonial Ethnography of Crime in Nineteenth-Century India <i>Kim A. Wagner</i>	135
6 From Civil Servant to Little King: An Indigenous Construction of Colonial Authority in Early Nineteenth-Century South India <i>Niels Brimnes</i>	163
7 French Anthropology and the Durkheimians in Colonial Indochina <i>Susan Bayly</i>	184

Part III Archives of Entanglement

8	Treachery and Ethnicity in Portuguese Representations of Sri Lanka <i>Alan Strathern</i>	217
9	William Hodges As Anthropologist and Historian <i>Nicholas Thomas</i>	235
10	Entangled with Otherness: Military Ethnographies of Headhunting in East Timor <i>Ricardo Roque</i>	254
11	'What Do You Really Want in German East Africa, Herr Professor?' Counterinsurgency and the Science Effect in Colonial Tanzania <i>Andrew Zimmerman</i>	279
	<i>Index</i>	301

Figures

2.1	British cantonment plan, India, 1833–34	70
2.2	Sketches of Indian houses, 1891	74
2.3	Household of Makunda, a Chamar in the Etah District (India)	79
9.1	‘The Fleet of Otaheite assembled at Oparee’, after William Hodges, 1777	240
9.2	‘Resolution Bay in the Marquesas’, after William Hodges, 1777	240
9.3	‘The Landing at Erramanga’, after William Hodges, 1777	248
9.4	‘The Landing at Mallicolo [Malakula]’, after William Hodges, 1777	248
9.5	‘The Landing at Middleburgh [Eua]’, after William Hodges, 1777	249
10.1	Colonial officers, indigenous irregulars, and war prisoners in Timor, c. 1900	261
10.2	Timorese warriors, carrying the severed heads of enemies, c. 1900	264
11.1	Juma, ‘Chain Gang in Lindi’, Tanzania, c. 1906	291
11.2	Juma, ‘Punishment in Tschingululu’, Tanzania, c. 1906	292

Introduction: Engaging Colonial Knowledge

Ricardo Roque and Kim A. Wagner

My day is done: I'm quitting Europe. Sea air will scorch my lungs: lost climates will tan me. To swim, trample the grass, hunt, above all smoke: drink hard liquors like boiling metals – as those dear ancestors did round the fire. I'll return with iron limbs; dark skin, a furious look: from my mask I'll be judged as of mighty race.

Jean-Arthur Rimbaud, *A Season in Hell* (1873)¹

Quitting Europe

In the long history of European overseas expansion, an immense and diverse collection of texts, images, drawings, and maps has been produced and accumulated, part of which survives today in archives and libraries around the world. As a legacy of colonization and empire-building, the 'knowledge' embodied in this diverse material has been identified with projects of imperialist or colonialist domination, and as such simply labelled as 'colonial'. This designation, however, hides considerable complexity. As we enter these archives, we enter a heterogeneous documental world, spanning distinct languages, literary and artistic genres or conventions, historical moments, geographical settings, varied human purposes and agendas. Along the way a proliferation of subjects, objects, categories, stories, events, personal and collective dramas, either experienced or imagined, is brought into being. This is not a neat and orderly world infused with transparent and unambiguous meaning. It constitutes a tensional, discontinuous, and uncertain formation of documents, categories, stories, and images. In their very dispersion and unevenness, these may be seen, as Michel Foucault observed, as productive political 'fields of force' that selectively make

visible a variety of specific historical actions and entities, whilst also excluding other actions and entities from emerging.²

How to make sense of these complex discursive fields and archival legacies of the imperial expansion of Europe is the central theme of this volume. Regardless of affiliation to imperial history, ethnohistory, historical anthropology, or critical literary and postcolonial studies, no academic would contest the significance of this archival realm for the construction of scholarly arguments. Without engaging this material, no authoritative statement or stance concerning imperialist activities, colonial discourse, or past indigenous societies would ever be possible. In a practical sense, scholars of colonialism (including its critics) are firm believers in, and (re)producers of, the factuality of colonial knowledge and furthermore rely on its existence as a bounded fieldwork site and as a resource for historical narration. This shared reliance on the archives, however, has also been accompanied by strong disagreement as regards the epistemological value of colonial accounts, and the kind of claims about colonialism, indigenous realities, and past events that they allow us to make. Scholars might recognize the significance of colonial knowledge, but they use it in a variety of different ways to guide them through very different worlds. The question of how we relate to the epistemic legacy of European imperialism, and what constructive use to make of its fragments, is in fact critical to contemporary historical and anthropological practice. It is also the main concern of the essays collected in this book.

The volume addresses issues of colonial knowledge from both historical and anthropological perspectives in a variety of periods and settings, covering African, Asian, and American topics and the history of British, Danish, Dutch, French, German, Portuguese, and Spanish colonial encounters, from the 1500s to the twentieth century. The earlier colonies of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, established mainly for the purpose of trade and the extraction of precious metals, are thus represented in studies of the Spanish in Mexico (Caroline Dodds Pennock) and the Portuguese in Sri Lanka (Alan Strathern). The exploration of the Pacific by the British in the eighteenth century is examined through James Cook's second voyage, and the imagery of 'discovery' (Nicholas Thomas). During the early part of the nineteenth century, colonies were firmly established on the South Asian subcontinent by a number of European powers, which is described in the context of the small Danish settlement on the Coromandel Coast (Niels Brimnes), and the rather better-known possessions of the British East India Company (Leigh Denault and Kim A. Wagner). New forms of colonial administration

and interaction between colonizers and colonized emerged through the later part of the nineteenth century, as described in the context of the Portuguese on Timor (Ricardo Roque) and the Dutch on Sumatra (Ann Laura Stoler). The 'Scramble for Africa' towards the end of the century remains perhaps the most emblematic phase of Western imperialism and its ramifications are explored through the British in Nigeria (Pauline von Hellermann) and the Germans in Tanzania (Andrew Zimmerman). Finally, the waning years of formal European imperialism, accompanied by the rise of anti-colonial nationalism, are represented by French Indochina in the twentieth century (Susan Bayly).

Our chronological and geographical scope is deliberately wide-reaching in order to reflect the diversity and similarity, the specificity and continuity, of various stages of the colonial encounter in world history. Rather than trying to offer a complete coverage of European imperialism, however, this volume presents a set of rich case-studies that demonstrates particularly fruitful approaches to the study of colonial knowledge. *Engaging Colonial Knowledge* thus seeks to explore novel and productive ways of reading and interpreting colonial records. In collecting the essays that constitute this volume, we have worked on the assumption that colonial accounts constitute embodied artefacts that, through careful examination of their relative potential and limitations, can offer important insights into the colonial phenomenon and into European as well as indigenous actions and cultures in the past. Approached as a productive condition of possibility, and not as a harmful obstacle to historical understanding, colonial knowledge enables, rather than deters, the writing of history of other cultures and events. Colonial knowledge was usually more than just the application of pre-conceived notions. Many colonial accounts emerged from situated bodily encounters that were unforeseen and unpredictable; encounters that mattered for the internal contents of colonial descriptions. Different literary conventions concerning appropriate forms of writing, and different ideas of truth and objectivity, allowed direct and eyewitness encounters varied degrees of visibility and authority inside the texts. Medieval and Early Modern accounts, for instance, might incorporate the words and imageries of Classical texts, due to the influence of the rules of *imitatio* in cultural creation, and to the detriment of the authority of direct experience. Shaped by the significance attributed to eyewitness observations, on the other hand, later accounts might offer wider conditions of possibility for reporting what was seen and experienced *in loco*.³ Accordingly, it is necessary to historicize accounts in relation to the different historical models of truth and knowledge production in

the context of which they were generated. Colonial knowledge should furthermore not be approached simply as a 'pure' reflection of 'purely' European conceptions. Colonial knowledge, we suggest, was the expression of worlds and visions brought into contact; a formation of stories and words that, rather than simply coalescing, could bind indigenous and European images and understandings to each other.

Rather than starting with an attitude of dismissal of the epistemological value of colonialism's legacy, we thus propose a constructive attitude of critical engagement with the knowledge produced by European colonization in world history. The essays collected in this volume each suggest distinct reading and writing strategies for developing this constructive approach, which is further elaborated in the following. Not every contributor may agree, for instance, on the extent to which indigenous voices and meanings can be recovered from the analysis of colonial sources. Yet they all share a similar spirit of inquiry, a willingness to engage. 'Engaging colonial knowledge' thus captures the commitment towards an understanding of colonialism, and its manifold dynamics, through critical attention paid to the political and epistemic productivity of its archival traces. This is a *tensional* commitment driven simultaneously by the determination to bind historical narratives to archival materials, *and* by the effort to maintain a critical distance from this very same material. We thus acknowledge the emotional unease, ethical discomfort, and political tensions that might accompany our historiographical encounters with the archives of colonialism. Yet in order to study colonialism and its consequences, it is a central argument of this volume that we must work *with* rather than *against* the contents of colonial accounts. Our approach draws attention to the fact that, in tying our narratives to colonialism's epistemic products, we must work towards a reflexive and inclusive understanding of the signs, cultures, and social and material circumstances associated with their production and circulation. As such, 'engaging colonial knowledge' represents a commitment to generating new historical, anthropological, and sociological insights about human phenomena from older archival traces; insights, for example, about the nature of cross-cultural interactions, indigenous social life, land tenure, political authority, marginalized activities, epistemologies of governance, or rites of power.

One of the basic arguments of this volume is that the diverse constituents of colonial knowledge must be approached as *artefacts*, which entail particular epistemologies, imaginaries, political strategies, and cultural conventions, as well as being the product of specific material circumstances, bodily experiences, and sensory engagements with a

concrete world. Colonial discourses are not disembodied. They comprise an array of documents and accounts rooted in concrete spaces, architectures, institutions, technologies, bodies, objects, and practical activities. They are also not innocuous in the relations they maintain with the physical world. Regardless of their more or less fictitious character, colonial accounts constitute a material force of varying degrees, a potential to act upon the world. Colonial knowledge, however uncertain, had very tangible consequences and impacted dramatically and violently upon the bodies of indigenous people, to mention but one significant example.⁴ Accordingly, colonial archives are not approached here as collections of incorporeal ideas, vacuous fantasies, and intra-textual phenomena. Instead, they are read as epistemic traces mediated by bodily actions and enmeshed in the materiality of colonial situations. We must take into account the contexts of *production* and the *encounters* from which colonial accounts originated, as well as the manifold effects that might derive from their reading and *circulation* as intellectual artefacts. Colonial knowledge, in this sense, is the real remains of a real engagement with a real world. It suggests a way to go 'beyond the trace' and offers the possibility of understanding what those encounters and circulations were like in the past – and how they shaped, and were shaped by, the discourses and imaginaries of colonialism.

In thus referring to *more* than mirror-images of the West, and to *more* than textual events, colonial accounts can constitute a figurative pathway towards Jean-Arthur Rimbaud's redemptive poetic ideal of 'quitting Europe', and returning transformed with new understandings.⁵ Rimbaud's vision in the epigraph entails an imagined otherness of indigenous worlds and colonial spaces. In the late nineteenth century, these kinds of images (denounced by postcolonial critiques as racist, exotic, and biased) nourished the literary imagination of Europeans and inspired people to seek adventure and engage in travel, economic exploitation, military conquest, or evangelization in the tropics.⁶ Still, we see in Rimbaud's vision a productive metaphor of the potential for quitting Europe entailed in colonial archives. As the product of meaningful corporeal contact with other people and landscapes, European visions and imageries do not simply remain the same. They are transformed and return reconfigured. In travelling into, and with, colonial accounts, then, we aspire to unravel these epistemic transformations, thereby evading the self-assurances of 'European civilization'. Engaging colonial knowledge is a way to quit Europe. This is not a straightforward endeavour. But, as Rimbaud suggested, it is hardly one that will simply take us back to the point of departure unchanged.

In the following we discuss the notion of colonial knowledge that informs this volume within the context of the wider historiography. We begin with a critical consideration of colonial knowledge in imperial history and postcolonial studies. Our purpose is here to isolate some of the strengths and limitations of postcolonial critiques as pertaining to the significance of colonial knowledge as a ground of heterogeneities and cultural entanglement. Finally, we discuss the notion of ‘engaging colonial knowledge’, and conclude with an exploration of the distinct reading strategies adopted in the individual essays, thus examining what their respective approaches might tell us about the varied modalities of European colonial knowledge in world history.

Colonial knowledge and postcolonial studies

Colonial representations of foreign people, their cultures and practices, made a claim to knowledge, a claim that a reality was being apprehended and described, either scientifically or simply as the outcome of lived experience. Within the conventional historiographical tradition, based on the legal paradigm of evidence-based truth, this claim has often been taken for granted. Colonial knowledge was treated as a ‘historical source’, and as such considered a valid representation and evidence of the past. This mode of relating to colonial knowledge has been predicated on a positive valuing of its factual quality as representing events located in the past and in external realities outside the text. It has also been, implicitly at least, characterized by the assumption that archives and their contents were politically neutral spaces that could be approached with little or no regard for the circumstances of their origins or the manner in which they acted upon the world. Since at least the nineteenth century, the documental legacy of colonialism has been used in this instrumental manner by successive generations of historians of imperial economy, policy, administration, systems of law, social structure, resistance movements, and so on.

The current situation, however, is very different and the conventional historiographical tradition has been profoundly challenged. In recent years issues of knowledge have attained an unprecedented significance in imperial history and postcolonial studies. But, paradoxically, never before has the epistemic value and credibility of colonial accounts been so deeply distrusted. During the last three decades ‘knowledge’ – under distinct conceptual terminologies such as ‘discourse’, ‘culture’, ‘text’, ‘information’, or ‘archive’ to name but a few – has come to the forefront of inquiries of the colonial; it has been posited as *the* central feature