
Symposium: Archaeology, Bioanthropology And African Identity in The Diaspora: Theoretical and Methodological Advances

E. Kofi Agorsah and Terrence W. Epperson

Global perspective on the archaeology of the African Diaspora will be the main theme of this symposium. Papers will discuss results of ongoing research, analysis, and interpretation of archaeological, bioanthropological and other evidence from the African Diaspora. The Howard University based African Burial Ground Project in New York City, a project that utilises an interdisciplinary and explicitly diasporic and comparative perspective, will serve as the hub and model for the symposium.

Although addressing a wide range of spatial and temporal contexts, this session is united by several basic themes. The participants in this session question notions of a non-political, value-free archaeology. Practitioners are ethically bound to examine and acknowledge the theoretical assumptions and underpinnings of their research as well as the social and political consequences of that work. The session participants realize that their research exists in a dialectical relationship with the concerns and needs of the living descendant communities, including the construction of their past and current identities. They therefore reject the purported disjuncture between research and contemporary social context and embrace their accountability to the descendant communities. Finally, because the African Diaspora was (and continues to be) a global phenomenon, the contributors to this session realize that no part can be understood in isolation. Therefore, this session is intended to foster a more humanistic, critical, and publicly accountable approach to scientific research of the African Diaspora.

Archaeological implications of African burial systems for reconstructing the heritage of the African Diaspora

E. Kofi Agorsah

The study of burial grounds and associated customs can provide information beyond the mere identification of the individuals and their physical conditions. Equally important is the reconstruction of the spatial consequences of the cultural activities that transpired in people's lifetime. This paper explores archaeological and ethnographic evidence of burial systems in both Africa and the African Diaspora to construct models for examining or explaining skeletal remains. Divination and other customs among some societies of Africa and the African Diaspora are also analyzed to construct models for reconstructing the bioanthropological evidence. For example, the importance of the connection of the African with the ancestral world requires that several ceremonies continue as part of those traditions. How were the bodies disposed of? What ceremonies would have taken place in the send-off? What are the possible cultural paraphernalia that were associated with those ceremonies? What were the spatial relationships and distribution? How would they remain in the archaeological record? What interpretations would they generate? Ethnographic data from many parts of the Diaspora have confirmed that even under very stringent rules and restrictions, such as existed during slavery days in the Caribbean, African societies maintained their traditional burial practices. Parallels can be drawn for explaining the meaning of the spatial or locational associations observed with excavated burials.

Biohistorical approaches to the health and demography of Africans in colonial New York

Michael Blakey, Jean Howson, Selwyn Carrington, M.C. Hill, S.O.Y. Keita, R. Kittles, Mark Mack, C. Null, Leslie Rankin-Hill and Kenya Shujaa

Censuses, vital records, private papers, newspapers, and legal records provide information on demography, the disease environment, diet, and medicine in the colonial city. Data from these sources are integrated with skeletal biological evidence from the African Burial Ground. Skeletal analysis has revealed a population affiliated with Akan origins. Infant mortality was high and childhood mortality represents more than 40% of deaths, with a peak at 3-4.9 years of age. High mortality resumes for 15-24.9 year olds and peaks again between 30-34.9 years of age in women, while men show the highest mortality between 35 and 49.9 years of age. Historical and biological data show epidemiological correlates of mortality patterns. These demographic data point to a highly stressed population, and possible implications for fertility are discussed. A biocultural model of the multiple stressors affecting morbidity and mortality in the enslaved African population of New York City is proposed. Preliminary comparisons between the city's European and African populations are offered.

The Baptist Church and the making of free Jamaica

James Delle

In the first half of the 19th century, the Baptist Church, through white missionaries and black preachers, played a large role in constructing and directing the discourse on freedom among members of the African Diaspora in Jamaica. This paper will examine phenomena through a consideration of the documentary evidence for the relationship between the church and 19th century liberation movements; how through the design and layout of certain missionary settlements this movement was abandoned in favour of colluding with the planters' goal of constructing a dependent wage-labour force, and how the role black preachers played in constructing post-emancipation Jamaica has become a central focus of the modern discourse on national sovereignty in Jamaica.

The global importance of African Diaspora archaeology in the analysis and abolition of whiteness

Terrence W. Epperson

African Diaspora archaeology addresses the fundamental issue of “race” in three related senses: 1) as an invented and imposed category of domination, 2) as a potential basis for resistance by colonized, enslaved, and oppressed people, and 3) as an ongoing social reality that structures access to, and interpretation of, the African and African-descent cultural patrimony. The analysis of race as a social construction should not be deployed to deny the reality of race, particularly for the victims of racism, nor should it be used to belittle the concerns of minority descendant communities. Instead, we must construct a critical archaeology that is simultaneously race-conscious and anti-essentialist. Rather than adopting a defensive position on the issue of race, African Diaspora archaeology must reformulate the terms of discourse and directly challenge the apparent “naturalness” and “neutrality” of whiteness, both historically and in the present. This paper draws upon the insights of Critical Race Theory and the New Abolitionist movement and employs examples from diverse North American contexts to demonstrate how whiteness was constructed and deployed as a means of colonial domination, how it was resisted and subverted, and how it remains a fundamental issue in the analysis and presentation of archaeological data.

Slavery artefacts in African history: Case study of the remains of slavery objects and fossils in Cameroon

E.S.D. Fomin

This work is intended to demonstrate vividly that from the study of artefacts used by African slavers, it is possible to gain greater insight in African Slavery systems. In the case of Cameroon, the study charts and highlights the weapons (iron, wooden and ropes) and other related objects used by slavers which provide clues to the appreciation of the dimensions of slave business and the benignity or harshness of the various slavery systems in the continent. The work also involves the study of iron implements as weapons and a medium of exchange in slave dealings in Cameroon: wooden tools, ropes and bags used by the slavers which have become sacred objects in some areas and have been preserved till today. Slavery related art carving, modelling and painting in the area is also studied. The artworks of slaves such as weaving, carving, smithing and female fossils preserved in some areas are examined as an important part of this study. The contention is that slaves did a tremendous job in the diffusion of art and crafts in Africa and female slaves who were ancestors of matrilineal lineages were venerated in such societies.

African sites archaeology on Curacao, Netherlands Antilles

Jay B. Haviser

Archaeological research on the island of Curacao has developed very steadily in the last decade. Issues of settlement pattern studies, the cultural formation and transformation of the African Diaspora in Curacao as well as communities and the processes involved in explaining all these, have attracted most attention. However, interpretations have differed among archaeologists. This paper is intended to generate a discussion of the evidence, analysis and interpretation of African sites identified, surveyed or excavated on Curacao and to evaluate the relevance of the present state of archaeological research as it enters its second decade. Using evidence from other studies in Africa, particularly West Africa, and the Caribbean, a comparison is drawn between evidence, analyses and interpretations with a view towards a refinement of our understanding of the development of African cultural traditions in the Diaspora generally and specifically on Curacao.

African agency and colonial practice in the 18th-century British Empire

Jean Howson and Edna Greene Medford

This paper discusses and compares colonial practice in two very different corners of the 18th-century British Empire, New York City and Montserrat. Specifically, it examines legal restrictions on the economic activities

and material lives of Africans, and the ways in which colonial policies shaped but also were shaped by problems of rule in particular places. Transformations in colonial practice were brought about as a result of the agency of Africans, for example when marketing activity depended on the participation of blacks, or when neighbourhood businesses depended on their patronage. It is argued that material culture needs to be interpreted in light of changing arenas of participation in local economic institutions, both public ones and those which operated in underground or quasi-sanctioned forms, including theft, illegal marketing, credit associations, and off-the-books labour exchanges. It is suggested that in our quest to find historical agency for peoples of the African Diaspora, a project with inherent political implications, it is important to fully explore how the institutional apparatus and local operating systems of colonial powers were used, rather than only resisted. Finally, it addresses problems of presenting a nuanced understanding of agency and its unintended consequences to a public audience for whom a model of victims and heroes has greater resonance.

Labour exploitation and resistance of African New Yorkers in the colonial period

Mark Mack, Edna Greene Medford, Jean Howson, Lisa King, C. Null, Warren Perry and Leslie Rankin-Hill

Like enslaved people throughout colonial America, African New Yorkers were valued for their labour. Under Dutch rule, they cleared the land, laboured in the fields, and provided the unskilled hands needed for public building projects. These practices continued and intensified under the British. Enslaved African New Yorkers worked primarily as domestics and performed a variety of tasks in shops, taverns, and other public establishments. Significant numbers laboured as vendors and as stevedores, semi-skilled laborers and seamen in the maritime industries. They endured backbreaking labour, the effects of which are evident in the skeletal remains. African New Yorkers resisted their bondage by adhering to their own code of conduct, by engaging their "countrymen" in associative practices, and by embracing social customs and cultural forms that had distinctly African origins. This paper focuses on the biological and cultural consequences of labour exploitation and examines the struggle African New Yorkers waged in response to the daily physical and emotional stresses of 18th century enslavement.

Interdisciplinary approaches to the sources and routing of captives in the New York slave trade

Edna Medford, Warren Perry, Selwyn Carrington, Linda Heywood, A. Holl, S.O.Y. Keita, Richard Kittles, Fatimah L.C. Jackson, M., Mack and J. Thornton

The eighteenth century witnessed heavy importation of enslaved Africans into New York City. While a few entered by way of the domestic trade between the British North American mainland colonies (later, the United States), the vast majority were imported from the West Indies, and after mid-century, directly from the African continent. Documentary evidence suggests extraction from a number of regions in Africa—the Guinea coast in West Africa, Congo and Angola in the West-Central region, and limited importation from East African (including the island of Madagascar). Archaeological and biological evidence point most clearly to Akan origins. The nature of slaving operations (ships sailed along the coast, acquiring cargo at various ports) hinders identification of Afro-New Yorkers ethnically. Hence, the African Burial Ground Project is utilising an interdisciplinary approach to the origins question by drawing on the expertise of archaeologists, biologists, and historians trace trade routes through the documentary evidence. The paper focuses on this multifaceted process.

Negotiating the colour line in western Massachusetts

Robert Paynter

Western Massachusetts in New England, USA, is perceived as one of the most racially white areas of the country. Despite this fact, archaeologists have been constructing alternative histories that consider the long-term continuing contribution of Native Americans and African Americans, along with Euro Americans, to the region's history. These alternative histories disclose the persistence of Native American and African American communities in a constantly shifting context of white supremacy. Among the tactics of white supremacy, the writing of triumphalist stories that emphasise the defeat of the aboriginal population and the assimilation of Native and African descent peoples to a standard of white practice figures prominently in the region's historical landscape. Contradictory evidence to Native extermination or African assimilation can also be found, though it presently receives a muted public presentation. This paper makes use of results from regional analysis and from the study of particular sites, such as the W. E. B. Du Bois Boyhood Homesite and sites in Deerfield Village, to address the ideological and political economic practices of white supremacy and the tactics fostering the viability of Native American and African American communities that resulted in a shifting and complex colour line in Western Massachusetts.

An archaeological test of the "settler model" account of the Mfecane/Difaqane

Warren R. Perry

This paper investigates the Mfecane/Difaqane by examining the processes of class and state formation in the area of modern Natal in southeast Africa. The Mfecane/Difaqane refers to a particularly turbulent period in southern African history occurring during the early through mid-nineteenth century. According to the "settler model," this period was characterized by large-scale violence initiated by the Zulu. The "settler model" is significant because until recently there has been almost uncritical acceptance of it and it has remained uninvestigated archaeologically. I address this problem by reviewing the various ways in which southern African historians have explained the Mfecane/Difaqane. I describe the key issues in the model and their archaeological expectations. Site information collected from the archaeological literature and from my archaeological survey in Swaziland is analyzed. My analyses show that the "settler model" is lacking along all archaeological predictions and therefore must be rejected.

The African Burial Ground Mortuary Complex in diasporic perspective

Warren Perry, Kofi Agorsah, R. Beathea, Leonard Bianchi, Christopher Decorse, Michael A. Gomez, Augustin Holl, Ruth Mathis, Kenya Shujaa And Leslie Rankin-Hill.

This paper examines archaeological mortuary patterns found at the African Burial Ground, using demographic data, body position, and archaeological materials such as coffins and artefacts. The cemetery contained burials with and without coffins, and with a variety of body positions and coffin shapes. Spatial, temporal, age and gender distributions are considered; for example, age and gender do not appear to be spatially patterned, while coffin presence/absence is. It is argued that the multi valency of mortuary goods and practices must be recognised. Evidence from historical documents, skeletal biology, ethnographic accounts, and other archaeological excavations will be used to draw comparisons between mortuary patterns at the African Burial Ground and other eighteenth and nineteenth-century African and African-descendant mortuary complexes in West and Central Africa, the Caribbean, and North America. The observed patterns reflect origins, cultural transformation, and resistance during enslavement.

Archaeology of the African Diaspora in Argentina: Cultural evidence of resistance

Daniel Schavelzon

This paper examines the formation and transformation of the heritage of Africans enslaved in Argentina, using archaeological and ethnographic data. Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Hispanic domination in Argentina made slavery a central part of the lifestyle, particularly in Buenos Aires and adjoining areas; in the city, for example, enslaved Africans constituted more than a third of the population. Archaeological excavations of some of the sites inhabited by these enslaved groups appears to indicate that, although a process of cultural blend of the Africans with the aborigines and Europeans was enforced, enslaved Africans did remarkably well in preserving several aspects of their African behavior patterns. Interpretation of the evidence suggests an underlying attitude of opposition or resistance to the dominant cultures as well as the preservation of African notions and mythologies, religion, music, and culinary traditions.

Cultural construction and the struggle for human rights at New York's African burial ground

Sherrill Wilson, Michael Blakey, Donna Harden Cole, P. King-Jorde, Kweku Ofori-Ansa, Sheila Walker, Deborah Wright and Susan Pearce

This paper discusses the political activism of New York's African American community for the preservation of the eighteenth-century African Burial Ground. Grass roots organisational efforts involved a broad cross-section of the descendant African American community including lay persons and professionals with varied social backgrounds, expertise, access to political power, and political leanings. Activist scholars informed community based decisions about the nature of research to be conducted on the site, which helped transform its scholarship while empowering the descendant community. The project continues as a holistic, engaged community program whose efforts are international in scope, and involve the development of preservation, human rights advocacy, Pan African linkages, cultural construction and ethnic identity, anti-racism, public education, ritual, memorialisation and the restoration of both a sacred site and scientific knowledge of a contested African American past and present.