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African-Influenced Burial Practices and Sociocultural Identity in Antebellum Philadelphia

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Abstract

Material culture plays subtle, but important, roles in the creation of meaning in everyday experience. In early 19th-century Philadelphia free, urban African Americans employed quite ordinary material objects to express community and ethnic identities in the extraordinary context of laying the dead to rest. Non-Western burial practices that appear to be derived from Creole slave culture and/or West African sources included: 1) burial of a shoe on the top of the coffin, 2) burial of a plate on the stomach of the deceased inside the coffin, and 3) placement of a single coin in the coffin, usually near the head of the deceased.

This paper will discuss these practices and their distribution between two cemeteries used by the First African Baptist Church. Further, these practices will be considered in the contexts of Philadelphia's growth and industrialization in the first half of the 19th century, African-American culture, and the history of the First African Baptist Church, to address implications for the construction of African-American identify in antebellum Philadelphia. It will be argued that the members of the 8th Street First African Baptist Church congregation, in particular, made uncommon use of common everyday objects, giving those objects socially charged meanings based upon a context of common experience represented in the formation of an explicitly African identity with its roots in the creation of Creole slave culture from a variety of African and non-African sources.

Introduction

This paper is concerned with an archaeology of African identity in the New World, specifically burial practices reflected at the cemeteries used by the First African Baptist Church of Philadelphia in the first half of the 19th century. These practices provide insights concerning social identity and social process in Philadelphia's African-American community. The considerably greater occurrence of what appear to be African-influenced burial practices in the later of two cemeteries suggests that the maintenance, or revival, of African identity is a reactive expression of the community's vitality and resistance to domination in a context of in-migration, economic stress, and growing racism.

The paper opens with a brief summary of the study of African identity in the Americas. From this broad context the paper will then focus in on the burial practices revealed in the excavation of two cemetery sites used by the congregation of the First African Baptist Church. These results will then be placed in the specific contexts of the history of the First African Baptist Church and Philadelphia's growth and industrialization in the first half of the 19th century. Ethnicity and resistance are considered to develop an understanding of the occurrence of these African-influenced burial practices as a reflection of an explicitly African social identity, which may have been an important resource for Philadelphia's antebellum African-American community.

African Identity in America

While African-American culture is now recognized as a distinct cultural entity formed from the unprecedented sociocultural interaction of peoples from three continents, this was not always the case. A people without a past, without history, can easily be looked upon as commodities or tools to be used and exploited. Accordingly, the study of African-American culture has been, and continues to be, politically charged.

The modern study of African-American culture has centered around the Herskovits-Frazier Debate. Melville Herskovits (1941) pioneering study, the *Myth of the Negro Past*, emphasized the importance of West African cultural carryovers in the formation of African-American culture, primarily relying on data from the Caribbean and continental South America . This work stood in dramatic contrast to the generally prevailing view that African-American culture was an imperfect imitation of European-American culture. The scholarship of E. Franklin Frazier (1932a, 1932b, 1966) came to symbolize this second position. He argued that the experience of slavery had been so devastating as to have stripped enslaved Africans of all aspects of their culture, resulting in the formation of a derivative African-American culture from European-American culture.

While weaknesses in several aspects of Herskovits' study have become evident with the passage of time, subsequent research in anthropology, folklore, history, and sociology has tended to support his notion of the continuity of various aspects of African culture in the Americas. Early studies set-out, and generally succeeded, in documenting aspects of African culture in African-American religion, the arts, and language (e.g. Puckett 1968, DuBois 1939, and Johnson 1940). Eventually,

researchers recognized that African influences had resulted in a distinctive African-American culture (e.g. Whitten and Szwed 1970, Wood 1974, Levine 1977, and Blassingame 1979). More recently, research has looked beyond African-American culture to examine the contributions of African culture to America more broadly, focusing largely on music, language, and the arts (e.g. Holloway 1990).

Research in the area of African-American material culture has also sought to document and understand the importance of links with Africa. John Michael Vlach was one of the earliest students of African-American material culture. Beginning with his 1978 *The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts* and his more recent *By the Work of Their Hands: Studies in Afro-American Folklife* (Vlach 1991), he documented the survival and maintenance of African traditions in a wide range of folk arts and crafts, including basketmaking, ironworking, boatbuilding, textiles, musical instruments, grave decoration, gravestone carvings, and architectural forms and the organization of space. He noted that these various art forms possess a cultural unity in their African heritage, and that stylistic consistency in design and the process of creation (or style and performance) appears to be a major aspect of ethnic integrity in African-American material culture. While some artifacts represent the uninterrupted survival of African traditions, such as coiled grass baskets produced in the Carolina Low Country, others such as quilts incorporate African themes into an European-American object.

Other important studies of African-American material culture include the work of Robert Farris Thompson. Thompson and Joseph Cornet (1981) documentation of aspects of Central African carving and sculpture in the folk art of African Americans living in coastal Georgia and South Carolina in *The Four Moments of the Sun: Kongo Art in Two Worlds.* Thompson (1983) subsequently broadened that study in *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy.*

More recently, Thompson (1990) has argued that the Kongo culture of Central Africa, as opposed to West Africa cultures, has had central influence in the formation of African-America artistic culture. He cited parallels between African-American creation of cosmograms, patterns of body language and gesture, creation of bottle and plate branches/trees, and practices of adornment and decoration of graves and similar practices in the Kongo to support this proposition.

Archaeologists have also focused on the study of African-American culture. Leland Ferguson's 1992 *Uncommon Ground: Archaeology and Early African America, 1650-1800* has been an influential recent study. Ferguson focused largely on the ceramic earthenwares termed by archaeologists Colono, or Colono-Indian, Wares. This ceramic is often recovered on sites associated with enslaved Africans from Virginia and throughout the Southeast and is very similar to ceramics made in West Africa. He applied the concept of "creolization" to describe the cultural interactions of European-descended masters, enslaved Africans, and, to a more limited extent, Native Americans which took place as New and various Old World peoples and cultures came into contact. From this process, Ferguson argued, African Americans formed a unique culture having material and ideological components distinct from that of European-American culture.

Building upon the work of Melville Herskovits, researchers interested in the formation of African-American culture have overcome the view that African-American culture developed as an imperfect imitation of European-American culture. Rather, African-American culture is recognized as a distinct cultural entity which formed from the interaction of peoples from three continents. The material aspects of African-American culture have been recognized as representing important documentation of African culture in America and the processes contributing to the formation of African-American culture. However, there has been no real opportunity to examine change in African influences in material culture across time within a single community.

BURIAL PRACTICES AT THE FIRST AFRICAN BAPTIST CHURCH CEMETERIES

Cemeteries at two of the locations of the First African Baptist Church were excavated preceding the construction of the Vine Street Expressway along the northern edge of Center City Philadelphia. In 1983 and 84 a team directed by Michael Parrington excavated the site of the cemetery located near 8th and Vine Streets, which was used from 1824 to c. 1841 (Parrington et al.1989). This cemetery contained the remains of approximately 140 individuals. In 1990 a second cemetery was excavated under the author's direction near 10th and Vine Street (Crist et al. 1995). This site had been used from c. 1810 to 1822, and the remains of approximately 85 individuals were recovered.

In the course of the excavation of the two cemeteries, a number of what appear to be African-influenced burial practices were observed. However, for the most part, the positioning and orientation of the burials in both cemeteries followed Western conventions: that is, the deceased were laid supine on their backs with hands together on the abdomen or to the sides of the body with the head of the deceased to the west, except in those cases were the graves had be disturbed and the remains reinterred with a north to south orientation (Puckle 1926:148). This tradition appears to be very old, dating in Europe from the Iron Age, and it is documented in many parts of West Africa (Nassau 1969:218), although in some areas of Africa only the males are buried with their head to the west, while the females are buried with the head to the east (Parrinder 1961:107).

As Sterling Stuckey (1987:43) observed in his examination of the formation of slave culture from a variety of West African and other sources, being on good terms with the spirits of the ancestors was an overarching conceptual concern of enslaved Africans throughout the New World. In the south enslaved Africans, and later free blacks as well, often decorated graves with food and other objects for the use of the spirit of the deceased in the afterlife (Thompson 1969:149-151; Vlach 1991:43-47). These objects may also have served to symbolically "ground" the spirit of the deceased (Thompson 1990:175-176). In Philadelphia there is a late eighteenth century account of slaves from Guinea "going to the graves of their friends early in the morning, and there leaving them victuals and rum" (Nash 1988:13). In addition, the "ring-shout", or "-shot", dance evolved as a devotional ceremony directed toward the ancestors (Stuckey 1987:12). There are accounts of this ceremony having been performed in Philadelphia from the late 18th century through as late as the 1870s (Stuckey 1987:23). No evidence for non-material practices nor of surface deposited

decorations were found at either site. Both sites had been effected by various redevelopment activities subsequent to their abandonment as cemeteries. All evidence of African-influenced customs were found at the level of the actual burial, either in or immediately outside the coffin.

While the practice of placing coins on each of the eyes of the deceased is documented in many cultures (Puckle 1926:50-51), this was observed in only two instances at the First African Baptist Church cemeteries. More common, was a single coin having been placed inside the coffin, often near the head. This may represent an association of death with a journey, perhaps back to the African homeland, the coin being provided to pay for passage. The placement of monetary offerings in graves is documented in West Africa where it is associated with passage over the river of death (Parrinder 1961:107). Shoes, as well, can be seen as part of the same symbolic system: as required for a journey. In several cases a shoe was found placed on top of the coffin. In addition, shoes are also associated with African-American folk beliefs concerning power over spirits or good luck.

Finally, two burials contained a ceramic plate placed on the stomach of the deceased. While the archaeological literature on Old World and Native American sites is replete with examples of the inclusion of ceramic vessels and other "grave goods" in burials, apparently for use by the deceased in the afterlife or as a form of social display of wealth and/or power, the recovery of ceramics from historic period burials is far less common. The purpose and meaning of these objects in the case of the First African Baptist Church cemeteries is somewhat ambiguous. Fremmer (1973) documented that plates of salt were often placed on a corpse in parts of Ireland and England to control odor and/or bloating. He concluded that the inclusion of a ceramic vessel in two 18th century English graves in Jamaican might have been due to oversight rather than an intentional act. But he also noted that in isolated parts of Jamaica it is traditional to place a dish containing a mixture of coffee and salt on the stomach of the deceased throughout the wake and burial. The wide-spread African practice of pouring of "libations" for the ancestors is another practice that may also have resulted in the accidental inclusion of a ceramic vessel in the grave.

The Plates may also have been provided for use in the afterlife, the burial of the plate last used by the deceased may also have been meant to prevent the deceased spirit from harming the living in that the "energy" or "essence" of the dead was held to be present in objects last used (Thompson 1969:151-152). Regardless if accidental or deliberate, the presence of the plates on the stomach of the deceased may be associated with African-influenced or creolized practices.

The distribution of these burial practices between the two cemeteries is very important to our discussion today. Only two burials in the earlier 1810 to 1822 cemetery at 10th Street exhibited clear evidence of African burial practices. In those instances a single coin was recovered from the interior of the coffin. Two coins were found in each of two additional burials, in one case near the head and in the second, placed into the eye-sockets of a poorly preserved skull. Both of these burials had been disturbed, however, and it is possible that these pairs of coins were placed at the time of reinterment. In addition, a single shoe was found buried in the 1810 to 1822 cemetery. However, it was not found in direct association with a coffin, and it may have simply have been lost by its owner.

In contrast, the later 1824 to 1841 8th Street cemetery included eight coffins each containing a single coin. In six cases remains of a single shoe were found on the coffin lid, and the two burials containing ceramic plates were both found in the later cemetery as well. The relative occurrence of African-influenced burial practices in the 1810 to 1822 cemetery is between 2.4 and 5.9 percent, depending upon one's interpretation of the evidence, with the lower number being the more likely. In the 1824 to 1841 cemetery the relative occurrence is 11.4 percent. In absolute terms, clear examples of African-influenced burial practices are 8 times more common in the later of the two cemeteries.

Superficially, these results seem counter-intuitive given an understanding that acculturative processes operate through time to reduce outward social and cultural differentiation, in accordance with such notions as the "Melting Pot" theory of American culture formation. An examination of the social and economic context of the First African Baptist Church, however, suggests that social and economic stresses may have had important effects on ethnic identity and its expressions in antebellum Philadelphia.

THE HISTORY OF THE FIRST AFRICAN BAPTIST CHURCH

In 1809 13 African-American members of the First Baptist Church of Philadelphia joined together to form the First African Baptist Church (Nash 1988:201). While this church was separate from the white-dominated First Baptist Church, the congregations remained connected through mutual membership in the Baptist Association of Philadelphia. In 1810 the new church reported a membership of 30, and in that same year a lot on the east side of 10th Street south of Vine Street, on the then northern edge of the city, was purchased by members of the congregation. A frame building for worship seems to have been erected by 1813 when the congregation had grown to 61 members (Nash 1988:201). In 1816 a division occurred in the congregation resulting in the establishment of a separate church on 13th Street (Nash 1988:202,263). Both groups continued to be known as the First African Baptist Church, although the group at 10th Street was formally recognized by the Baptist Association since they were in possession of the meetinghouse. Both congregations lost their properties in sheriff's sales in 1822. By 1824 the 13th Street group established a new church on Smith's Alley near 8th and Vine Streets on three lots owned by their leader, Rev. Henry Simmons, one of the founders of the original First African Baptist Church congregation. A portion of the property was used as a cemetery through at least 1841, when the cemetery was cited as a nuisance to public health. The Smith's Alley group seems to have disbanded soon after the 1848 death of Rev. Henry Simmons, and his widow sold the property in 1851 despite legal challenges by remnants of the congregation. The 10th Street congregation survived and is now located at 16th and Christian Streets in South Philadelphia.

ANTEBELLUM PHILADELPHIA: THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CONTEXT OF THE FIRST AFRICAN BAPTIST CHURCH

In the first half of the 19th century, Philadelphia was transformed from a colonial port into the most important industrial center in the county (Cochran 1982). Population growth, ethnic diversification, and social distinction were part and parcel of the economic changes transforming the city at this time (Laurie 1974). The population of the city grew from approximately 81,000 in 1800 to 408,000 by 1850 (Laurie 1980:9). German and Irish immigrants flooded the city in the 1830s and 40s. The African-

American community grew as well: from approximately 4,200 in 1800 to nearly 11,000 in 1850 (Curry 1981:244-45). Philadelphia became the largest and most important center of free African-American life in the United States. Most of the city's new African-American residents were freed slaves who migrated from the south.

This growth of population and the transformation of Philadelphia's economy was not without its difficulties, however. The growth of the immigrant and African-American populations lead to competition for the same low skilled jobs. In the economically difficult years surrounding the Panic of 1838, many workers were reduced to part-time employment and as many as one-third fled the city to seek work elsewhere (Laurie 1980:108). Late 18h century Enlightenment ideals of the universal equality of humankind (in 1780 Pennsylvania became the first state to abolish slavery), gave way to nativist and racist sentiments by the 1830s: the voting rights of African Americans were rescinded in 1837 (Nash 1988:2-4).

Both Philadelphia's Irish and African-American communities were subjected to mob violence in the 1830s and 40s, but the African-American community suffered much more so. Major racially motivated riots occurred in 1829, 1834, 1835, 1838, and again in 1842 (Curry 1981:104-106). These violent outbursts, which included beatings and house and church burnings, seem to have reflected widely held resentments due to economic competition. This trend may have been exacerbated by the conspicuousness and perceived "upitness" of the ten percent of African Americans in Philadelphia who controlled 70 percent of that community's wealth (Lapsansky 1980:57). The vast majority of African Americans, who were less visible, were underemployed in menial occupations and were "crammed into lofts, garrets, and cellars, in blind alleys and narrow courts" as one observer noted in 1848(George G. Foster, quoted by Curry 1981:49). Between 1838 and 1847 Philadelphia African Americans suffered a ten percent decrease in per capita wealth (Hershberg 1973:114). In the first half of the nineteenth century, free African Americans in Philadelphia, and throughout the urban north, became what Leonard Curry (1981:82) has termed "a wholly-distinct and outcast class."

Yet the African-American community of Philadelphia continued to grow, developing its own means of dealing with a hostile social environment. The success of African Americans in Philadelphia prompted Frederick Douglass to write, also in 1848, that Philadelphia "more than any other (city) in our land, holds the destiny of our people" (Nash 1988:6). In fact, in 1845 six African Americans were among the city's several dozen wealthiest people (Lapsansky 1980:57). The African-American community formed separate institutional structures to assist them in their struggles. These included not only churches, but also mutual aid societies and chapters of the masons and other fraternal organizations (Curry 1981; Nash 1988). This review of the social and economic context of the First African Baptist Church congregations indicates that as the African-American community of Philadelphia grew, along with the city as a whole, through the first half of the 19th century, it became a community apart, or a people within a people, relying on its own resources. An explicitly African ethnic identity developed from what Sterling Stucky has termed “Slave Culture” may have been one of those resources.

ETHNICITY AND SOCIAL IDENTITY

Ethnicity has been described as involving ways of thinking, feeling, and living that constitute the essence of culture (Steinberg 1981). Ethnic groups are populations which have four defining characteristics: 1) they are largely biologically self-perpetuating and its members may share certain physical characteristics such as race, 2) members share fundamental cultural values expressed in overt cultural forms, 3) they comprises a community of communication and interaction, and 4) members identify themselves, and are identified by others, as constituting a social category distinguishable from other similar categories (Barth 1969).

This fourth characteristic has been found particularly important. Variability in ethnic identity has been recognized as individuals identify themselves, and are recognized by others, as ethnic to a greater or lesser degree in response to contextual forces such as such as colonialism, nationalism, and internal migration. Accordingly, ethnicity is now understood as subjective (e.g. Cohen 1981; Royce 1982; and Waters 1990). While remaining consistent with Barth's (1969) definition, this understanding places greater emphasis on the fourth element of that definition, i.e. self-definition that is shared by others not part of the group.

Cultural traits, or traditions, such as foodways, festivals, and folklore are taken-up and used as symbolic markers for ethnic identity in various contexts (DeSantis and Benkin 1980; Stern and Cicala 1991). Accordingly, the importance of cultural traits lies beyond their specific content and is found in the social identity which they represent. In this sense they are signs and symbols which may be used by both ethnics and non-ethnics to "perform" various aspects of ethnic identity in at least three ways: 1) to express adoption of "Americanisms", 2) to communicate maintenance or adoption of ethnicity, and 3) to communicate the acceptance of an ethnic group or the pluralistic aspects of American society (Kalcik 1985).

An ethnic group marshals an array of such signs and symbols (and underlying related values) to maintain boundaries and to survive as a distinct entity consistent with the second aspect of performance identified above (Royce 1982). To be effective these signs and symbols must exist in opposition or contrast to the larger society to help define a sense of "other". The conscious or unconscious use and manipulation of such signs, symbols, and values, can be seen as constituting the performance of ethnicity as a social identity.

Social power, derived from a combination of material and ideological components, is an important factor affecting the application of ethnic identity (Royce 1982). While the power of dominate groups is obvious, subordination does not result in powerlessness. Subordinate groups have access to certain kinds of power that dominant groups often ignore or overlook, the application of which constitutes resistance, or agency, in daily life. Strategies of resistance can include: outright refusal to abide by the dominant groups' rules, outward acceptance coupled with deeper resistance, use of subordination to inspire guilt, and the viewing of situations as more complex than members of the dominant group do. Thus, the performance of ethnicity as a social identity can constitute a form of social resistance, or agency, in everyday life.

AFRICAN-AMERICAN SOCIAL IDENTITY AND RESISTANCE IN 19TH-CENTURY PHILADELPHIA

The physical characteristics of race defined African Americans in antebellum Philadelphia, and as a result, choice in ethnic identity was constrained. White-dominated society was not going to accept African Americans as full equals. The question then, is more of how the African-American community manipulated African-influenced signs and symbols for its own purposes.

At the end of the 18th century, people of African ancestry comprised just under ten percent of Philadelphia's population, earlier, in 1780, the proportion may have been as low as four percent (Nash 1988:143). In Philadelphia, enslaved Africans lived in close proximity to their masters, who often held only one or two slaves and seldom more than four (Nash 1988:13). While new slave arrivals helped to renew African-based cultural practices, the preponderant pressure on enslaved Africans in Philadelphia was to outwardly adapt to the culture of the European descended majority.

Freedom, in 1790, brought changes in the construction of African identity in Philadelphia. In examining naming practices as an indicator of acculturation, Gary Nash (1988:80-88) noted a two stage process of cultural self-definition beginning in the late 18th century. First, was a "symbolic obliteration of the slave past" by rejecting African, classical, derisive or whimsical names given by masters. This was followed by what Nash termed "the creation of a unique Afro-American identity" largely by adopting English names of their own choosing.

By the 1830s, in-migration of former slaves from the south and the growing resentment and racism of much of the larger society may have served to revitalize certain signs and symbols of African identity within Philadelphia's African-American community, and particularly within the community's various institutions. The maintenance, or revival, of African-influenced burial customs in the 8th Street First African Baptist Church congregation fits into an overall pattern of in-migration, economic stress, and growing racism as a reactive expression of the community's vitality and resistance to domination. In this small way, and perhaps in many other ways undocumented, the members of this community acted to shape their everyday sociocultural reality. Examining such processes gives us access to what Raymond Williams (1977:10) has called "the whole substance of lived identities and relationships" which have considerable implications for our understanding of the present as well as the past.

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