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Material Culture and Social Death: African-American Burial Practices

ABSTRACT

Orlando Patterson has proposed that the institution of slavery caused the ''social death'' of slaves, in that the inherited meanings of their ancestors were denied to them through control of their cultural practices by slave owners and overseers. A survey of archaeological evidence for mortuary practices in African-American society, however, shows that this was not the case, as such inherited meanings were present throughout the early historical period, and in some communities are still present. The careful identification of such occurrences can only be made through comparison to African archaeological and ethnographic evidence. Such occurrences do not negate the horrors of the dominance of slaveholders over slaves in the New World, but do give an opportunity to celebrate the unique nature of African-Atlantic culture.

Introduction

In a recent review, Parker Potter (1991:95) has warned plantation archaeologists about the ''inseparability of knowledge and human interests.'' For Potter, and I am in basic agreement with him, plantation archaeologists must struggle to celebrate the unique African-American heritage forged while under the dominance of Euroamerican society (Potter 1991:99). Archaeologists of the African-American past have a social responsibility constantly to remind themselves of ''*who controlled* the quality of life,'' and also a responsibility to ask African Americans what interests they have in their cultural heritage, and how these can be related to archaeological research (Potter 1991:98–100).

The recent excavation of a portion of the colonial African Burial Ground in New York City (Harrington 1993) has brought the study of African-American mortuary remains into the public and archaeological spotlight. The wholesale excavation of cemeteries merely to answer the research questions of archaeologists can validly be classified as desecration, and thus a certain reticence on the part of archaeologists to include discussion of African-American burials when outlining archaeological research potential (cf. Singleton 1990) is understandable. The developments in New York City (Harrington 1993), however, have demonstrated that contract archaeologists are required to deal with such remains, and that a solid understanding of the historical and anthropological aspects of African-American mortuary practices is necessary before interpreting them.

Funerals in plantation slavery contexts in particular appear to have afforded African Americans an opportunity to develop African-American cultural practices in the New World based at least partially on African practices (Genovese 1972:194–202; Thornton 1992:228). Several archaeological excavations of African-American burials have now been carried out (Thomas et al. 1977; Parrington and Wideman 1986; Owsley et al. 1987), although large New World cemeteries from before emancipation are restricted to Handler and Lange's (1978) Barbados sample and the recent New York City excavations (Harrington 1993).

In order to understand fully the cultural implications of such burials, there is a need for historical archaeologists to consider the work of historians of slavery, art historians, Africanist ethnographers, and Africanist archaeologists. Only with such a wide-ranging, ''ethnohistorical'' approach can historical archaeologists begin fully to put the burial practices of African Americans in context. The interpretation of mortuary rituals and material culture is contingent on the wide-ranging chronological, geographical, and social contexts which characterize the long history of African descendants in the New World.

Burials, Social Death, and Africanisms in the New World

The excavation of burials has always been central to archaeology, and up until the mid-20th century, the emphasis was usually on the ''flow of traits'' visible in mortuary remains that defined culture

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areas and cultural diffusion (Chapman and Randsborg 1981:2–3). Since the 1960s archaeological interest in mortuary patterns has grown to include individual status, modes of death, rites of passage, group affiliations, and many other types of specific cultural information. By the early 1970s it became clear that the relationship of mortuary practices to status, group membership, and other societal factors was not a simple one. A debate began as to whether mortuary variability could really prove much about societal structures (Chapman and Randsborg 1981: 4–8). Mortuary data have now been used extensively by archaeologists, ethnographers, and ethnohistorians to study many anthropological and historical issues (Ucko 1969; Brown 1971; Tainter 1978; Chapman et al. 1981; Humphreys and King 1981; Parker Pearson 1982; Johnson et al. 1994).

The study of African-American heritage has broadly paralleled that of the discipline of anthropological archaeology. An emphasis on the "flow of traits" is clear in the anthropological work of Melville Herskovits, whose 1920s scholarship concentrated on African "culture areas." Herskovits (1958[1941]) created the first full formulation of the concept of "African retentions" in the New World with his 1941 book *The Myth of the Negro Past.* Herskovits' affirmation of the existence of an African heritage in the New World was the basis for much of the "black studies" scholarship in the United States, Cuba, Haiti, and other countries from the 1960s onward (Cole 1985:120–124).

During the 1970s anthropologists and historians studying African-American culture began to shift their emphasis from Herskovitsian "survivals," and instead began to concentrate on certain "basic values" and "phenomenology" as defining African-American relationships to Africa (Cole 1985: 120–124). Sidney Mintz and Richard Price in 1976 called for the definition of a "generalized West African heritage" for African Americans, defined by emphasizing cognitive orientations rather than the more formal elements concentrated on by Herskovits. Mechal Sobel (1979:xvii) proposed that in the New World "African worldviews coalesced over time into one neo-African consciousness." For Sobel, West African peoples did not have one Sacred Cosmos, but they did share enough of a worldview to create one worldview in America (Sobel 1979:21).

It is clear that the institution of slavery severely restricted the ability of African Americans to maintain cohesive cultural identities from Africa. Orlando Patterson has attempted to show that the cultural practices of slaves were greatly influenced by the definition of slavery "as a substitute for death, usually violent death":

> Slaves differed from other human beings in that they were not allowed freely to integrate the experience of their ancestors into their lives, to inform their understanding of social reality with the inherited meanings of their natural forebears, or to anchor the living present in any conscious community of memory. That they reached back for the past, as they reached out for the related living, there can be no doubt. Unlike other persons, doing so meant struggling with and penetrating the iron curtain of the master, his community, his laws, his policemen, or patrollers, and his heritage (Patterson 1982:5).

Slaves had to resist this desocialization in countless ways (Patterson 1982:337). The lack of ability to import material culture from their homeland, and prohibitions on many cultural practices, created great difficulties in undertaking such resistance (Genovese 1972). Despite these difficulties, historians of the African-American diaspora have now clearly shown that African culture, and particularly religion, have made important contributions to the African-American experience (Raboteau 1978; Sobel 1987; Creel 1988).

Neither a search for "survivals," nor an anthropological emphasis on "phenomenology" seems suited to the study of African-American mortuary practices. Jean Howson (1990:79–80) has pointed out that the search for formal elements, or "survivals," of African practices in the Americas was and is naive. Attention to specific material traits and their disappearance over time as a way to construct a universal sequence of acculturation is a dangerous oversimplification. James Garman (1994:90) calls for a holistic picture "that does not reduce African Americans to a collection of material traits with links to Africa."

The key that is missing from sterile studies of "Africanisms" and "survivals" is cultural context. The historian John Thornton (1992:211) empha-

sizes that the dynamics of cultural change in African-American society worked very differently on different elements of culture, such as political systems, language, aesthetics, and religion. Howson (1990:84) advocates the careful interpretation of material culture in all its contexts, a position that is important for research on African-American burials.

The mortuary context was a place within slave culture where in some cases some "freedoms" were allowed by the slave owners. For Parker Potter, the ability of slaves to hunt game or to purchase their own ceramics—or, to bury their own dead—were not really "freedoms"; they were traded off against "the more powerful unfreedoms" of the institution of slavery (Potter 1991:98). Potter goes so far as to suggest that "placing too much emphasis on . . . the ability of slaves to create certain aspects of their own world could do a disservice to contemporary African Americans in the attempt to identify and challenge the racial discrimination that still exists in contemporary American society" (Potter 1991:101). His point is valid; the existence of a burial that shows African religious practices in the New World should not and cannot be used to argue that slavery was a benign institution—and yet African influences cannot be ignored, and should be celebrated. As the art historian Robert Farris Thompson (in Cosentino 1992:59) put it, "Yes, I *am* political if it is a political statement to say that African-Atlantic culture is fully self-possessed, an alternative classical tradition; that one studies Mbanza Kongo, Ile-Ife, and Kángaba as one might study Carthage, Jerusalem, Rome, and Athens."

Historic Burial Studies in Africa and the Americas

The lack of a well-researched ethnohistorical approach has been a serious limitation of many studies of African-American material culture. Douglas Armstrong (1990:7) has rightly pointed out the seriousness of the "problem encountered in the study of cultural transformations among Africans in the New World . . . the tendency to over generalize West African cultures." In his studies of 18th-century slave houses he felt "forced to rely on vague comparisons and incidental observation to establish elements of African continuity" (Armstrong 1990:8), a problem which seriously compromises the validity of the undertaking. He points out the need for more interaction between historians and archaeologists of West Africa and the Americas, and also the paucity of archaeological work on West African sites contemporary with the period of slaving for the Americas (Armstrong 1990:8).

This is in part due to the lack of focus on the colonial period by governments of independent African countries and Africanist archaeologists. Most Africanist archaeologists are concerned with concentrating on the prehistoric cultural heritage of Africa. The archaeology of the colonial period in Africa is a very new, and still very limited, field of study (DeCorse 1987, 1991, 1993). A major new contribution to the study of African historical mortuary archaeology is the work of Christopher DeCorse at ElMina, Ghana (Figure 1c). His excavations of urban domestic contexts adjacent to the Dutch fort at ElMina, dating to the 17th through late 19th centuries, has recently revealed 200 burials in sub-floor domestic contexts (DeCorse 1992:184). Analysis of this material was still in progress in 1992, but when published it will be an important comparative sample for New World archaeologists. This is just one excavation location, however, and if African-American practices are to be traced to Africa, the historical period must be fully studied on both sides of the Atlantic.

Archaeological excavation of African-American mortuary remains has been undertaken in North America and the Caribbean since the early 1970s, but the pressures of salvage situations have meant that in many cases little attention has been paid to the historical context of burials. Salvage excavation of a slave cemetery by a prehistorian on Montserrat, West Indies, and the discovery of two slave burials on St. Catherine's Island, Georgia, were not accompanied by any historical research other than to find that early maps showed the cemeteries to have been part of a plantation (Thomas et al. 1977:401; Watters 1987:312, 1994:56). David Watters (1994:56) validly points out that, in the case of the Eastern Caribbean, severe funding problems, the lack of

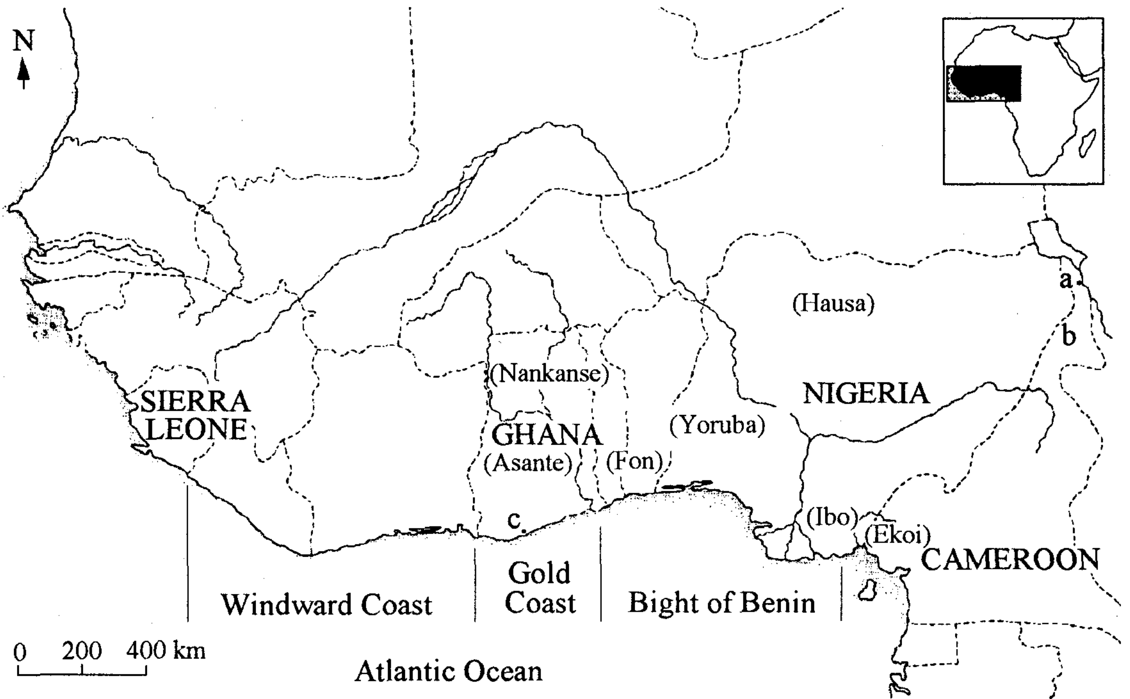

FIGURE 1. Map of West Africa: *a*, Holouf Cemetery site, Cameroon; *b*, Mandara Highlands of Cameroon; *c*, ElMina site, Ghana.

professional archaeologists, and the rapid development of tourist sites have made short salvage projects by avocational archaeologists an unfortunate reality.

Handler and Lange's (1978) work on Barbados is the only major published archaeological case explicitly using an ethnohistorical approach to the study of New World slave mortuary practices. Their research, based on excavation and historical documents, is by far the best archaeological study of mortuary practices of Africans and their descendants in the Americas. They found the excavation of a slave cemetery on Barbados to be of limited use in reconstructing mortuary ideology, with documents as a more useful source. The documents had their own limitations, however, in being very anecdotal and heavily affected by a European bias. The time span and extent of particular mortuary practices were often difficult to define, but the documents were in the end an extremely useful addition to the archaeological data (Handler and Lange 1978:171). Handler's later attempt deliberately to locate other slave cemeteries in Barbados was unsuccessful; the invisibility of many slave cemeteries may thus be a factor in their preservation, or a factor in their untimely destruction at the hands of developers who are not even aware of their existence (Handler 1989).

The excavation of African-American burials has so far been limited, which has created great limitations on interpretation. Up until the excavation of the African Burial Ground in New York City (Harrington 1993), Handler and Lange's (1978:21, 171) Barbados excavation was the largest group of slave burials (N = 104) excavated in the New World, and also—dating between 1660–1820—the earliest group. Handler and Lange (1978:28) state that with such a small database generalization is premature,

but the ongoing research on the African Burial Ground in New York City (Harrington 1993) will soon give archaeologists a large 18th-century sample for comparison to Handler and Lange's excavation. Other published excavation reports (Combes 1972; Thomas et al. 1977; Parrington and Wideman 1986; Bell 1990; Cheek and Friedlander 1990) have been rescue excavations of 19th-century burials, and thus largely post-emancipation, although one salvage exavation of a pre-1800 cemetery on Montserrat has been carried out (Watters 1987, 1994). This gives a good chronological range of data, but more data for the period of slavery in the United States would be desirable.

The limited use of comparative data from Africa on burial practices is perhaps the most serious shortcoming of New World studies to date. Inadequate ethnographic research is notorious for resulting in underestimation of variability in mortuary practices (Chapman and Randsborg 1981:14). Handler and Lange (1978:317) saw great difficulty in using African ethnographic sources because they are often "directly contradictory of each other," but this may be due more to Handler and Lange's attempt to simplify the huge range of African cultural practices than to any real contradictions. Slaves came from wide geographical regions of Africa which changed over time. Thus the wide variation in ethnographic practices, rather than being contradictory, are, in fact, of great relevance to the study of American practices.

Handler and Lange (1978:210) validly point out that the comparison of modern African ethnographic studies to New World burials from the 18th century is in itself not ideal and, in addition, points to a great need for data on West African burial practices from the European colonial period. An even greater problem is outlined by Merrick Posnansky (1989:4), in that in West Africa "it was not major states like Benin, Asante, or the Hausa city-states which contributed the major numbers of slaves but rather the weaker societies, societies which lost out in the process of state formation." This creates a problem in comparative archaeological data, as such societies are very rarely studied by Africanist archaeologists, and by the time ethnographers began to record details about such societies in the early 20th century they had been displaced, marginalized, and ravaged by the slave trade (Posnansky 1989:4).

For the Kongo region, where huge numbers of slaves originated, the problem is even worse, as the pre- and protohistory of the modern nations of Zaire and Angola remains largely unexplored (Posnansky 1989:6). The first scientific archaeology in the entire Lualaba River basin, for example, began only in 1957 (Hiernaux et al. 1972:148).

The lack of such data has created many false generalizations. David Roediger (1982:170) has claimed that the common burial practice on both continents of orienting the body in an east–west direction is a West African practice "against burying a corpse crossways to the world," something which may well be true but which ignores both the great variation in West African burial orientations and the Christian tradition of east–west body orientation. Handler and Lange (1978:214) concur with this attempt to define broad West African and even Sub-Saharan African beliefs which would override specific differences in mortuary patterns in African-American practices, a type of syncretism built from the varying backgrounds of slaves. Merrick Posnansky (1989:1), however, calls it a naive assumption "that there is a commonality of African traditional culture spread over a wide geographical area and over a long time period."

It is clear that ethnoarchaeological, ethnographic, and historical literature on African burial practices must be used to create valid comparisons. It is also evident that research must focus on the range of areas that slaves came from, and not just be limited to the Yoruba, a single West African culture, and the Kongo, a huge geographic region made up of many groups, two areas which are usually emphasized in the comparative American literature. Nicholas David's (1992:181) caution that ethnoarchaeologists in West Africa have given little attention to mortuary practices is well taken, and brings forward once again the problem of adequate African published data. The influences of Muslim, and perhaps even Christian, religion on African mortuary practices further complicate the African templates from which American practices were drawn.

Cultures of Origin

The mixing of ethnic groups brought about by the slave trade must have caused great changes in African-American burial practices in the New World. The African origin of first-generation slaves in a particular location is a very important factor to consider in research.

The origins of slaves in the British colonies changed over the period of the slave trade, and are of central concern in any future use of African burial data to compare to American practice. Philip Curtin's (1969) data on the ports from which slaves were taken on the African coast (Figure 1) shows that for the 1680s approximately 27 percent of slaves came from the "Windward Coast," or modern Liberia and the Ivory Coast, with another 21 percent from the Gold Coast, modern Ghana, and 15 percent from the Bight of Benin region, Togo, Dahomey, and Nigeria. By the 1750s this had shifted to only 32 percent of slaves coming from Sierra Leone, the Windward and Gold Coasts, combined, and a full 40 percent from the "Bight of Biafra," Cameroon and Nigeria. In 1800 the trade had shifted southward (Figure 2), with 45 percent of slaves coming from the Bight of Biafra, and 34 percent from the Central Africa/Angola region (Curtin 1969:129). A point of origin on the coast does not reveal the ethnicity of the slaves, however, and this "mystery of the ultimate origin of slaves in the African interior" (Handler and Lange 1978: 28) is a very complex topic (cf. Lovejoy 1983; Thornton 1992).

Curtin's (1969) publication of an 1850 census of Freetown, Sierra Leone, taken by ethnic group, is a good indication of the diversity of peoples enslaved at that time. The sample was 54 percent Yoruba, 9 percent Ibo, 8 percent Fon, and apart from that was made up of 160 additional, different ethnic groups—defined by their languages—from mainly West and Central Africa, but also from East Africa and other regions. What ethnic groups are we to use for comparison of burial traits? In the end this question seems to address a moot point. Kongo and Yoruba groups, with high populations enslaved in the American trade, have commonly been compared to African-American examples (Vlach 1978; Thompson and Cornet 1981; Thompson 1983), but vast numbers of other peoples from many parts of Africa were enslaved as well (Curtin 1969; Lovejoy 1983).

Thornton (1992:192–195) emphasizes that in most cases a single slave ship would pick up its entire cargo from one port, thus increasing the chances of cultural homogeneity. In the common case that slaves were war captives they all could have been from one cultural group. It is in the New World that the separation of African slaves from others of their own ethnic group would more commonly have occurred. The purchasing policies of plantation owners varied greatly. Some felt that deliberate mixing of Africans of different ethnicities prevented rebellions, whereas others preferred having slaves from a particular ethnic group in order to form a stable plantation community (Thornton 1992:195–196). More focused research at the local or plantation level, emphasizing the trade and purchase records for a particular place and time, is one of the few ways to get closer to the ethnic origins in Africa of particular first-generation slave populations.

The Bioarchaeology of African Ancestry

Before African-American burials can be studied, they must be identified as African-American. This identification can be done using cultural material associated with the deceased, using historical evidence for an African-American cemetery in the location, or, finally, by identifying the physical remains themselves as of African descent, using osteological techniques.

Physical identification would seem to be the most objective initial step, and yet it is problematic in itself. The identification of "race" in physical anthropology has a long and infamous history in America, exemplified by the racist work of Samuel George Morton in the 1820s to 1850s (Gould 1981: 51–62), and the 18th- and 19th-century practice of using African-American dead as scientific specimens (Humphrey 1973). In 1962 Frank Livingstone published his now classic 1-page argument in *Current Anthropology*. It urged anthropologists to re-

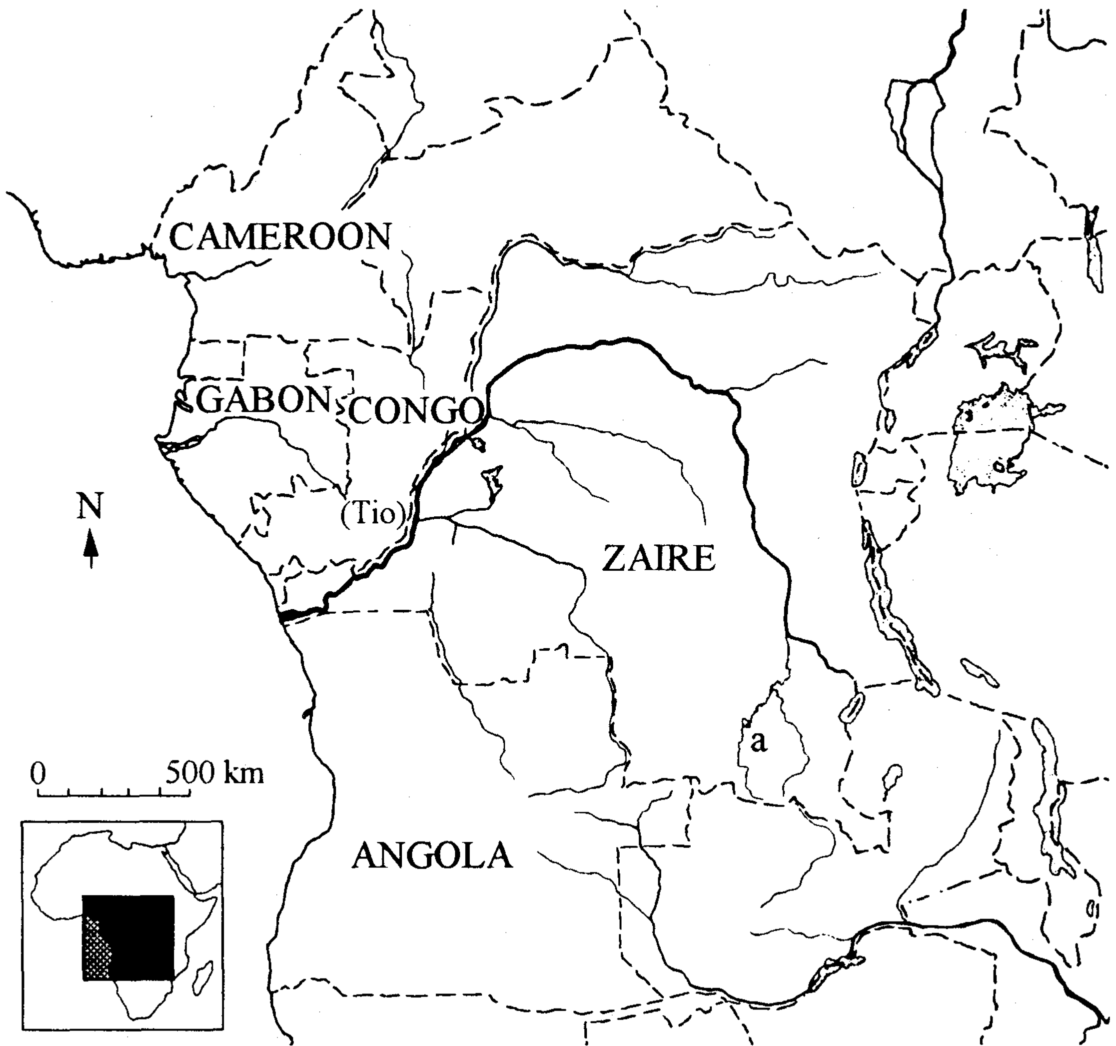

FIGURE 2. Map of Central Africa: *a*, Katoto Cemetery site, Zaire.

ject the concept of "race," because within *Homo sapiens* "variability does not conform to the discrete packages labelled races" (Livingstone 1962: 279).

Within modern forensic anthropology, however, the race concept is still in use (Krogman and Işcan 1986:270; Işcan 1988:209), in order to "categorize the skeletal remains of unknowns in terms that reflect racial reality as locally understood" (Stewart 1979:227). The tacit acceptance of such fuzzy categorizations has led to a schizophrenic response by physical anthropologists, denying the validity of racial categorization while simultaneously trying to describe its morphology.

Some researchers working with African-American burials have made no attempt to identify the ancestry of their sample through the physical remains, since the historical documentation of the

cemetery is taken as sufficient proof (Handler and Lange 1978:105). In other research the ancestry of the individuals is reported, but the methodology used to infer ancestry is not published (Owsley et al. 1987:188–190). When the methodology is reported, it varies widely among researchers (Blakely and Beck 1982:193–195; Angel et al. 1987:216–226; Rathbun 1987:241; Harris and Rathbun 1989: 411). Many of these techniques appear to depend greatly on the skill of the analyst; the problem of subjectivity in this type of study can lead dangerously toward assigning skeletal remains to an ancestry that the researcher was predisposed toward for other reasons.

Craniometrics, despite a common reaction to reject the methodology because of its racist past, may ironically be the tool needed to break free of the flawed concept of race, and create the most effective criteria for the assignation of ancestry. T. L. Woo in the 1930s began to realize that cranial measurements commonly in use were often an invalid attempt "to give quantitative value to the differences that were obvious to them at first sight" (Hershkovitz et al. 1990:307). This methodology emphasized measures heavily influenced by environmental selection. The emphasis should rather have been put on those regions of the skull, such as the calvarium and base, which show "little obvious adaptive significance" (Hershkovitz et al. 1990: 307, 318; Yongyi et al. 1991:274). Since the pioneering work of E. Giles and O. Elliot (1962), the methodology of bio-distance measurement and statistics on cranial remains has been steadily improving (Gill 1984; Krogman and Işcan 1986:275–280; Brace and Hunt 1990; Hershkovitz et al. 1990; Pietrusewsky 1990). Such modern bio-distance studies look at the polygenic traits of bone or tooth shape, data which include both a genetic and environmental component, and attempt to define patterns in the data thought to reflect degrees of genetic relatedness (Buikstra et al. 1990:1–6).

The almost complete lack of data on the range of variation within most skeletal populations is the first major stumbling block to such cranial studies (St. Hoyme and Işcan 1989:54). This limitation has begun to be remedied in recent research, although a need still exists for data from Africa before a true comparison can be made to African-American remains. A need also exists for further research on worldwide craniometrics before the complex issue of bio-distance measures in the ethnically diverse American case becomes more clear.

At the individual level it is possible that assessment of ancestry is in fact impossible, since idiosyncratic variation may effectively counteract any inherited traits. At the level of the group or cemetery population, however, geographical origins may be possible to ascertain, and different populations, for instance within archaeological cemeteries, may be able to be sorted out. In cases where clear historical evidence for an African-American cemetery does not exist, the osteological remains may be the only way to identify the cemetery as an African-American burial ground without a reliance on cultural practices.

Material Culture: African Practices in the New World

African influence on mortuary practices in the Americas is evident in both living communities and in archaeological contexts in the United States and the West Indies. Practices may have been more widespread in earlier periods, and are rare today, but they were not extinguished by the Atlantic crossing. Evidence comes from diverse sources.

It is clear that in many contexts of the earlier colonial period slaves were mostly able to maintain control over burial practices. Thornton (1992:206) specifically rejects Mintz and Price's (1976) idea that barriers to cultural transmission from Africa were overwhelming. This cultural transmission appears to have been strongest in the practice of funerary rituals. In Barbados from the 1600s up until the 1780s slaves were usually responsible for burying their own dead, in their own cemetery. Slaves were often not baptized Christians, and whites considered slaves "idolatrous"; thus, slave control over funeral rites seems to have been fairly complete (Handler and Lange 1978:173, 209). In Jamaica in 1688 Hans Sloane noted that slaves from the same ethnic group in Africa would gather at a plantation for the funeral of one of their members

(Sloane 1707:xlviii; cf. Thornton 1992:200). In 1712 in New York the Reverend John Sharpe (in Raboteau 1978:66) complained that slaves "are buried in the common by those of their country and complexion without the office; on the contrary the Heathenish rites are performed at the grave by their countrymen."

Sharpe may have been referring specifically to the African Burial Ground now being investigated (cf. Harrington 1993). This cemetery was founded around 1712 just outside the New York city limits, as church burial had been denied slaves in New York since 1697. Church authorities did not dedicate the burial ground, and control of the funerals, mortuary, and burial practices at the cemetery seems to have rested mostly within the African-American community (Harrington 1993:30). Funerals were in fact the only time slaves in 18th-century New York were permitted to gather in groups larger than three people (Harrington 1993: 30), and thus little doubt remains that such events were of key importance in maintaining many cultural ties.

Up until the late 18th century in English-speaking North America and the Caribbean a general feeling prevailed among slave owners that teaching Christian doctrine to slaves would undermine the authority of the masters (Patterson 1982:73); thus, Christian practice was not at first forced upon slaves in the Protestant New World. In North America from the 16th to the 19th centuries slaveholders were always concerned about the "conspiratorial" or "heathenish" aspects of slaves holding funerals for fellow slaves, but did not forbid the practice. In some cases they felt it callous to do so; in other cases they felt that such a prohibition could cause embitterment leading to slave rebellions (Genovese 1972:194–195).

On some plantations, special groups of slaves appear to have prepared the corpse, with taboos against others touching it, a practice similar to many African cases (Roediger 1981:169). This practice is reflected in David's (1992:187) Mandara Highlands data from Cameroon (Figure 1b), which show that in some societies male "transformers" are responsible for carrying out the funeral, but in others the funeral is carried out by the family of the deceased. Among the Yoruba the blacksmiths are called upon to put the body in the coffin and seal it (Ojo 1976: 105). A cemetery dating to A.D. 1500–1600 excavated by Augustin Holl at Houlouf in Cameroon (Figure 1a) was within a separate area of the walled house compound of a blacksmith, which Holl (1994:164–165) relates to the modern "recurrent feature in the ethnography of Chadic-speakers of the Mandara Mountains" of having blacksmiths as undertakers and gravediggers.

The age and gender of slaves brought from Africa thus may have been of critical importance in the transmission of burial practices between the cultures of the two continents. As an example, the 18th-century British trade into Jamaica was predominantly in adult males "in the prime of life," with around 58 percent males, 35 percent females, and 7 percent children as fairly standard (Klein 1986:254). The age and gender of the slaves would have influenced their cultural knowledge. Age-grade systems and secret societies in some African groups may have limited the knowledge of burial practices to within certain groups of older, often male, individuals. Thus, transmission of cultural practices to the Americas would have been highly dependent on whether such specialists were present. It can be fairly safely assumed, however, that in most situations at least some of the males would have been old enough to have been versed in the burial practices of their culture.

The physical location of the burials may be another clue to African practices. Separate burial practices for different social groups is a common occurrence in many African societies, with the location of burials often tied to the symbolism of a group's cosmology (Chapman and Randsborg 1981:15, 17). In DeCorse's (1992:183) excavations at ElMina in Ghana, 200 burials were found under the house floors, at least one in each house excavated.

In some African societies those who died a "natural death" were distinguished from those who died in childbirth, from infectious disease, from being struck by lightning, from committing suicide, and as victims of murder or drowning. Among the Yoruba, burial of the dead generally occurred within the town boundary, under a room in their house,

whereas those who died "unnaturally" were relegated to outside the town for burial (Ojo 1976:99). Drowning victims specifically were interred at the riverbank where they had died (Ojo 1976:100).

"Natural deaths" in the Mandara Mountains of Cameroon are buried in the clan cemetery, whereas a list of "others" similar to the Yoruba case are often buried at the cemetery margins. Infants are generally interred behind the mother's hut, and clan chiefs may be buried within their house or compound. An emphasis on "belonging" is clear in some groups in the Mandara Highlands, where chiefly and other land-holding clans have separate cemeteries, and "strangers" are buried on the side of the road leading back to their village, explicitly denying their descendants land rights (David 1992: 188). In the Houlouf cemetery in Cameroon the 25 burials were all interred in an upright or seated position, and from ethnographic analogy Holl (1994:139, 168) proposes that these were members of the elite, while other members of the society were buried in other locations. Four empty marked graves may be symbolic burials of those who died away from the town and could not be brought back for burial (Holl 1994:136). Among several Ghanaian tribes burial of children occurred separately, at a crossroads. Among the Asante, children under eight days old were buried in pots in the town (Ucko 1969:271).

Placing multiple individuals in one grave is also an important trait. A cemetery consisting of 47 tombs and dated to ca. A.D. 1100 was excavated at Katoto in Zaire in the 1960s (Figure 2a; Hiernaux et al. 1972). The cemetery contained 32 single burials, and also 14 multiple burials, usually with a woman and infant, or a man, woman, and children together (Hiernaux et al. 1972:148). Two burials in the Barbados cemetery appear to have been of two individuals each, although the reason for this may have been expediency in time of disease rather than any cultural preference (Handler and Lange 1978: 193).

Subfloor burials within the house, as in the El-Mina sample from Ghana, was clearly carried to the Caribbean by slaves. Slaves in Jamaica in the late 18th century were said "sometimes" to bury family members under the bed in their house (Moreton 1790:162; cf. McDonald 1993:110). Handler and Lange have historical evidence of subfloor graves in Barbados slave houses, although the burial plot was a more common place. In the Newton Plantation cemetery child/infant burials are underrepresented. This may mean that they were buried elsewhere, or may simply be a reflection of differential bone preservation (Handler and Lange 1978:124, 174). One male adult at the Drummond Plantation near Jamestown, Virginia, dated to the 1680–1720 period, was buried away from the others and "very near a servants' quarter." This occurrence is interesting, although the ancestry of the individual is not clearly stated as African (Aufderheide et al. 1985: 357–358). In South Carolina in the 1970s the most important aspect of burial for African Americans was to be buried with other family members. Late 19th- and early 20th-century burials were not in church cemeteries in coastal South Carolina, and when church burial became commonplace the power of the clergy in being able to refuse burial in the family plot was much resented (Combes 1972: 56).

Burial in mounds seems to have been desired by many African-American groups. The slave cemetery at Newton Plantation has three mounds, each ½–1 m high, and 4½–7½ m wide, presumably built by the slaves, with burials in and around the mounds (Handler and Lange 1978:107). David Hurst Thomas and other excavators were surprised to come upon two 19th-century plantation slave burials in a native mound group on Saint Catherine's Island, Georgia. Only one mound was partially excavated, but an 1890 map had a cemetery marked in the vicinity, so presumably the mound group was used extensively by the slaves as a burial ground. Slave burials were also found in the Mississippian period temple mounds in Moundville, Alabama, but apparently have not been published (Thomas et al. 1977:412, 417). The reuse of prehistoric mounds was not an exclusively African-American practice, however, as evidenced by the Euroamerican family cemetery located in the Irene Mound near Savannah, Georgia (Aufderheide et al. 1985:358).

Grave goods placed with the body afford the most obvious evidence in an archaeological context of African influences on the burial. The type and

placement of grave goods with the corpse varies widely in African practice. In the Mandara Highlands grave goods placed with the body are limited in nature: "The overall concern . . . is to provide the departed with items either of sentimental value to them or that will serve them in good stead in the land of the dead, where they will live a life that is, it would seem, perceived as being on the whole pretty similar to the one they are leaving" (David 1992: 197). At the Houlouf cemetery Holl (1994:140) reports the inclusion of a smoking pipe, lots of stone tools, copper artifacts, and a large number of imported carnelian beads, with a maximum of 174 beads in one tomb. At ElMina the grave goods included ceramic vessels, beads, and tobacco pipes. A 1602 document from ElMina claimed that the Africans would bury all of the deceased's belongings in the grave (DeCorse 1992:183).

High-status chiefs among the Tio were reported in the late 19th century as being buried with plates, guns, and lots of other European items, but low-status burials did not emphasize grave goods (Vansina 1973:211–212). The 13th-century Katoto cemetery in Zaire had multiple ceramic vessels, iron tools, and iron jewelry in the graves (Hiernaux et al. 1972:150–153).

Peter Ucko (1969:265) provides the cautionary note that among the Nankanse of Ghana the grave goods are actually objects owned by a living person which are placed with the dead to get their soul out if it is trapped by the grave, and thus have little to do with the role of the deceased in life. Yoruba grave goods may include items of personal equipment, but do not include valuables, as these are displayed at the funeral but not placed in the grave (Ucko 1969:267). It should also be noted that funerary items, and in particular ceramics associated with the deceased in African practice, may be permanently positioned in an area of spiritual significance other than the burial site, such as the sites for clan spirit pots in Akan funerary customs (Vivian 1992). No reports have been made of such separate areas for "spirit pots" in African-American practice, but perhaps that is because they have gone unrecognized by researchers.

Documentary evidence from the New World gives an interesting example of the belief that death would mean a return to Africa, and of the need for grave goods for the journey. A slave in the southern United States in the 1830s reported on a funeral of the son of African-born slaves, into the grave of whom they placed

> a small bow and arrows; a little bag of parched meal; a miniature canoe and a little paddle (with which he said it would cross the ocean to his own country) . . . and a piece of white muslin with several curious figures painted on it . . . , by which . . . his countrymen would know the infant to be his son (Charles Ball, quoted in Roediger 1981:178).

The clearest New World archaeological example of African influence on grave goods is the "old" adult male from the Newton Plantation buried wearing three copper bracelets; one copper and two white metal finger rings, with a metal knife in the left hand; and a necklace of cowrie shells, dog canines, glass beads, fish vertebrae, and an agate bead; plus an earthenware pipe at the pelvis that was identified as a 17th-century pipe from Ghana (Handler and Lange 1978:129–131; Handler 1981).

The cowries are Indo-Pacific in origin, and served as a West African form of currency (Hogendorn and Johnson 1986). They are also present as grave goods at the Katoto cemetery in Zaire (Hiernaux et al. 1972:154).

The burial thus seems to be an example of slave access to goods from Africa, perhaps brought over by the deceased. The social role of the deceased is unknown, but some sort of special position in the slave community is certainly implied (Handler and Lange 1978:129–131). The other burials at Newton Plantation showed European clay pipes as the most common grave item, in 17 of the 92 burials (Handler and Lange 1978:123). One burial had a large fragment of a shallow red earthenware bowl located under the pelvis (Handler and Lange 1978:136). European-made glass beads, dating mostly to the first half of the 18th century, were found in eight of the burials, with two particular burials containing over 200 beads each (Handler and Lange 1978: 145). Placing a relatively large number of grave goods with the deceased was thus a practice which was present in the New World, but one which is so far only recorded for pre-1820 contexts.

The earth put into the grave, and human relationships to it, may also have had significance to

African Americans. A presumably 19th-century practice of each funeral attendant tossing a handful of earth into the grave is purported to be "in conformity with [unspecified] West African traditions" (Roediger 1981:173), although this also conforms to European Christian traditions. In courts of law in Barbados the practice of drinking grave dirt mixed with water was a form of oath taken by slave witnesses. This practice is not known from Africa, but was certainly not European in origin (Handler and Lange 1978:207). The sacredness of earth from a grave is also evident in Kongo practice, in which it is a part of "nkisi" medicine bags, and is said to embody the spirit of the deceased which can come back to serve the owner of the charm (Thompson 1983:117).

The surface material placed above the grave appears to be the most enduring material marker of African influences in the New World. In the Mandara Highlands pots are usually placed on the graves of adults, with a "variety of pots that are used by different groups to signal a limited range of statuses." The most common and obvious distinction is by gender, as certain pots are only associated with males or females (David 1992:197).

In North America the surface decoration of graves with ceramics and other objects is the most commonly recognized African-American material culture indicator of cemetery sites. William Faulkner, in *Go Down, Moses,* described a black cemetery with "shards of pottery and broken bottles and old brick and other objects insignificant to sight but actually of a profound meaning and fatal to touch, which no white man could have read" (Faulkner 1942:135; cf. Vlach 1978:139).

The 20th-century manifestations of this practice have appeared to some researchers to be miscellaneous piles of "junk" (Combes 1972:54), and include arrangements of a vast array of articles including ceramics, glassware, clocks, lamps, seashells, spoons, doll heads, lightbulbs, flashlights, false teeth, eyeglasses, cigar boxes, piggy banks, gun locks, razors, knives, tin cans, marbles, pebbles, and at least one example of a ceramic toilet tank (Vlach 1978:139). The material is still not always clearly reported and published, as with the Charleston County, South Carolina, cemetery, 38 CH 778, which had unspecified "surface materials" present (Rathbun 1987:240–241).

The earliest published example of material evidence of the practice in the New World appears to be a blue shell-edged plate, dated 1800–1818, found in the surface humus directly above the head of an excavated burial in South Carolina (Thomas et al. 1977:406). This of course does not preclude the use of artifacts as grave markers from the first arrival of Africans in the New World, as such surface remains would be particularly susceptible to disturbance by many processes including reuse of the land for purposes other than as a cemetery. Handler and Lange (1978:205–206) report documentary evidence that post-interment ceremonies in which food and drink were placed on the grave for the dead were common among Barbadian plantation slaves until the 1820s, when a major Christianization period ended them. The practice of placing the last article used by the deceased on the grave was recorded in Georgia in 1850 (Thompson 1983:134).

Early recognition of the relationship of this practice to African customs is related in correspondence in the *Journal of American Folklore* of 1891 and 1892, in which South Carolina graves with oyster shells, white pebbles, ceramics, glass bottles, and other "nondescript bric-a-brac" were described, all "broken and useless," and were compared to such items illustrated in *Century Magazine* from the Congo (Bolton 1891; Ingersoll 1892; Vlach 1978: 142). It is interesting that in this African instance locally made grave goods had by this time been replaced by European trade items, perhaps reflecting high-status associations with such goods in Africa.

What materials were placed on graves, and ethnographic testimony on the meaning of such materials, varies widely. Vansina (1973:217) describes Tio late 19th-century practice, in which a little house was often built over the grave to protect the crockery or jugs left on the mound. John Vlach records several African and American instances of surface grave decoration. A variation on the practice was noted among the Ekoi of Nigeria in 1912, with a low mud mound built over the grave and plates pressed into it all along the edges. Testimony from Alabama in the 1920s and Georgia in the

1930s stated the surface grave goods were what the person owned or used, and were to satisfy the spirit and keep it from wandering. Other 1930s Georgia testimony stated that it was important ritually to break the containers, in order to break the chain of death in the community. Graves in Gabon in the 1970s were noted to be similarly covered with diverse objects. In the United States such surface grave markers are much more common in the South, but Vlach (1978:140–147) points out that they have been recorded as far north as Staten Island, New York.

Particular categories of material have been favored in surface assemblages. The color white, evident in ceramics, shells, and pebbles, is of importance. Association with water is also evident, which took the form of water jugs, marine shells, or mirrors which served as a metaphor for water. Clocks are a 20th-century addition, and may be set either at 12 o'clock to wake the dead on Judgment Day, or at the time of the deceased's death (Vlach 1978: 140–147). White marine shells are reported on graves as wide-ranging as the Kongo, the southern United States, Haiti, and Guadeloupe. A 1912 burial in South Carolina had a large number of pressed glass hens arranged on the surface, a South Carolina grave of a child from 1967 includes a single white rooster statue, and white chicken images are known to have been placed on tombs in the Kongo. These images are perhaps related to the sacrifice of a live white chicken over the grave, a practice reported in the Caribbean in 1816 on each Christmas morning, in the Kongo in the 1880s, and at a wake in Georgia in 1939 where it was claimed to "keep the spirits away" (Thompson 1983:134–135).

Pots that had been deliberately pierced and turned upside down to symbolize the realm of the ancestors or death were reported in the Kongo in the 1970s. The practice was explained by an informant as the last strength of the dead person contained in the last objects that they used. It was repeated that the items kept the spirit in the grave, and kept it from harming the living. When the informant touched the items on his mother's tomb he later dreamed the things she wanted to tell him (Thompson 1983:134, 142).

An informant in Mississippi in the 1920s stated that the last cup and saucer used by the deceased should be put on the grave, as well as the last medicine bottles used. If medicine is still in the bottles they should be turned upside down so that the medicine goes into the grave. Cups, cut glass, bottles, and lamps were common, and it was explained that something that was "the best in the house" was more important than something used by the deceased. Cut flowers and conch shells were said to be just for "dressing up" the grave. A particularly vivid account from South Carolina in the early 1970s stated that a woman whose daughter had died had had repeated dreams of the daughter asking for her hand lotion, dreams which only stopped bothering her when she took the lotion and placed it on the grave (Combes 1972:56, 58).

If there is a general pattern to such practices, it can perhaps be related to the "liminal state" of the deceased in the belief systems of many African groups, formulated in anthropology by Robert Hertz, a student of Émile Durkheim, and further elaborated by Arnold Van Gennep. In Hertz's model the deceased is removed from the social realm through a primary funeral, but then enters a rite of passage in which the living mourn, and the deceased lingers in an ambiguous state and may intervene in human affairs, particularly if the funeral preparations are not correctly carried out (McCaskie 1989:426). Yoruba informants state that for three years after the funeral the deceased is "on his knees," i.e., only after the three years does the spirit go to heaven (Ojo 1976:108). A belief that the spirit component of the individual had to be "managed back" into the spirit world through burial ritual is stated in Asante mortuary customs as well (McCaskie 1989:428). The Tio in the late 19th century also clearly stated that the dead would often come in dreams to tell their needs or to accuse those who had bewitched them (Vansina 1973:218). African beliefs are thus clearly continued in many aspects of American mortuary practices throughout the historical period. Such practices are, however, very rare today.

The End of African Mortuary Practices

No single period exists in the history of African-American burial practices that marks the end of

African influence in the New World. Differences in community cohesion and/or isolation, the change from plantation to urban life, the influence of Christianity, and attempts to gain power in mainstream economic and political structures in the Americas all no doubt contributed to a growing marginalization and syncretization of African burial practices in the Americas. Only in rural African-American communities have practices related to an African past continued into the modern era.

The case of New Orleans provides an interesting early example of a forced end to African-American practices. As early as 1724 Catholic law required Christian slaves to have Christian burial and all New Orleans slaves to be baptized. Parish priests demanded disinterment and reburial in church cemeteries when non-Christian burials were discovered to have occurred. Thirteen African-American skeletons were excavated from a New Orleans cemetery, dating 1720–1810, with no evidence of any African practices in these church-controlled burials (Owsley et al. 1987:185–188).

The orientation of the burial appears to have been one of the first practices to become standardized. African burial orientation varied widely within and between groups. For instance, in the Mandara Highlands burial orientation ranges through seated corpses in boot-shaped tombs, "sleeping position" flexed burials in bell-shaped tombs, urn burials for some potters, and supine burials in sub-rectangular graves. The most common Mandara burial orientation was the flexed burial with the body on its side. Which side the body is laid on is often dependent on gender, and orientation of the body is related to a general concern with the east–west axis. David (1992:195) concludes that with such a variety of burial styles in the Mandara Mountains, inference of the symbolism of the body orientations solely from archaeological remains would probably be impossible. The A.D. 1500–1600 cemetery at Houlouf consisted entirely of individuals in an upright or seated position, facing to the southwest. This orientation is taken from ethnographic analogy to be a sign of high status (Holl 1994:138). For the Asante of Ghana the orientation is usually lying on the side, with the key being that the deceased must face away from the village (Ucko 1969:273).

Among the Tio of the Kongo the corpse was tied into an "N-shaped," flexed position before burial on its side in a round shaft, with a small mound on top (Vansina 1973:209). The cemetery at Katoto had both supine burials and flexed burials on their sides. Orientation was widely varying, with no single direction prevalent (Hiernaux et al. 1972: 148).

In the Americas the variation in burial orientation seems to be minimal. Fifty-five of the 58 burials at Newton Plantation for which orientation was clear were supine and on an east–west axis, 38 with the head to the west and 17 with the head to the east (Handler and Lange 1978:185). This pattern shows only minor variation from the almost universal Christian orientation of supine burial with the head to the west. In the African Burial Ground in New York City all burials seem to have been supine, with Michael Blakey stating that the majority were head to the west, and some with the head to the east. He suggests the head to the east burials may indicate Muslim practice (Harrington 1993:36). John Vlach (1978:147) sees orientation with head to the west as an African practice, "a shared African concept of the cosmos, that the world is oriented following the sun," but Handler and Lange (1978:317) correctly contradict this interpretation in pointing out the great variety of burial orientations in West Africa, some with orientation to the sea, others differentiated on the basis of gender, et cetera.

A brief description of burials at the Drummond Plantation, near Jamestown, Virginia, dating to the 1650–1720 period, suggests that "servants" of both African and European origin may have been buried together. Three adults buried in the same vicinity all had their heads to the north (Aufderheide et al. 1985:357). All burials in the Montserrat mid-18th-century cemetery that were identifiable were supine, head to the west burials (Watters 1987:301, 1994:60), and the supine, head to the west orientation of burials is universal in excavated African-American burials from the beginning of the 19th century onward in both the United States and the Caribbean (Combes 1972:54; Thomas et al. 1977: 410; Blakely and Beck 1982; Parrington 1986). In general it would seem that supine, head to the west burial was common as slaves became Christianized,

but may have been more easily accepted than other Christian concepts as it is syncretic with common African associations of life and death with the path of the sun.

The position of one Newton Plantation cemetery burial is of interest, a solitary interment of a woman in a separate mound, in a prone position, face down. Handler and Lange (1978:198–199) point out that burial face down is a practice used for ''Nyongo'' witchcraft practitioners in coastal Cameroon, in an effort to confuse the spirit so that if it attempted to leave the grave it would go the wrong way. Ethnographic testimony from African Americans in Georgia in the 1940s stated that if repeated deaths of children in a family occurred, burial face down of the last child to die would ensure that the next child would live to adulthood (Combes 1972:58). It is important to note, however, that prone burial was also practiced historically in Europe, particularly in the burial of suspected witches.

Grave goods in 19th-century African-American burials appear to be, in almost all cases, in line with European and Christian practice. Of 140 burials in the First African Baptist Church cemetery in Philadelphia, all dating between 1824 and 1842, eight had a single coin near the head, six had a single shoe placed on the coffin lid, and in two cases a ceramic plate had been placed on the stomach. The plate, although interestingly similar to the surface material common to many African-American burials, is taken as possibly related to the European practice of placing a plate of salt on the corpse to prevent it from bloating and to keep the devil away (Parrington and Wideman 1986:60–61).

The validity of these interpretations is unfortunately not substantiated with any historical documentation of such practices by local Philadelphians. A burial from South Carolina had a penny placed over each eye, conveniently dating the burial as after the 1882—latest—date on the pennies. Placing pennies over the eyes was a common 19th-century practice in many Christian burials to keep the eyes closed (Combes 1972:54). All 17 late 19th-century burials in Atlanta, Georgia, had no grave goods apart from clothing and some jewelry (Blakely and Beck 1982).

James Garman has recently completed an interesting study of the Newport, Rhode Island, ''Common Burying Ground,'' focusing on the headstones in the spatially segregated African-American section of the cemetery that date from the 1720–1830 period. These head and footstones were purchased by Euroamerican masters in the pre-emancipation period, up until the year 1800, and Garman (1994: 80–82) concludes that the headstones are more a representation of the desired virtue of the master to the community than they are a representation of the lives or culture of the slaves. After emancipation there are a series of stones commissioned by African Americans themselves. These are mostly identical to Euroamerican headstones of the same period. This may be either a representation of the desire of African Americans to be admitted into the culture of the new republic or due to fear of calling attention to any cultural differences within an overwhelmingly white society (Garman 1994:87–88).

The use of coffins also became increasingly common, and eventually universal, over time, and apparently was not common practice in African traditions. Until the 17th century in Europe, coffins were considered a high-status item, and the poor were not buried in them (Parker Pearson 1982:110). At ElMina, burial was in a specially prepared shroud up until the introduction of coffins in the late 19th century (DeCorse 1992:183). Historical evidence from Barbados shows that, in the 17th through early 19th centuries, coffins were supplied by plantation owners as a final reward for devoted slaves, and were thus an incentive toward acceptance of the dominant European ideology. They were certainly not always used (Handler and Lange 1978:191–192).

A cemetery identified as mid-18th century from a Montserrat plantation had probable coffin nails in five of nine burials, and copper stains from the pins of burial shrouds in the others (Watters 1987:303, 1994:62–63). Two early 19th-century people from a plantation in Georgia were both buried in coffins, without coffin hardware. Coffin hardware was, however, rare for any ethnic group before 1830 in North America (Thomas et al. 1977:410, 412).

By the late 19th century, African-American burials in the United States included coffins with the elaborate mass-produced hardware common to all

ethnic groups. These were essentially "high-status" coffins, but the skeletal remains of these free blacks show high trauma rates and low nutritional status. This may demonstrate an attempt by free blacks to negate the socioeconomic differences between them and other ethnic and higher-status groups. Mortuary ritual thus continued to be an opportunity in the late 19th century for expressing the symbolic ideals of African Americans. The ideals, however, had shifted from more directly African-based ones, to an attempt at the time of death to mask the socioeconomic differences between African Americans and other parts of American society (Combes 1972:54; Genovese 1972:201–202; Blakely and Beck 1982; Bell 1990:67–70).

The rise of "fundamentalist Protestantism" in the 1790–1830 period in the English-speaking Americas created an emphasis on Christian piety and obedience. This change resulted in a desire, or pressure, on slave masters to have all slaves made Christian (Patterson 1982:73). Handler and Lange (1978:213) conclude that by the late 18th century, African influences in Barbados mortuary practices were "fading out." Another important influence began in the 1820s, as both European and North American society began moving toward an emphasis on "sanitation," with new municipal cemeteries set up to replace church burial by the 1850s in most urban areas (Parker Pearson 1982:106; Blakely and Beck 1982:178). This, too, may have resulted in less control over their own burial rites by African Americans. Thus, in many cases African-American burials by the mid-19th century, and in some cases well before that date, had become indistinguishable from the burials of any other ethnic group in America.

The Future

There is a clear need in formulations of African burial practices in the New World to have a much larger database of published excavated material. Handler and Lange's Barbados excavation is the only thoroughly researched and published pre-1800 cemetery of African Americans, and in itself has shown the great difference between such early practices and the 19th-century practices which have been shown by other excavations. The recent New York City finds (Harrington 1993) have demonstrated the importance of descendant community—in this case African-American—involvement in the excavation and research of African-American burials. Despite any controversy involved, or perhaps in this case because of it, an opportunity is provided for greater community involvement in their own heritage. Both the descendant group itself, and all members of society, are shown the key contributions and role that that group has played in American history.

Most, if not all, future African-American burial excavations will probably be undertaken through salvage archaeology efforts. The negative consequences of this are clear, in the minimization of time and investment involved in properly researching and excavating burials which are threatened by development. It is essential that a coordinated historical, biological, and archaeological research effort be made to recognize African-American burials, to protect them from destruction, to maximize the information gained from them when excavation is inevitable, and to publish the results in an accessible format. It is difficult to place such a heavy burden on contract archaeologists alone, and thus the solution for the future may be a coordinated effort between contract archaeologists and university- or museum-based archaeologists when important finds such as the recent New York City burials are initially discovered.

Conclusions

Mortuary remains are a form of ritual communication in which fundamental social values are expressed (Parker Pearson 1982:100). The control of symbolic instruments such as mortuary practices by slave owners and overseers was an attempt to alienate the slaves from claims of belonging to a legitimate social order, and instead to make the master–slave relationship the dominant cultural force (Patterson 1982:5). Yet, did African Americans really cease to have any control over such symbolism and practice?

A 19th-century master in Georgia objected to, but

did not end, the use of African drums to announce slave funerals (Roediger 1981:168). Handler and Lange have shown significant African-American practices in excavated burials. If any conclusions are valid for the limited data available, they would seem to indicate that African Americans before 1800 had control over their own burial practices in many cases, and with that control they chose to practice much of what their ancestors had emphasized for proper burial. The burial practices of the late 19th-century urban, predominantly Christian, African-American communities in centers such as Philadelphia and Atlanta had very different concerns. These focused more on Christian piety and on the denial of the economic hardships that their communities faced in life, through use of dominant-culture symbols such as elaborate industrially produced coffins.

Funerals may have been one of the few times that antebellum slave communities could assume control of the symbolism around them, and thus create the dignity at death that negated the "social death" of their slave status. In the burial practices of many cultures we see an area in which social groups are afforded the possibility of reviewing the past, and thus both reaffirming cultural consent for particular relationships, and also disputing other traditional power relationships. The end of the liminal state for the deceased can also be seen as the reconciliation of cultural ideals with the new power structure (McCaskie 1989:430). For antebellum African Americans the power structure was, however, further complicated by the slave relationship. We see rapid shifts toward more European practices in various African-American communities at widely varying periods in their history. In other communities, however, African Americans continue practices which are not of Euroamerican origin, despite the immense difficulties of adapting to Euroamerican cultural, religious, and economic domination.

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