

Keeping the Devil at Bay: The Shoe on the Coffin Lid and Other Grave Charms in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-century America

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Abstract Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century graves excavated archaeologically in the United States are occasionally found in association with objects beyond the typical clothing or coffin hardware, such as ceramic vessels, coins, and perhaps most mysterious of all, a single shoe placed on the lid of the coffin or casket. Not clearly described in archival accounts, the single shoe phenomenon within a mortuary context is argued here to be a creolized practice, combining an African cosmology and belief in the liminal state of the soul after death with a European and especially British Isles tradition of shoes as magical objects and potential traps for evil.

Keywords African-American · Creolization · Folk beliefs · Bioarchaeology · African religions · Funeral traditions

Introduction

The first historic period burials excavated archaeologically in the United States, in the 1930s through 1960s, were almost exclusively those of Native Americans (e.g., Abrams 1965; Reed 1939; Schuetz 1968; Woolfenden 1969). By the 1970s, the graves of other cultures and ethnicities were beginning to be viewed as archaeological resources; exhumed not out of scientific curiosity, but because they were threatened by development. Many of these early projects were associated with African-Americans (Blakey 2001; Burnston and Thomas 1981; Davidson 2004a, pp. 10–11; Parrington et al. 1989; Rose 1985).

One of the pioneering efforts of historic cemetery archaeology occurred in the early 1980s with the excavation of the First African Baptist Church (FABC) Cemetery (8th and Vine) in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The archaeological firm John Milner and Associates, led by Michael Parrington, recovered 144 burials (of

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which 135 had skeletal preservation) with estimated dates of interment ranging from 1824 to 1842 (McCarthy 1997, p. 370; Parrington et al. 1989; Rankin-Hill 1997, pp. 24–25).

While these burials were associated with typical artifacts including remnants of clothing, coffin fragments and occasional coffin hardware, there were also unusual objects in the graves, including ceramic plates, unmodified coins, and perhaps most inexplicable—the simple presence of a shoe lying atop a coffin lid (McCarthy 1997, p. 376). The recovery of a single shoe or boot on the lid of a coffin might be explained away as an accident, an incidental object that was in the grave fill when backfilling, except that the “accident” was repeated at least six times at the FABC Cemetery (Burials 46, 66, 81, 91, 105, 144; see Table 1 and below).

The inclusion of unique effects can be interpreted in various ways, dependant upon the artifact, the individual, and the prevailing social custom. While determining motivations decades or hundreds of years removed from the funeral event can be problematic, there are three major trajectories that account for any recovered artifacts: incidental inclusions that inadvertently fell into the grave while back filling or were accidentally left on the person of the deceased (e.g., objects retained in a pocket after death); inclusions left in the coffin or casket by the undertaker or funeral home (either deliberately or by accident); and objects purposely placed by surviving family or friends—either in the coffin, on top of the coffin lid, superficially or within the grave fill, or at the base of the grave shaft adjacent to the burial container. It is the last category of inclusion that offers the greatest insight into the deceased and the survivors’ worldview, religion, and performance of identity, but an insight only derived if the correct interpretation of the original intent can be discerned. Which objects were truly mundane, placed with the deceased out of simple sentiment, and which were afforded supernatural or spiritual status?

Death is a fundamental aspect of any culture and the treatment of the dead lies at the core of any religious belief system. During enslavement, however, such expressions of freedom were often denied. Narratives of former slaves collected in the 1930s by the Federal Writer’s Project describe antebellum funeral events that range from the insensitive to cases of utter brutality (Davidson 2004a, pp. 112–115; Roediger 1981). All of this changed with Emancipation. When freedom came, African-Americans also acquired the freedom over how their dead would be laid to rest; but what form would these burial treatments take? What elements of traditional, African-derived funeral practices would prevail within the pervasive white-defined Beautification of Death Movement of the nineteenth century (Bell 1990, 1994; Farrell 1980; Richmond 1999)?

Arguably the most recognizable elements of African culture practiced by African-Americans into the twentieth century were mortuary traditions. Robert Farris Thompson (1984, p. 132), a leading authority on African art and spirituality, states without hesitation that “Nowhere is Kongo-Angola influence on the New World more pronounced, more profound, than in black traditional cemeteries throughout the South of the United States.” The most typical grave inclusions associated with African-American burials of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are household ceramics (i.e., whiteware bowls, plates, cups, saucers) and medicine bottles, defined by Davidson (2004a, pp. 310–312) as “Core Elements of Spirituality.” These objects are not obviously personal (i.e., *beloved* personal

possessions of the deceased), but rather may be interpreted through historical accounts as objects associated with the moment of death (e.g., containing the last meal at the bedside), and through this association spiritually charged, at times even imbued with the spirit of the deceased.

As one of Newbell Niles Puckett's (1926, p. 104) informants put it in his 1926 study of Southern Black folk beliefs: "to keep the deceased from coming back again, the cup and saucer used in the last illness should be placed on the grave. The medicine bottles are placed there also—turned upside down with the corks loosened so that the medicine may soak into the grave." From Central Alabama in 1925 is this description: "A Gullah negro on the Santee river explained to me that it was their custom to place the last plate, the last glass and spoon used before death on the grave" (Puckett 1926, p. 104). In a decidedly similar practice, a cup, knife and fork were described by one early twentieth-century researcher as objects commonly placed on a grave (Brewster et al. 1952, p. 260).

Such ceramic vessels and medicinal items are a class of grave inclusion intimately associated with the dying individual at the moment of death—their presence in part based on the belief that elements of the deceased's soul may have been attracted to and become trapped in these objects—arguably a demonstration of a direct and unbroken linkage between West African belief and material symbol (Thompson 1984, 1990, pp. 167–172). Other traditional mortuary rituals practiced by African-Americans since the nineteenth century, however, actually originated within Europe and Western thought, with particular objects and mortuary specific rituals that come into play only *after* the death of the individual.

One example is the placement of coins with the deceased, which is one of the most universally recognized burial traditions. This practice is an ancient one, and in the Western World can be traced as early as the Greek and Roman civilizations, with the earliest documented reference dating to about 470 BCE. The Greek belief behind this practice is one of paying the ferryman in the underworld to take the soul of the deceased over the River Styx (Johnson 1912, pp. 295–296; Merrifield 1988, p. 67; Puckle 1926, p. 51). In the British Isles, one early reference to the placing of a coin or coins in the grave was published in 1686, but actually refers to the early 1600s: "When I was a Boy (before the Civil-wars) I heard 'em tell that in the old times they used to put a Penny in dead persons mouth to give to St. Peter: and I think that they did so in Wales and in the north country" (Britten 1881, p. 159).

Coins, especially in the eyes or near the head and often used to close the eyelids of the deceased, are known archivally and at times found archaeologically in burials that date to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and on both sides of the Atlantic, demonstrating nearly 3,000 years of tradition (Davidson 2004a, pp. 334–335; 350–357; Hole 1940, p. 53; Hyatt 1935, p. 588; Koch 1983; McPherson 1929, p. 124).

African-American burials, including both the FABC Cemetery (McCarthy 1997) and the Freedman's Cemetery in Dallas (Davidson 2004a, pp. 316–319), have been found in association with one or two coins, often near the head, or even still *in situ* in the eye orbits or mouth. While some have argued that the presence of a *single* coin is an "Africanism," or a practice directly derived from African culture (McCarthy 1997), it is clear that the tradition of one or two coins is one well grounded in Western thought and well documented in Western European culture at least since the

Table 1 All documented burials associated with a single shoe on the lid of a coffin/casket

Cemetery	Burial	“Race”	Age	Sex	Date range	Loci on coffin lid
Single shoe recovered on the lid of a coffin						
Freedman’s Cemetery (41DL316), Dallas, TX	1484	Black	0.42 years	subadult	1901	over pelvis
Freedman’s Cemetery (41DL316), Dallas, TX	343	Black	1.4 years	subadult	1900	over upper thorax
FABC Cemetery (8th & Vine), Philadelphia, PA	46	Black	39 to 44 years	F	1823–1842	over foot end of coffin
FABC Cemetery (8th & Vine), Philadelphia, PA	66	Black	30 to 39 years	M	1823–1842	over sternum
FABC Cemetery (8th & Vine), Philadelphia, PA	81	Black	27 to 39 years	M	1823–1842	leather & iron buckle over knees
FABC Cemetery (8th & Vine), Philadelphia, PA	91	Black	20 years	F	1823–1842	over right shoulder
FABC Cemetery (8th & Vine), Philadelphia, PA	105	Black	“mature adult”	F	1823–1842	no detailed description in report
FABC Cemetery (8th & Vine), Philadelphia, PA	144	Black	12 year old	F?	1823–1842	“two adult size shoes were found, one of which had fallen down below the coffin”

Table 1 (continued)

Cemetery	Burial	“Race”	Age	Sex	Date range	Loci on coffin lid
Becky Wright Cemetery (3CW922), AR	11	White	15 years, ± 36 months	F	1890–1900	over sternum
Probable shoe in association with coffin lid {not mentioned in site report (Parrington et al. 1989), but illustrated in Parrington and Roberts 1990}						
FABC Cemetery (8th & Vine), Philadelphia, PA	143	Black	4 months	subadult	1823–1842	Adult sized shoe over head (Parrington and Roberts 1990)
Shoe buckle found near head						
FABC Cemetery (8th & Vine), Philadelphia, PA	12	Black	35 to 50 years	M	1823–1842	cuprous buckle on cranium
FABC Cemetery (8th & Vine), Philadelphia, PA	16	Black	25 to 32 years	M	1823–1842	small buckle near left shoulder
Shoe leather found with burial, but unclear if in direct association						
FABC Cemetery (8th & Vine), Philadelphia, PA	98	Black	“Newborn”	subadult	1823–1842	no detailed description in report
FABC Cemetery (8th & Vine), Philadelphia, PA	100	Black	21 years	F	1823–1842	no detailed description in report
FABC Cemetery (8th & Vine), Philadelphia, PA	101	Black	47+ years	M	1823–1842	no detailed description in report
FABC Cemetery (8th & Vine), Philadelphia, PA	90	Black	29 to 42 years	F	1823–1842	no detailed description in report

sixteenth century. The phenomenon among both twentieth-century Africans (e.g., Parrinder 1961, p. 107) and African-Americans since at least the nineteenth century arguably is a creolized practice, a fusion of European symbols used within analogous and African-derived belief systems (Fig. 1).

But what of the multiple instances of a single shoe found on a coffin lid in early nineteenth-century black Philadelphia? What is the rationale for its presence, and from which culture is the practice derived? Although far from ubiquitous, coins recovered archaeologically with the dead are instantly recognizable and can be situated within a well-documented tradition of some antiquity. The practice of placing a single shoe on top of the lid of a coffin or casket, before it is lowered down into the grave, is much more mysterious but of such a consistent form and context as to be more than mere coincidence.

Such features have been documented in graves from three American cemeteries: the First African Baptist Church Cemetery, dating to the early nineteenth century in Philadelphia; the Freedman's Cemetery in downtown Dallas, Texas, dating to the early twentieth century (Davidson 2004a); and the Becky Wright Cemetery, in rural Crawford County, Arkansas, and dating to the late nineteenth century (Mainfort and Davidson 2006) (see Table 1). The first two examples are African-American, while the last example is likely Euroamerican.

The Strange Case of a Shoe on a Coffin Lid

First African Baptist Church Cemetery, Philadelphia, PA

At the First African Baptist Church Cemetery (8th and Vine) excavations in Philadelphia in the 1980s, in addition to the previously discussed six burials associated with shoes on their coffin lids, three other burials (90, 100, 101) had shoe leather found with them, but it was “unclear if they were directly associated”

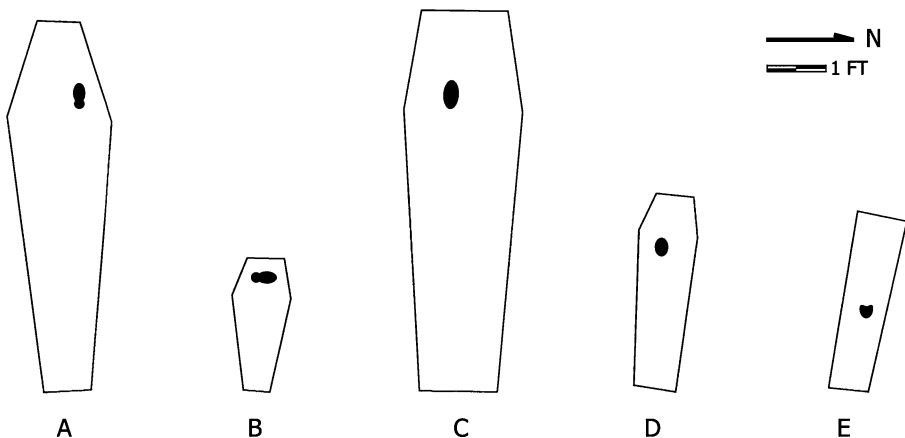


Fig. 1 Silhouettes representing the location of a single shoe on the lid of coffins from three different cemeteries (a – Burial 66, FABC Cemetery; b – Burial 143, FABC Cemetery; c – Burial 11, Becky Wright Cemetery; d – Burial 343, Freedman’s Cemetery; e- Burial 1484, Freedman’s Cemetery)

(Parrington et al. 1989, pp. 73–74), while two other burials were each associated with a small cuprous buckle, interpreted as shoe buckles, found on top of the cranium (Burial 12) and near the left shoulder (Burial 16). Finally, Burial 90 was associated with shoe leather, but the report lacks the detail to understand its relationship with the body or burial container.

Further, there may have been the same practice at the cemetery associated with an earlier First African Baptist Church congregation, located just two blocks away at 10th and Vine Streets. Eighty-five individuals were exhumed from this cemetery in 1990, which dates from 1810 to 1822 (Crist et al. 1996). A single shoe was found adjacent to one excavated coffin, but since it was not *in situ* on the coffin lid, its association is uncertain (McCarthy 1997, pp. 371, 376). None of the individuals at either FABC Cemetery were additionally found with evidence of shoes being worn on the feet of the deceased.

When comparing between different published sources, there is an apparent discrepancy regarding a particular burial's association with a single shoe. The official archaeological report on the FABC Cemetery (8th and Vine) (Parrington et al. 1989) cites the above number and identities of burials associated with a single shoe. However, the article by Parrington and Roberts (1990, p. 152) published in 1990 illustrates Burial 143, which is obviously a young child or infant's coffin (approximately 2.5 ft [76.2 cm] long), with a "single shoe sole on top of the coffin lid." The problem is that this burial and its shoe goes unmentioned in the original report. In fact, in the list of all burials with any associated artifacts, Burial 143 does not appear. Although not mentioned at all in the archaeological report (Parrington et al. 1989), it is enumerated in the list of burials with skeletal material in the accompanying osteological report, and is described as an infant, aged four months (Kelley and Angel 1989, p. 67).

The FABC Cemetery (8th and Vine) was unusual in part because of the unique configuration of the graves. Since the church only had a small backyard space to use for interments, the practice of purposely stacking graves was common. The FABC researchers noted that the burials associated with shoes on the coffin lids were all from the deepest strata, with later burials stacked atop them. At this greater depth soil conditions were more constantly moist, and had little air exchange, forming an environment more favorable for the preservation of organic materials such as shoe leather. Many of the more shallow, and therefore more recent burials may also have originally been interred in association with a single shoe, but if present simply did not survive due to poorer preservation overall (Parrington et al. 1989, p. 73–75). Thus, the phenomenon may have been even more common than known from these extant examples.

Freedman's Cemetery, Dallas, TX

Dozens of historic cemeteries were excavated in the United States after the FABC cemetery project in the early 1980s, and no other case of a single shoe associated with a burial or burial container was revealed (or at least reported) until the Freedman's Cemetery excavations in the early 1990s (see Davidson 2004a, pp. 323–326, for a systematic survey of some 45 historic cemetery excavations).

Freedman's Cemetery was the principal burial ground for African-Americans of Dallas, Texas, between the years 1869 and 1907. Due to the necessity of expansion of North Central Expressway (State Highway 75), in the late 1980s a pedestrian

survey was conducted along the proposed route. Freedman's Cemetery lay along the highway expansion right-of-way, and this, along with later revelations that previous highway construction had paved over substantial portions of the cemetery in the 1940s, necessitated the Texas Department of Transportation to create the Freedman's Cemetery Archaeological Project. Between November 1991 and August 1994, meticulous and continuous excavations by over 50 personnel resulted in the archaeological investigation of nearly 1 ac (0.40 ha) of the 4-ac (1.62 ha) cemetery, and the exhumation, documentation, and analysis of 1,150 unmarked burials containing the remains of 1,157 individuals (Condon et al. 1998; Davidson 1999, 2000, 2004a, b, 2007, 2008; Davidson et al. 2002; Peter et al. 2000).

At Freedman's Cemetery, along with other articles of clothing such as buttons and buckles, 67 individuals were interred wearing shoes on their feet (Owens 2000, pp. 427–428). Beyond these mundane shoe associations, however, a single shoe was associated with the *lids* of coffins in two instances. Freedman's Burial 1484, containing the remains of an infant less than one year of age, had an *adult sized* shoe placed with the burial, observable at the time of exhumation as a leather shoe heel directly on top of the coffin lid and centered over the pelvis of the dead child. This burial has an estimated date of interment of 1901 (within the broader Late Period, 1900–07; Davidson 1999).

The other example of a shoe on a lid of a coffin at Freedman's is Burial 343, a subadult (1.34 years). The shoe was placed atop the wooden window cover panel of the coffin, which would have positioned the shoe directly above the right thorax/shoulder of the child. Burial 343 has been assigned to the Late Period with an estimated interment date of 1900 (Davidson 1999). Although the shoe recovered on the coffin lid was fragmentary (approximately 10 cm long) and difficult to determine if it fit an adult or child, remnants of a pair of child-sized shoes were also found at the feet of Burial 343 and well within the coffin, and so it is unlikely that the single shoe on the lid was the personal clothing of the deceased child.

Becky Wright Cemetery, Crawford County, AR

The Becky Wright Cemetery, in Crawford County, Arkansas, was located on a terrace above the shore of Lake Fort Smith. Between approximately 1870 and 1900, this burial ground served the needs of a small Euroamerican community scattered along Frog Bayou in the vicinity of the town of Chester. The cemetery was contained within a 2-ac (0.81-ha) tract of land that was deeded to the Methodist Episcopal Church South in 1854 for use as a campground (Mainfort and Davidson 2006).

Archaeological excavations in 2001 located 10 interments, with seven individuals represented by preserved skeletal remains. Commercial tombstones were associated with three individuals, while the remaining graves were marked only with fieldstones and yucca plants. Three burials at the Wright Cemetery contained unique artifacts that were not elements of jewelry or clothing, but rather were personal artifacts that likely illustrate knowledge of and adherence to specific vernacular folk beliefs. Specifically, a single riding spur found with an adult male (Burial 5), a tablespoon found with an infant (Burial 12), and finally, a single shoe found lying on the coffin lid of Burial 11 (Davidson 2006, pp. 199–201).

Burial 11 was identified as a young adult female, aged 16 years (+/–36 months), interred in a wooden, hexagonal coffin, ornamented with only thumbscrews and

cheap, out-of-fashion ornamental tacks in the form of white metal “dummy screws.” Although presumed to be of European ancestry (given the history of the burial ground), skeletal preservation was poor overall for this interment so a racial assessment could not be determined based on osteological measures alone. Although her grave was unmarked and therefore undated, the estimated date of interment (based on associated artifacts) was some time between 1890 and 1900. This young woman was interred wearing a dress outfitted with elaborate black glass buttons depicting a butterfly alighting on a leaf, suggestive of mourning clothes. Although not interred *wearing* shoes, a single poorly preserved leather shoe was recovered on the coffin lid, exhibiting partial uppers with eyelets. The shoe was centered on the lid just above the upper chest/sternum (Davidson 2006, pp. 153–154; Davidson et al. 2006, pp. 64–65).

First Interpretations

These examples from three cemeteries spanning nearly a century establish that the practice of placing a shoe on a coffin lid was not restricted to any one narrow age demographic or gender, as the association includes infants and teenagers, to adult men and women. Further, there does seem to be a preference to positioning the shoe over the head or upper thorax of the deceased, with the shoes often in very clear alignment with, or lying perpendicular to, the burial’s long axis. The shoe can also be seen in a minority of cases, however, over the pelvis (one example) or over the lower legs or feet (two cases) (see Table 1).

In the earliest substantive publication on the FABC Cemetery excavations, Michael Parrington (1987, p. 60) offers the first explanation of the shoe on the lid phenomenon: “material possessions are required for the journey to the spirit world, and items such as coins or shoes can be interpreted as objects needed for that journey.” By 1990, however, Parrington and Roberts (1990, p. 150) offered an alternative interpretation. Citing Newbell Niles Puckett’s 1926 study, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*, they argue instead that: “Shoes also have connotations of power, as represented by a black folk belief that the burial of a shoe will keep the devil away.”

This specific account was actually not collected by Puckett himself, but was rather a paraphrase from the 1896 study of folk beliefs collected by Fanny D. Bergen. Her collection of “current” folklore of the English-speaking peoples of the United States and Canada notes from one informant in Chestertown, Maryland (Note No. 1395) (Bergen 1896, p. 42), “Old shoes, particularly the soles, were often buried by negro servants on Monday morning to keep the devil down through the week.” By referencing the Maryland informant in the 1890s, Parrington and Roberts are apparently arguing that a belief in shoes as potential supernatural objects has an African basis or origin.

Beyond the work of Parrington and Roberts (1990), the researcher offering the most comprehensive interpretation for the practice in Philadelphia of shoes on coffin lids is John McCarthy (1997, 2004, 2006). McCarthy (1997) initially argued that the custom is African-derived, and in its “practice,” these black Philadelphians were consciously *performing* their African ethnicity amid pressures to conform to the cultural norms of white America.

McCarthy, however, did not give any source for his central premise, that this practice and the presumed belief system behind it is of African origin, save for a less

than satisfactory argument that only a *single* shoe is offered as a metaphor of a journey. The sole citation he gives to bolster his claim as to its African origin is Geoffrey Parrinder's (1961) synthesis of West African Religion. But Parrinder did not actually refer to any specific usage of shoes in West African mortuary contexts. On the page cited by McCarthy (Parrinder 1961, p. 107), Parrinder is speaking of several different funeral practices (although largely of the Ashanti) that include grave inclusions, such as coins placed on the wrists or on top of the burial container to help pay the dead's passage in the afterlife. While many of these objects and actions are material metaphors for a journey, which the single shoe in a burial context certainly might be, this broad correlation is too weak to bear much weight alone.

By 2004 (and reiterated in 2006), however, McCarthy instead proposed the possibility that the practice of placing shoes on the coffin lids in Philadelphia may instead have "originated in Europe, for in southern England and parts of northern continental Europe shoes were used as house charms from Medieval times into the nineteenth century" (McCarthy 2004, p. 30, 2006, p. 179). This later interpretation, McCarthy now stresses, is one based within the idea of "African-influenced, creolized adaptations of European material culture and perhaps European folk practices as well" (McCarthy 2004, p. 32, 2006, p. 180).

While all of these interpretations are interesting, and the implications for any of them potentially profound, McCarthy is not forthcoming with any substantive evidence that could bolster any case. Is the origin of the custom entirely grounded within one or several of the eighteenth- or nineteenth-century cultures of West or Central Africa, and the retention and practice of this act by African descended peoples a powerful statement of cultural survival and triumph under enormous pressures to conform to white society? Alternatively, can the practice of placing a single shoe on the coffin with the dead ultimately trace its origin to one or more of the cultures of Europe, and the practice of this custom in early nineteenth-century black Philadelphia a demonstration of direct acculturation? Finally, is the shoe on the coffin lid a creolized practice, combining aspects of African and European custom or belief?

In framing the possibilities, these arguments certainly do recapitulate the two major rationale used to interpret African-American culture for well over a century. Many late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writers of folklore and ethnography assumed (often in a condescending and racist undertone) that African-Americans had irretrievably lost any substantive African cultural heritage during the horrors of the Middle Passage and enslavement (save for the Uncle Remus stories and similar oral traditions; e.g., Garrett 1966, p. 243; Mixon 1990; Smith 1984, pp. 50–51).

They further believed that any of the traditions or folk belief in Black America viewed as superstitious were more often than not direct borrowings from Euroamericans, and by maintaining these borrowed practices African-Americans only demonstrated their derivative and "primitive nature," since it was argued, whites had long since abandoned these same practices and embraced modernity. These views were wrong on all counts; in working class and rural communities throughout the country, whites continued many of these same traditions and so-called "primitive" folk beliefs brought to America from Europe. Further, despite the brutality of the Middle Passage and centuries of enslavement in the Americas,

vestiges of African-derived or influenced belief systems demonstrably did survive in the United States well into the twentieth century (Bolton 1891; Brown and Cooper 1990; Chireau 2003; Combes 1974; Davidson 2004b; Fennell 2003, 2007; Herskovitz 1966, 1990; Holloway 1990; Ingersoll 1892; Jordan 1982, pp. 18, 21; Lee 1892; Mitchell 1975; Moore 1980; Moore 1892; Orser 1994; Porter 1894; Puckett 1926; Russell 1997; Shearin 1911; Shepherd 1967; Showers 1967; Thompson 1984).

By the late twentieth century, a sea change had occurred, with many anthropologists and archaeologists often interpreting every unusual artifact or practice associated with African-Americans as a demonstration of the endurance of African culture, and in a vindicationist frame—and their presence celebrated as a heretofore hidden element of African heritage (e.g., Agbe-Davies 2008, pp. 414–415; Brown and Cooper 1990; McCarthy 1997; Mullins 2008; Russell 1997; Wilkie 1995; Young 1996).

Certainly such a material expression of belief as a single shoe on a coffin lid could conceivably be contained within the myriad cultures, languages, cosmologies and spiritual beliefs of Western and Central Africa of the fifteenth through early nineteenth centuries. But is this particular custom of African origin?

An African Origin?

To test the potential of an African origin for the curious practice of shoes on coffin lids, I conducted an extensive survey of African historical accounts and ethnographic literature concerned with spiritual belief systems and mortuary events spanning the early seventeenth through late twentieth centuries. In this survey I do not presuppose an unchanging stability or continuity of African cultures, with specific traditions held suspended within a timeless ethnographic present. Rather, I was searching for two potentially related but still distinctive things: first the presence or use of a shoe or shoes as a material symbol within a spiritual or mortuary context in any of several African cultures, and second (especially if failing at the first), to explore if the belief underlying this practice exhibited within early nineteenth-century Black Philadelphia may have an African basis or antecedent.

In his innovative exploration of everyday objects recovered from nineteenth-century African-American contexts modified with or aligned to form simple crosses or “X’s”, Christopher Fennell explored their similarities to the cosmogram—“Tendwa kia nza-n’ kongo,” which is the primary religious symbol of the historic Bakongo people—from a cultural area now contained within the modern borders of Congo, Gabon, Republic of Congo, and Angola (Fennell 2003). Because there are no direct connections that can now be established between Bakongo people and those black Americans living within these specific contexts and manipulating these symbols, Fennell (2003, 2007, p. 47) consciously employed the method of direct ethnographic analogy to explore their possible linkages.

The methods I pursued here, however, are more akin to the Direct Historic Method than ethnographic analogy, the former term coined by Waldo Wedel (1938) in his study of Pawnee prehistory, and first explicitly employed on the American Great Plains in the 1920s and 1930s. The Direct Historic Method uses knowledge

derived from the historic period as a set of cultural norms upon which one might model the prehistoric or protohistoric past. The method works best when using historic accounts of a specific culture or ethnic group, and projecting that knowledge into the recent past in the same geographically bounded space. In the case of the shoe and coffin lid phenomenon, the transatlantic *distances* between these African and African-American cultures are admittedly vast, but not particularly temporal, inasmuch as the majority of these comparisons are actually *contemporaneous* with the mortuary practice known to span the nineteenth to early twentieth centuries.

For those accounts that occurred prior to circa 1800 (the earliest dating to 1602; De Marees 1987), the rationale was to establish if the use of a shoe in a mortuary context may have had an early origin in any of the documented cultures of Central or West Africa that was subsequently lost within the parent culture due to disruptions suffered under the Slave Trade. Alternatively, the accounts that extend into the late twentieth century (e.g., Glaze 1981) were examined to establish if a use of a shoe or shoes in a mortuary context might be extant within any number of African cultures whose presence may easily have been missed in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century ethnographic accounts.

In short, within this vast literature I have failed to find a single reference to a mortuary practice involving a shoe or shoes and the physical grave. Although it seemed prudent to survey cultures from the entire continent, the focus was on the historical and ethnographic literature of West and Central Africa. During the Transatlantic slave trade, the vast majority of enslaved peoples arriving on the shores of North America in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were taken from West Africa and particularly the Bight of Biafra, Gold Coast and Guinea Coast regions (Richardson 1989, p. 13).

Upper Guinea Coast

Among the Upper Guinea coast of West Africa, there are no references to shoes, either in everyday domestic contexts or as part of mortuary ritual (e.g., Parrinder 1961), stretching back as early as Pieter de Marees' (1987) account of 1602. However, the presence of grave inclusions in a generic sense is described in the De Marees (1987, p. 182) 1602 account, where all of the deceased possessions are buried in the grave with him or her, or placed atop the ground adjacent or over the grave.

Ludwig Ferdinand Romer (2000, p. 184), a Danish merchant working in the Gold Coast of Africa (modern Ghana) who published an account of his experiences in 1760, in his admittedly brief reference to funerals also fails to describe shoes in association with the death event. In early twentieth-century Sierra Leone, Northcote Thomas (1916, pp. 118–131) examined the burial practices among several different cultures (Susu, Loko, Koranko, Limba); none contain the existence or significance of shoes in either domestic or mortuary contexts.

The Vai speaking peoples of Liberia and Sierra Leone, although predominately Muslim, still maintain traditional beliefs in spirits and conjuration. In the early twentieth century, the American diplomat Ellis (1914, p. 87) studied various aspects of their culture and death ritual, which includes a belief in leaving grave goods: "They think that the dead also need clothes or something to wear, and so they carry

to the graves white cloth. All these articles are left at the grave, and it is thought that the spirit of the deceased will come for them.” Again, although there is a stated relationship to cloth that will be worn by the spirit, no reference to shoes, and specifically no reference to a single shoe representing a metaphor for a journey is present.

Gold Coast

Shoes, or even analogous symbols and inclusions, are not documented in the burial practices of late twentieth-century Frafra people of Northeastern Ghana (Smith 1987), nor among the Akan of Ghana (Fisher 1998). The early twentieth-century Ga people of Ghana also fail to demonstrate a use of a shoe or shoes in the funeral event (Field 1937, pp. 198–205). The famous ethnographer A. B. Ellis noted in some detail the funeral practices of the Tshi speaking peoples of the 1880s. Although coffins are used, and elaborate objects for the wealthy are interred with the deceased, including gold nuggets and gold dust sprinkled on the body, no direct references to shoes are given (Ellis 1887, pp. 237–243).

In a detailed, late twentieth-century ethnography of the art and culture of the Senufo people of the Ivory Coast (and bordering countries), Anita Glaze (1981, pp. 149–193) noted the funeral rituals involved for various levels of Senufo society. Although clothing, in the form of folded cloth, is often interred with the deceased in some abundance, no shoes for a spiritual journey are present. Rattray and colleagues (1959), who spent several decades studying the Ashanti people of modern Ghana in the early twentieth century, noted with extreme detail the funeral rituals of both royalty and common people, and although cloth is given as grave goods, no reference to a shoe or shoes is present.

Few historic period burials in Africa have been documented archaeologically, with the most extensive being the excavations conducted by Christopher DeCorse at the site of Elmina, in Ghana. Elmina was an African settlement prior to European contact, but later became the Dutch headquarters in the Gold Coast. It served as such until 1872, when the Dutch ceded their claims to the region to the British (DeCorse 1992, 2001). Approximately 200 burials (spanning the 1400s to the abandonment of the site in 1873) were excavated. DeCorse does not describe any shoes found in the excavated graves, or similar objects that could serve as direct metaphors for a journey.

Bight of Biafra

The anthropologist N. W. Thomas (1917) conducted an extensive and highly detailed survey of the burial customs in use within several Ibo villages just before World War One. Beyond cloth, woven matting or the occasional wooden coffin to protect the body, very few grave goods are placed with the deceased save for cowry shell and other beads, food, and animals sacrificed and buried whole or in part. No shoes or other articles of clothing are ever described. James Walker (1877) published an early study of the Calabar people, and although he describes the placement of expensive personal possessions in the grave shaft of the deceased chief, no shoes or analogous symbols of journeys are noted. So too, in documenting modern Kalabari

funerals, Eicher and Erekosima (1987) note a great many objects laid out with the dead, in display prior to burial, but shoes are not mentioned.

Although Meek (1931a, pp. 218–227), in his book-length study of the Jukun speaking peoples of early twentieth-century Nigeria, details various aspects of the funeral event, he fails to describe shoes or objects directly associated with a journey. Meek (1931b, c) also published a two-volume study of numerous tribes in early twentieth-century northern Nigeria. Specifically, Meek documented various aspects of over two dozen ethnic groups, including the Bachama, Mbula, the Bata speaking peoples of the former Adamawa Emirate, the Bura and Pabir Tribes, The Kilba and Margi peoples, the Chama, the Verre, the Mumuye, and smaller tribes of the Zaria, Bornu, and Adamawa Provinces (Meek 1931b, c). Within many of these cultures, Meek gives detailed accounts of their mortuary ritual, and none of these groups used a shoe or shoes in the funeral event, or as a material metaphor for a journey.

Among the Igala people of Northern Nigeria, R. Sydney Seton (1929, 1930) observed in detail many different aspects of the culture, including the acts that occur with death and burial. No shoes or analogous symbols were noted.

Central Africa

In Central Africa, Sheane (1906 p. 157) observed the burial practices of the Awemba tribe of Zambia (former Northern Rhodesia) in the first decade of the twentieth century, and although these practices are described in some detail, the only grave inclusions noted are “food and calico, and his pipe.” In the late nineteenth century, Heli Chatelain (1896, pp. 16–17) wrote of several aspects of Angolan Culture, including funerals, and did not note the use of a shoe or shoes or analogous symbols.

Robert Milligan (1912, pp. 145–157), a white missionary working in Central coastal Africa in the first decade of the twentieth century among the people of modern day Cameroon, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, and the Congo, described in some detail various aspects of the funeral event, but again there was a complete absence of shoes or similar metaphorical objects. Rev. John Roscoe (1922), who lived in the Bunyoro region of modern Uganda in East Central Africa during the first decades of the twentieth century, noted the burial practices there in some detail, none of which included a shoe or shoes, or similar material metaphor for a journey in death.

Jan Vansina (1973) summarized nineteenth- and twentieth-century burials practices among the Tio people in the Congo. Although he documented an array of practices in detail, including conspicuous display of material wealth entering into the grave, and the placement of “crockery or jugs” on the surface of the grave, there was no mention of shoes, either singly or in pairs, or even a similar object used as a metaphor for a journey (Vansina 1973, pp. 207–220). Another study of the Congo people by Wyatt MacGaffey (1970) also fails to document a shoe or shoes associated with the funeral event.

The Rev. Robert Nassau, writing of his experiences in what was then the “Gabun district” of the French Congo of the late nineteenth century, described in detail funeral practices of the local Congo people. Specifically, Nassau (1969) detailed the placement of personal objects in the coffin with the deceased, including clothing, a pipe and tobacco, and even some alcohol, but shoes are not specifically mentioned,

nor are there any other artifacts that serve as direct material metaphors requisite for a journey.

East Africa

La Fontaine (1914), studying the Taveta tribal people (Bantu ethnicity) from south central Kenya at the turn of the twentieth century, noted with some detail the burial customs employed at the time of his writing, and nowhere does he describe any ritual regarding shoes or other items used in the same manner.

eHRAF World Cultures Database

Finally, a search of the eHRAF World Cultures website database, maintained by Yale University (<http://ehrafworldcultures.yale.edu>), using the key words “shoe” or “shoes” within the combined ethnographic materials of the 27 recognized major cultures of Africa (Akan, Amhara, Azande, Bagisu, Banyoro, Bemba, Bena, Betsileo, Dogon, Ganda, Gusii, Hausa, Igbo, Kanuri, Lakeshore Tonga, Libyan Bedouin, Lozi, Maasai, Mbuti, Nuer, Ovimbundu, San, Shluh, Somali, Tiv, Wolof, Zulu), along with the 12 pertinent subject headings (including Burial Practices and Funerals, Commercial facilities, Cult of the Dead, Death, Dying, Life and Death, Mortuary Specialists, Mourning, Social Readjustments to Death, Special Burial Practices and Funerals, and Suicide) failed to recover a single relevant reference to a shoe or shoes associated with the funeral event.

Shoes as Metaphors for Journeys—Shoes as Traps for Evil

Given the total lack in these African cultures of a shoe or shoes in the grave, the use of shoes as a metaphor in other contexts, or the use of directly analogous objects as metaphors for a spiritual journey, we must look elsewhere for a precedent. Since the late nineteenth century, folklorists and historians have long noted that many African-American folk beliefs contained elements of European custom or superstition, or were otherwise almost wholly borrowed from Europe (e.g., Chireau 2003, p. 52; Levine 1977, p. 60; Puckett 1926). While the extent of these borrowings has been debated, with many elements of true African beliefs subsequently identified in African-American culture during the twentieth century, is the practice of placing a shoe on a coffin European in origin, or perhaps a creolized practice combining African and European belief?

This latter possibility is exactly what I am arguing for here—that the single shoe on a coffin lid may ultimately be a creolized practice that combines specific African beliefs regarding the progress of the soul after death, with particular Western European beliefs regarding charms and protection from evil. This thesis is hardly straightforward; while there is a wealth of recorded Western folklore regarding the death experience and the disposition of the body into the grave, with redundant references describing certain burial customs (e.g., coins), the specific phenomenon of placing a single shoe on the lid of a coffin is not documented archivally, at least from any source I have explored.

The clearest reference to shoes in relation to the death event in Western and Northern Europe is pre-Christian and specifically Nordic/Viking in origin. In discussing the abundant though often conflicting accounts of placing coins with the body at the time of burial, the early twentieth-century professor of folklore Alexander Krappe (1930, p. 279) laments that: “We know far less of the original meaning of the shoe given to the dead man (Totenschuh). The current tale about the rough roads of the Otherworld . . . gives one an impression that they are essentially aetiological in character. Nor does the fact that the shoe is a common symbol of fertility help very much in clearing up this puzzle.” Although Dr. Krappe uses the singular “shoe” in this one instance, he goes on to speak of their necessity in the afterlife because of the poor roads to be found there, suggesting a pair of shoes and a much more direct metaphor for a journey (Frazer 1886; Weinhold 1856, pp. 494–495).

This is apparent because in Germanic and Nordic lore, the term Totenschue or “death shoe” is synonymous with Hel-skor or “Hel-shoes,” which is itself derived from the Norse goddess Hel (or Hela), the ruler of Hel, the Norse underworld. According to one late nineteenth-century authority (Guerber 1895, p. 167): “the Northern races were very careful to bind upon the feet of the departed a specially strong pair of shoes, called Hel shoes, that they might not suffer during the long journey over rough roads,” a point echoed by MacCulloch (1930, p. 305) writing in the early twentieth century: “The toilsome journey to Hel was aided by the equipment buried with the dead, e.g., the Hel-skor (German Todtenschuh), ‘Hel-shoe.’ The custom of providing shoes for the dead existed in prehistoric Europe and continued as a general custom.”

Finally, the word Totenschue also was used as a term to describe elements of the funeral itself. In a recent English translation of the early thirteenth-century Nordic saga, *The Saga of Gislí the Outlaw*, the authors explain that (Johnston et al. 1973, p. 75): “It is a common and ancient belief that the dead man has a long journey before him and needs good shoes: graves of Greeks and Alemanni, for example, have been found with shoes in them; in some parts of Germany the funeral feast has been called Totenschue.”

More broadly speaking, nineteenth-century anthropologist James Frazer (1886, p. 78) noted in his discussion on burial customs practiced throughout the world that: “the idea of a journey by land appears in the Norse, German, Prussian, and Californian custom of shoeing the dead,” but that “in Bohemia, on the contrary, no shoes are put in the grave, because if they were, the ghost would be obliged to walk the earth till they were worn out.”

At least since the late Middle Ages, bodies in Western Europe and the British Isles were prepared for burial by first washing the corpse, then dressing it for the wake and commonly by the late 1600s, placing the body in a wooden coffin (Gittings 1984; Gregor 1881, p. 207). Clothing styles did vary through time as well as by age and gender, with men by the nineteenth century increasingly interred wearing suits or other street clothes, while women and children were more commonly dressed in shifts, nightgowns, or simple dresses (e.g., Anonymous 1888, pp. 155–156; Davidson 2006, pp. 171–198; Owens 2000).

The placing of shoes on a corpse was something of great concern and debate at least by the nineteenth century (and likely earlier), with the majority of the dead interred without shoes. If the shoes were not buried with the dead, however, the survivors also could not necessarily use them. For example, from one English

folklore collection dated to 1904: “It is considered unlucky, and as foretelling as an early death, to wear the shoes or the gloves of a person who is dead” (Balfour and Thomas 1904:60), while one Irish account from the 1890s explains that, “Clothing belonging to the dead are supposed to decay very rapidly” (Bergen 1895, p. 21), a belief echoed in early twentieth-century English Lincolnshire (Gutch and Peacock 1908, p. 237). Period accounts state that bodies should not be buried with shoes, in part for purely practical reasons, because there could be difficulty in fitting shoes on a corpse experiencing bloating or rigor mortis (Crissman 1994, p. 41).

A very thorough guide to American funeral directing, published in 1900, fails to mention the pros or cons of placing shoes on the dead (Hohenschuh 1900), but the corpse depicted in the many photographs (showing in detail how to dress a body and place it in the coffin for presentation to the family) is clearly not wearing shoes. However, slip-on shoes, resembling normal footwear but especially designed for the dead, were certainly available for sale in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (e.g., Bixby’s Burial Shoes 1900, p. 5).

Archaeologically, bodies dating to the Medieval and later periods interred wearing shoes in Great Britain are exceedingly rare. For example, in the excavations at Spitalfields, a London suburb church crypt, the over 1,000 burials (dating 1759–1852) studied archaeologically in the 1990s did not reveal any shoes, despite excellent preservation (Reeve and Adams 1993). However, this lack of shoes is not absolute. In the excavations at the Cross Bones Burial Ground (London), 148 burials dating to the mid-nineteenth century were subjected to archaeological investigation, and in at least one instance, an adult male was interred *wearing* a pair of boots (Brickley and Stainer 1999, p. 27).

Ethnographically, a study of twentieth-century Gypsies in the British Isles offers that shoes were commonly placed in the coffin with the deceased (Sanderson 1969, p. 186): “By including in the coffin the prized possessions of the dead you try to keep them happy in the next world, with good clothes to wear, money to spend (and) ... *with stout shoes for the journey*. Thus, provided for, the spirits of the dead should be content, and less likely to return in envy and malice” (emphasis added). Additionally, a very rare mid-twentieth-century rural Irish reference to the placing of pairs of shoes with the deceased is noted by E. Estyn Evans (1957, p. 293), where one man: “put two pairs of shoes in the coffin of his wife—a strong one for bad weather, a lighter pair for ordinary wear.”

Specifically for Southern African-Americans of the early 1920s: “Money should be placed upon the dead man’s eyes to keep them from coming open, but he should be buried without shoes” (Puckett 1926, p. 84). One elderly African-American, Christopher Columbus Franklin, who was born in 1855 and experienced slavery in Bossier Parish, Louisiana, was in agreement with Puckett. Interviewed in 1938, Franklin noted that during slavery days, “Dey put nice clothes on de corpse. De didn’t put on no shoes on it but dey put de socks on” (Rawick 1979, p. 1410). Despite these strictures, shoes are occasionally found in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century burials through excavation (e.g., the African-American Freedman’s Cemetery in Dallas; Owens 2000), but they are far from common.

Given this relative scarcity of a pair of shoes worn by the deceased at the time of burial, and a curious absence of a single shoe in the archival record, what can be well-established is that shoes have been considered lucky and at times magically

charged objects within Europe since at least the time of the Roman Empire, and continuing well into the early twentieth century. The authoritative volume, *A Dictionary of Superstitions*, (Opie and Tatem 1989, p. 353) lists 22 major beliefs regarding shoes as magically charged objects (this number includes shoelaces, stockings, etc.).

One very common practice involved throwing an old shoe or shoes at people as they began new journeys, such as when a young man left his home to seek his fortune, or at weddings, a practice that was recorded as early as 1546, was well documented in the British Isles and in North America throughout the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, and which has continued at least in a modified form for weddings well into the twentieth century (Anonymous 1859, pp. 261–266; Balfour and Thomas 1904, p. 98; Brand 1777, p. 97; Creighton 1968, p. 146; Gutch and Peacock 1908, p. 163; Hazlitt 1965, pp. 543–544; Henderson 1879, pp. 36–37; Hole 1940, p. 22; Hyatt 1935, p. 164; Mason 1884, p. 210; Opie and Tatem 1989, pp. 351–352). For example, in the Denham Tracts, collected between 1846 and 1859 (Hardy 1895, p. 3): “When a young person is leaving his family and friends or is getting married, it is still usual to throw an old shoe after him for luck. Many try to hit the party in the back.”

Some nineteenth-century authors (Anonymous 1859, pp. 263–265; Crombie 1895; Henderson 1879, pp. 36–37) noted the similarity of this and the use of a shoe in certain Biblical references. Particularly in the story of Ruth, removing and discarding a shoe was a sign of renunciation of a father’s right to his daughter (by giving her away in marriage). In this way, the shoe is a symbol of transaction and transference from one state to another. This certainly could have potential implications in regard to the relationship between life and death, and a material symbol of this transference.

In the 1890s, British folklorist James Crombie (1895, p. 272) devoted some study to the numerous uses of shoes in various cultures, and made this key point:

In the explanation of ... shoe-throwing at weddings and on other occasions, as well as a host of other minor customs and superstitions in which shoes play a part. . . . The secret lies in the animism of the shoes. Now what do we mean by that? It is a well-known fact that amongst peoples low down in the scale of civilization a certain magical virtue or power is attached to anything that has been made by, owned by, or most of all worn by another.

For example, the link between the spirit of an individual and his or her footwear can be seen in 1890 in the highlands of Scotland, where in a well-documented court case, the boots of a murdered man were ritually buried under water (along the coastline) to “lay the ghost of the murdered man, and thus prevent it from disturbing the people living in the neighborhood” (Joule 1890, p. 135).

The principal basis underlying John McCarthy’s (1997) initial interpretation of the shoes recovered at the FABC Cemetery was that Death was (and is) viewed as a journey into an unknown land, so according to McCarthy perhaps on a surficial level the placement of a *single shoe* with the dead was to extend a metaphor used for the living, into the afterlife. While I would not discount this entirely, given the use of the shoe as a symbol of transference from one state to another (discussed above), I think that another core interpretation is more compelling (alluded to by McCarthy 2006);

shoes not as metaphor for a journey, but shoes as protective charms—specifically as animistic elements and a proxy for the deceased—and as literal traps to capture evil and protect the soul of the dead.

Worn-out shoes and boots have commonly been found concealed in walls and in chimneys of old houses throughout the British Isles and occasionally even in the United States, with some examples dating back several hundred years (Eastop 2001; Merrifield 1988, pp. 131–134). This practice is considered one in which the shoe acts as a house charm, protecting its inhabitants from harm. The placement of a single, worn-out shoe in a chimney is important, since it was down the flue or other small openings that witches were believed to be able to travel through at night, a path that could also be utilized by malevolent spirits. An analogous nineteenth-century English charm form includes placing a bullock's heart in a chimney to protect against fairies entering the home (Foster 1888, p. 116).

Despite the complete lack of evidence for a “shoe as charm” custom in the African cultures surveyed above, at least by the nineteenth-century African-Americans clearly viewed shoes as potential supernatural or spiritual objects, having likely integrated this European-derived symbol into still extant African belief systems in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Mary Waring (1895, p. 252), writing in the 1890s of black South Carolina folk belief, noted the use of old shoes as a means to drive away evil spirits from a home in a mocking tone that is still insightful: “Take some old shoes, put sulphur in them, then set fire to the whole; this will drive away the ‘sperrits’ [sic], mosquitos, and everything else that has a nose.” There are very similar practices found in the British Isles, suggesting its ultimate origin: “To burn an old shoe prevents infection” (Nottingham, England; Radford and Radford, 1949, p. 218); “It is lucky to burn old shoes before starting out on a journey (Herefordshire)” (Radford and Radford 1949, p. 218; see also Hole 1940, pp. 29–30), and in the 1880s in Scotland, an old shoe burned under a cow that has been hexed will break the spell (Gregor 1889, p. 282).

Another African-American shoe belief is documented by Shepherd (1967). Writing in the 1880s of “Negro Superstitions” for the popular monthly magazine *Cosmopolitan*, Shepherd (1967, p. 251) stated: “To have about a house some place of deposit for old shoes, and therein to keep all the worn-out leather of the household, will bring good luck to the family.” Also pertinent here is the previously cited example from Maryland in the 1890s (Bergen 1896, p. 42): “Old shoes, particularly the soles, were often buried by negro servants on Monday morning to keep the devil down through the week.” Finally, perhaps most revealing is one African-American belief, again found by the writer Eli Shepherd, and published in 1888. In describing various forms of counter-charms that can be used in a home to ward off malevolent spirits, Shepherd said (1967, p. 249), “turn a pair of shoes up on the floor with soles against the walls; perhaps the faint semblance to a laid out corpse will pacify the hungry spirit.”

These documented examples of African-American folk belief are important for three reasons. First, they demonstrate that the belief in worn-out shoes as potential supernatural objects was by the nineteenth century well known in Black America, and particularly noteworthy, as a trap for malevolent spirits. Second, the authors by this time have attributed the belief entirely to African-Americans and, assuming it to be of African origin, have ignored the true origin of the practice within the British

Isles. Finally, the dates of these instances, in the 1880s and 1890s, are only forty or fifty years after the FABC Cemetery burials in Philadelphia, essentially contemporary to Burial 11 at the Becky Wright Cemetery in Arkansas, and just ten or twenty years prior to the two interments in the Freedman's Cemetery in Dallas.

The ultimate rationale for placing a single shoe on a coffin lid may be attributed to the actions of John Schorn, the late thirteenth-century parish priest of North Marsten in Buckinghamshire, England, who according to legend once cast the Devil himself into a boot. It is not entirely clear whether or not the use of a shoe or boot as a means to trap evil originated with Schorn, or if he was simply invoking a commonly recognized symbol of the day, though Schorn's feat was widely known in his own time and was commonly depicted on Christian pilgrim's badges into the 1500s, as well as within the stained glass windows of the medieval church where he performed this feat (Brown 1979, pp. 4, 61; Merrifield 1988, pp. 134–136).

Thus, the boot or shoe was viewed as a means to trap or deflect evil. The devil or malevolent spirit, attracted to a newly dug grave, would first encounter a well-worn shoe and might theoretically mistake the shoe for the deceased, in part because the shoe, being made of the tanned skin of an animal, is in one sense a *literal* body or corpse. With pre-twentieth-century shoes often ill fitting and stiff when new, and only later conforming to the shape of the wearer's foot, the shoe also picks up a distinctive and unique character, formed in part by the deceased or family members. In short, it is a wonderful proxy and metaphor for the departed.

In my examination of the archaeological literature, I found no known examples of a single shoe in association with a burial in the British Isles, either placed within the burial container or on the lid of the coffin. In certain burial contexts, such as at the crypt excavations at Spitalfields Church in a suburb of London and dating from 1759 to 1852, excellent preservation of fabric, leather, wood, and even human soft tissue would suggest that if a leather shoe or boot had been placed on any coffin lids, they would have been clearly observed archaeologically (Reeve and Adams 1993).

Despite this absence in a mortuary context, there is a probable example of a Euroamerican use of a shoe to protect a newborn. In Vermont during the Civil War, a Dr. John Currier observed that at the birth of a child to a white family (Currier 1891, p. 256): "the grandmother brought along one of the mother's shoes and requested me to place it over the child's head. Several of the neighboring women were in at the time, and we all were so amused at the request that it was not granted nor repeated. The object of this request I never could find out." Given what we know of the animism of the shoe, and its power to trap evil, it is likely the grandmother was simply attempting to use the mother's shoe to protect the soul of the newborn, lest it be harmed while still helpless and critically—before the protection afforded the child through baptism.

Why, if the British and their descendants clearly saw a worn-out shoe as a potent ward against evil, in the wall or chimney of a house, or less commonly at the birth of a child, did they consistently fail to include them in the grave? Further, why did African-Americans at least on a handful of occasions, place a single shoe on the lid of a coffin in the grave, despite the total absence of this specific symbol or metaphor in all of the African cultures surveyed for this study? To contextualize and bolster this interpretation of the single shoe phenomenon, it is necessary to dig deeper into Christian as well as Central and West African traditional cosmology and the belief in the soul.

A Platter of Salt, Christian and African Cosmologies, and the Progress of the Soul

In the British Isles of the late medieval and Renaissance periods, the fate of the soul immediately after death was a point of contention, with Catholics believing that Purgatory, as a liminal space between this life and Heaven, was where souls were destined in the interval between death and Resurrection. In popular Protestant Christian belief, however, the soul is seen as instantaneously leaving the body for Heaven (or Hell) (Marshall 2002, pp. 111–112), or in a more vernacular view, entering Heaven typically after three days, possibly mimicking Christ's three-day interval between his crucifixion and resurrection. Traditionally, funerals were held on the second or third day after death, when the body is reduced to a mere shell, and the soul safely departed (e.g., Hoffman 1889, p. 30; Mason 1888, p. 63).

Clearly, despite an official Protestant view regarding the soul's instantaneous ascension into Heaven, at the traditional Lyke wake (derived from the Anglo-Saxon language and literally meaning "body watch" [Brockie 1886, p. 199] or "corpse vigil" [Mackenzie 1825, p. 205]), the family and friends of the deceased still dutifully watched over the corpse for one or two nights prior to burial, to protect the body *and the departed soul* from harm, a practice that continued in the British Isles and the United States well into the twentieth century (Black and Thomas 1903, p. 216; Brockie 1886, pp. 199–200; Henderson 1879, p. 54; Mackenzie 1825, p. 205; McPherson 1929, p. 125; Nicholson 1890, p. 6; Puckle 1926, pp. 61–63; Simpson 1908, p. 206; Whitley 1977, p. 64).

Although there were numerous charms in Western Europe, the British Isles and America to protect an individual in life (e.g., wearing perforated silver coins; see Davidson 2004b), significantly there is a custom that was once almost universally employed that did serve as a means to protect the soul of the recently departed at the wake and funeral, or prior to burial—namely the placement of a dish of salt on or near a corpse (Billson 1895, p. 104; Forby 1830, p. 426, as cited in Gurdon 1893, p. 55; Fremmer 1973, pp. 60–61; Hazlitt 1965, p. 533; Hole 1940, p. 50; Hyatt 1935, p. 588; Jones 1995, p. 383; Mackenzie 1825, p. 205).

Much like the ubiquitous practice of placing coins in the grave, placing a plate or bowl of salt atop or adjacent to the corpse during the wake is a well-documented tradition in the British Isles and America, although variations did occur—(salt or salt and earth, see below); ashes (early twentieth-century African-American; Puckett 1926, p. 87); coffee (twentieth-century Jamaicans; Fremmer 1973, p. 61); or snuff (mid-nineteenth-century Irish; Anonymous 1859, p. 47). Several references collected in a single mid-nineteenth-century volume (Anonymous 1859, pp. 120–121, 174) describe its placement on the stomach (or less commonly, the breast) of the dead, or under the coffin or cooling board, in England, Wales, and Scotland. One folklore collection from the northern counties of England, originally published in 1866, gives one specific method of placing salt with a corpse: "measure three handfuls of common salt into an earthenware plate, and lay it directly on the breast" (Henderson 1879, p. 53). Another account from Scotland, circa 1775, states that a wooden platter, containing salt and earth, unmixed and in equal measure, to symbolize "a corruptible body" (the earth) and the immortal spirit (the salt), was laid directly on the breast of the dead (Fremmer 1973, p. 61), echoed in late nineteenth-century Durham,

England (Brockie 1886, p. 200), and seen almost verbatim in the American South of the early twentieth century (Brewster et al. 1952, p. 258).

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and on both sides of the Atlantic a dish of salt placed on or near a body was often viewed as a mere symbol—“typifying immortality” (Puckle 1926, pp. 53, 108), or explained in utilitarian terms: to keep the body from bloating (i.e., stop the formation of gases) or purging, or to act as an absorbent for unpleasant smells (Anderson 1937, p. 6; Billson 1895, pp. 104–105; Brockie 1886, p. 200; Hardy 1895, p. 73; Hurdle 1953, p. 75; Randolph 1947, p. 313). In actuality, however, it was originally used as a charm or protection against evil (Hole 1940, p. 50), with some early twentieth-century accounts in this moment of transition to rational modernity describing it as triply serving as a preventative for swelling, as a symbol of immortality, and as a means to keep off evil (e.g., Balfour and Thomas 1904, p. 102): “a plate of salt laid on a (corpse’s) breast, ostensibly to prevent the body from swelling, but oftener as a preventative against the devil disturbing the unburied” (Simpson 1908, p. 206).

To put it simply, as the medieval abbot Richalmus of Germany noted (Lawrence 1898, pp. 158–159), “Evil Spirits cannot bear salt.” Catholic priests commonly employed salt in the Middle Ages as a vital ingredient in holy remedies and in exorcisms (Jolly 1996, pp. 149, 159, 161), and even in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, salt was vestigially seen as providing protection to newborns before and during baptism (Addy 1895, p. 120; Hole 1940, p. 7). The stark whiteness of salt was also seen as a symbol of purity and in a 1790 account, “the devil loveth no salt in his meat, for that is a sign of eternity, and used by God’s commandment in all his practices” (Fremmer 1973, p. 61).

Nearly 100 years later, the Rev. Walter Gregor, writing of folk lore in northeast Scotland in 1881, states that at the funeral event: “on the breast was placed a saucer or plate containing a little salt, to keep the evil spirits away, because they could not come near Christ’s savior of the earth” (Gregor 1881, p. 207). This custom and belief is carried forward almost verbatim in a description of the practice in early twentieth-century Scotland (McPherson 1929, p. 124), while salt in a domestic context can be used as a protection against witches (Addy 1895, p. 86), placed at a threshold of a German home in Nova Scotia, Canada, to prevent a witch’s entry (Creighton 1968, p. 48), or according to two late nineteenth-century African-American informants, scattered in the four corners of a new home as well as on the floors and within chimneys before moving in (Derrickson 1892, p. 243; Hawkins 1896, p. 131).

The tradition of placing salt on or adjacent to the dead while lying in state was by the nineteenth century well integrated into African-American belief. For example, ashes and salt are described in early twentieth-century African-American accounts, with yet another rationale: “whatever disease the body has goes into the ashes and salt” (Puckett 1926, p. 87). Another early twentieth-century African-American reference was collected by Harry Hyatt (1935, p. 588) in Adams County, Illinois: “Years ago they would put a saucer of salt on a dead person’s chest just as they would die, to keep them from spoiling until they could get the coffin made.”

Beyond its intrinsic properties of whiteness and its abhorrence by evil spirits, another ancient rationale for the use of salt as a charm in the British Isles is that the devil as well as “hags” (i.e., witches) are compulsive counters. This English belief had also been well incorporated into African-American culture by the nineteenth

century (Anonymous 1894; Cross 1909, p. 252; Hawkins 1896, p. 129; Henderson 1879, p. 53; Jackson 1967, p. 293; Johnson 1930, p. 171; Lee 1892, pp. 110–111; Lett 1970, p. 43; Minor 1898, p. 76; Peterkin and Ulmann 1933, p. 154).

Clearly, according to this rationale, a malevolent spirit or person encountering a dish of salt placed near or upon the dead would be repelled by it and, if this repellence could be overcome, further compelled to count every grain before the soul of the departed could be harmed or stolen. However, the use of such protective elements would not typically follow the body into the grave, because according to Christian belief, by the time of interment the soul was no longer present (although for a rare exception see Jones 1930, pp. 214, 216, as discussed below). In fact, at least in the early Christian Church in the British Isles, traditionally no objects were supposed to be placed in the grave, since such “trappings” were looked down upon as pagan in nature (Johnson 1912, pp. 311–312; though see Samson 1999, for a more nuanced view on this), although there are some rare exceptions, including plates, which at times may have been used to hold the wake’s salt charm (Davidson 2004a, pp. 340–345; Fremmer 1973).

Central and West African Belief in the Progress of the Soul

The belief of the departed soul’s rapid ascension to Heaven, or fall to Hell, may be a hallmark of Christian belief, but it is not the prevailing belief in African—or in fact, most non-Western—cultures. The broad distinction of death in the Western world as instantaneous, and death as a gradual rite of passage in non-Western societies has been observed for some time (e.g., Bloch and Parry 1982), but was first noted in detail by the French sociologist Hertz (1960) in his monumental work, “A contribution to the study of the collective representation of death,” published in 1907 and later translated into English in the volume, *Death and the Right Hand* (1960). Hertz was studying the mortuary practices of indigenous groups in Borneo, but his point is well taken for many non-Western cultures, including those of Central and West Africa.

Hertz’s early twentieth-century Borneo groups believed that the moment of death is not an instantaneous event, but rather is only an intermediate first step into the afterlife, with the transition of the dead occurring over the course of several months or years. For each death, two “burials” are performed. The time interval between the first or temporary burial and the second and final burial can last several months, if not years. For the Borneo people, the changes that take place within the corpse, from the wet, flesh state to the dry bone state, are material symbols of the deceased person’s transition from the existence known in life, to that known in death. The soul stays near the body during this period of transition, and only enters the land of the dead at the ceremony of the second and final burial, when body and soul have been fully transformed (Hertz 1960).

Many traditional African belief systems also believe that death is not instantaneous, but rather a long and gradual process that can take months or years to complete. In this liminal state, the soul of the deceased is still at times residing within the grave, venturing out for short periods of time as it acclimates to the afterlife, and awaits rebirth in the next generation (Leonard 1968, p. 154; MacDonald 1891; Okwu 1979).

This belief in the transitional state of death is most commonly operationalized by the practice of Second Funerals; ceremonies played out weeks, months, and occasionally even years after the death of the individual, which was and is still commonplace within numerous African cultures, including the twentieth-century Akan people of West Africa (Parrinder 1961, p. 108), the early and late twentieth-century Ibo of Nigeria (Ilogu 1983, pp. 110–111; Leonard 1968, pp. 154–155; Thomas 1917, pp. 164, 196; Ubah 1982, p. 101); the related Ibibio people in Nigeria of the early twentieth century (Talbot 1923, p. 142), in early twentieth-century Sierra Leone (Thomas 1916, pp. 120–121), the early twentieth-century Igala tribe of northern Nigeria (Seton 1929), the Ewe speaking peoples of Ghana in the late nineteenth-century (Ellis 1890, pp. 158–159), among the Jukun speaking peoples of Nigeria of the early twentieth century (Meek 1931a, pp. 225–226), the Taveta people in Kenya, East Africa in the early twentieth century (La Fontaine 1914), as well as the Zulu of South Africa of the late nineteenth century (MacDonald 1891).

The belief of the liminal state of the soul in the weeks or months following death clearly was retained and found root among people of African descent in the Americas. For example, “Burial rites in Afro-Brazilian and Afro-Caribbean cults, as in West Africa, tend to be long-drawn-out affairs, involving several stages before burial is complete. It may take months for the spirit of the deceased to be separated from his family, associates, and environs” (Raboteau 1980, p. 30).

Closer to home, the Second Funeral practice was ubiquitous in African-American culture of the eighteenth through early twentieth centuries (e.g., Hawkins 1896, p. 131; Peterkin 1958, pp. 112–113; Raboteau 1980, pp. 230–231; Showers 1967, p. 298; Sisk 1959, p. 170). The closest analogue to a “first person” account of the Second Funeral in the American South can be found in the ex-slave narratives collected in the 1930s by the WPA Federal Writers Project. For example, Willis Cofer, an elderly African-American who experienced enslavement in Georgia, and who was interviewed there in 1937, stated that after the death and interment of the deceased, “Dey waited ‘bout two months sometimes before dey preached de fun’ral sermon” (Rawick 1972, p. 208). James Bolton, a man who experienced slavery as a child (born in 1853), was interviewed by the WPA in Athens, Georgia in 1938: “Sometimes it were two or three mont’s attter the burying fo’ the funeral sermon was preached” (Rawick 1977, p. 83).

The practice of Second Funerals performed many months after death and burial was also well documented among other Georgia African-Americans of the 1930s in the WPA volume, *Drums and Shadows* (Johnson 1940, pp. 226–227), and among the African-American Gullah population of the Georgia Sea Islands (Moore 1980, pp. 475–476). As historian Raboteau (1980, pp. 230–231) argues, such traditional African practices acted out in the United States of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are “suggestive of a continuity of tradition and belief even in the face of dominant Christianity.”

A variant of the Second Funeral practice has also been documented among some whites in the Missouri and Arkansas Ozarks of the 1920s and 1930s (Randolph 1947, p. 314), and in central Appalachia, most clearly documented in the early twentieth century (e.g., Raine 1924, as cited in Crissman 1994, pp.147–150). In these cases, inclement weather and the inability for family, friends, and most importantly, circuit preachers, to travel on short notice for often rural and isolated death events created the custom of at times delaying a formal funeral sermon.

Discussion

It is argued here that the shoe on a coffin lid is a creolized belief, with the Western or British Isles tradition of the shoe as a trap for evil (or the devil himself) traditionally used within a domestic context, combined with the African belief of the liminal soul in the grave requiring protection in the days and weeks following death. But the underlying necessity of a charm to protect the spirit is not an American innovation—using in this instance a Western metaphor as symbol (the shoe). Rather, there were protective elements or practices in place throughout the African continent in these antecedent cultures, all to protect the grave and its contents—the fragile, liminal soul—awaiting its transition into the spirit world.

In an article entitled “Fetishism in Congo Land” and published in the *Century Magazine* in 1891, E. J. Glave (who served with Stanley in Africa) described various aspects of Congo belief systems, including burial customs. Glave (1891) illustrates the surface of a “Congo Chieftain’s Grave” covered with a large iron kettle, ceramic plates, bowls, jugs, and finally bordering the perimeter of the grave are bottles (resembling simple wine bottles), buried neck downwards. The placement of bottles around the perimeter or atop a grave served as traps to deflect evil from the spirit of the recently departed, much as bottle trees were used historically in domestic contexts within the Congo region of Africa and the American South to safeguard the living (Thompson 1984, pp. 139–145).

Another southern funeral tradition that is African-derived, mentioned by Thompson (1984), and observed by Glave (1891) and others, is the placing of ceramics (and other white objects), bottles, as well as pressed glass pieces, all on the surface of the grave. Examples abound in the historical literature (for an extensive review, see Davidson 2004a, pp. 279–294), with one of the earliest American accounts dating to the 1850s, where Telfair Hodgson, the daughter of a white Georgia planter, stated that (Torian 1943, p. 352): “Negro graves were always decorated with the last article used by the departed, and broken pitchers, and broken bits of colored glass were considered even more appropriate than the white shells from the beach nearby.”

In 1891, folklorist Carrington Bolton (1891, p. 214) described in greater detail the graves within a Columbia, South Carolina cemetery dedicated to poor blacks:

The numerous graves are decorated with a variety of objects, sometimes arranged with a careful symmetry, but more often placed around the margins without regard to order. These objects include oyster shells, white pebbles, fragments of crockery of every description, glass bottles, and nondescript bric-a-brac of a cheap sort,—all more or less broken and useless. The large number of medicine bottles on some graves has suggested that the bottles once held the medicines that killed the patients.

Such vernacular grave markers were not chosen merely for decorative or aesthetic purposes, or for their intimate association with the dying (see above, and Davidson 2004a, pp. 285–329), but also included objects selected for their reflective qualities—either directly, or metaphorically, through their suggestion of water (e.g., sea shells). Such objects, being shiny or reflective, naturally contain the “flash,” a quality specifically described by Thompson (1984, pp. 117–118, 130, 1990, pp. 164–167) as

the “flash of the spirit.” This is a Kongo (i.e., West African-Congo River Basin derived) term used to describe inanimate objects that are naturally reflective, and which therefore hold the potential to attract and capture spirits; such spirits can be malevolent, and in a mortuary context, might wish harm on the spirit of the deceased. Thus, the glassware, hollow bottles, and ceramics marking the surface of a grave (even in a broken state), just as the single shoe on the lid of the coffin, can easily serve as potential traps for evil.

Gauging the true extent of the “shoe in the grave” practice is difficult, given only a handful of instances spanning the nineteenth century as well as a vast geography—from urban early nineteenth-century Philadelphia, to 1890s rural Arkansas, to early twentieth-century urban Dallas. Certainly the demographic range of individuals associated with these shoes is varied, easily spanning infants and teenagers, adult men and women (see Table 1). Many other excavated cemeteries and individual graves may well have once held similar examples of shoes on coffin lids, but two factors likely have contributed to their archaeological invisibility: inadequate care taken during excavation, and taphonomic processes resulting in the poor preservation of shoe leather.

But why are there no unambiguous written accounts describing a practice that unmistakably occurred in three states separated by nearly 100 years of time? The only clear nineteenth- and early twentieth-century references to shoes in burials all debate the propriety of dressing the deceased in his or her own shoes (with the majority of references suggesting that it is better not to do so), or more rarely, a pair of shoes are included as an obvious metaphor for a journey in the afterlife.

Lest the absence of textual accounts of a single shoe in a grave be seen as a possible weakness in this interpretation, it must be stressed that while certain types of house charms abound archivally on both sides of the Atlantic and with people of both European and African descent, such as the use of a horseshoe nailed above a doorway (Addy 1895, pp. 71–72, 73; Anonymous 1859, pp. 65, 186; Burne 1883, p. 164; Creighton 1968, p. 46; Gurdon 1893, p. 169; Gutch and Peacock 1908, p. 162; Hardy 1895, p. 62; Hole 1940, p. 127; Lawrence 1896, 1898, p. 7; Lett 1970, p. 42; Moore 1892, p. 230; Nicholson 1890, p. 87; Shepherd 1967, p. 250) or the burial of a “witch bottle” at the threshold of a door or in a hearth (Anonymous 1896; Gutch and Peacock 1908, pp. 95–96; Henderson 1879, pp. 231–232; Hole 1940, p. 168; Merrifield 1988, pp. 163–183; Moore 1892, p. 230), there are in fact no pre-twentieth-century references to the use of an old shoe acting as a charm in the walls, roof, or chimney of a house, despite their common recovery in the British Isles from such contexts dating from the fifteenth through twentieth centuries (Eastop 2001; Merrifield 1988, pp. 131–136).

As Albert Raboteau (1980, p. 85) observed in his study of slave religion in the antebellum South and echoed by others (e.g., Chireau 2003, p. 52; Levine 1977, p. 60; Puckett 1926): “Many Afro-American witchcraft beliefs are European in origin. As such, they are a prime example of an area where there is a fusion of African and European folklore.” Anthropological concepts to transcribe and explain such elements of culture change, whether this change is peripheral or fundamental, have themselves evolved with increasing sophistication. Simplistic models of one-way acculturation have given way to a greater recognition that when two or more cultures come together, all participants are changed. Certainly a European house charm—operationalized within the death ritual through an African-derived belief system—suggests a true creolization of beliefs.

Although there have been many different definitions of creolization (and more recently, hybridity; e.g., Edwards-Ingram and Brown 1998; Kapchan and Strong 1999), one often articulated within African diaspora archaeology that is particularly applicable here is the “new lexicon and old grammar” concept, first invoked by Charles Joyner (1984) in his study of South Carolina slave populations (also see Fennell 2007, pp.127–132). Elaborating on Joyner, Leland Ferguson (1992, p. xlii), in his study of African retentions in colonial South Carolina and elsewhere emphasized that this linguistic model of creolization is particularly well suited to the interpretation of archaeological artifacts: “material things are part of the lexicon of culture while the ways they were made, used, perceived are part of the grammar.” In this particular instance, African-derived grammars of spiritual belief, finding themselves in the new context of North America and in association with European ideas and beliefs, inevitably incorporated some analogous elements of this new lexicon, including the symbol of a shoe as a supernatural object and trap for evil.

Evidence of other creolized beliefs and material expressions have been effectively argued for decades (Davidson 2004b; Herskovitz 1990; Holloway 1990; Orser 1994; Thompson 1984; Wahlman 1986); this is just another example out of many. What likely made the easy transference of the shoe symbol in its new role as mortuary practice is that the spiritual belief systems and cosmologies of many Central and West African cultures were not inherently rigid or dogmatic, but were rather improvisational, dynamic, and actively changing, in part due to their method of oral transmission (Ottensberg 1963; Vansina 1973, pp. 227–228).

Such improvisation is reminiscent of Robb’s (1998) synthesis of symbols and how they are commonly employed within anthropological theory. Robb argues that symbols have been routinely used and conceived of at only two levels. First, symbols are used as conscious and straightforward elements of “strategic manipulation,” largely unquestioned, with this view severing and isolating a few key symbols from the continuum of all social relations (termed “tokens”). Secondly, symbols appear as “components of mental reality,” which literally structure human thought (i.e., “symbols as girders”).

Robb (1998, p. 338) offers a third way to conceive of symbols—symbols as tesserae, referring to the fundamental elements of a mosaic. Symbols in this perspective are arbitrary fragments “until temporarily assembled and experienced. . . . Because symbols’ meaning is not fixed but contestable, social life involves continual struggle over alternative interpretations of important symbols.” Such a view of symbols can account for dominant and alternative views, hegemony and resistance, and both personal and communal constructions of identity and meaning through each individual act.

Conclusion

African-American identity began its genesis below decks on those slaving ships involved in the Atlantic slave trade, even before making landfall in the Americas. Upon landing, even more African cultures, languages, and beliefs came together with those of Europe and Native America to form what would later crystallize as African-American culture (Mintz and Price 1992). The widespread acceptance of

Christianity by enslaved Africans and their descendants by the early nineteenth century (Fountain 1999) added another level or layer of belief and expression but did not, however, negate the retention of African-derived cosmologies or practices (Mitchell 1975; Smith 1984, p. 53). Prior to Emancipation, enslaved African-Americans had little or no control over the burial of their dead and the ability to practice the full range of their African-derived core cosmologies. When freedom did come, however, within such fundamental changes some of the practices by which they buried the dead and nurtured the deceased soul were no longer purely “African.”

The innovation of the shoe symbol within a mortuary context was likely not a rational decision formulated expressly to retain or hide an African belief system within a European symbol (e.g., Mullins 2008, p. 112). Rather, core beliefs were retained even as new practices were innovated or borrowed from other contexts to fill inevitable voids or gaps in lost knowledge. Further, given the ubiquitous British belief in shoes as magical objects, and the equally common African-derived beliefs in the liminal state of the soul after death, the placement of a shoe in a grave may have been innovated in any number of individual and separate acts across time and space, without any particular catalyst or singular event.

An analogous retention of belief can be seen in the British Isles, where although Christianity was firmly established by circa 900 CE, non-Christian beliefs and customs continued to be fostered and practiced well into the twentieth century, with some of these Celtic and Nordic (i.e., pagan) elements becoming integrated with the Christian faith, and others existing as a separate but parallel or complimentary system of knowledge, including a belief in the shoe as magical object (Flint 1991; Hodges 1899; Johnson 1912; Knowlson 1930, pp 157–158; Merrifield 1988; Porter 1894, p. 106; Scribner 1993).

For millennia people of the British Isles regarded old shoes at the very least as lucky objects, and typically as potentially magical or spiritually charged animisms that were at once intimately personal and broadly universal (Crombie 1895, p. 272)—as well as a symbol of fertility, one representative of new journeys or beginnings and a material transference from one state to another. Originally, this transference was either one into marriage or adulthood (Anonymous 1859, pp. 263–265; Crombie 1895; Henderson 1879, pp. 36–37), but in an African-American innovation, this material symbol further symbolized that transference into death, the soul’s journey from this world into the spirit world. All of these attributes, combined with the conception of the shoe as a trap for evil, created an extremely powerful, multivalent symbol that conveyed a great deal of import to a simple, everyday object. This interpretation of the single shoe phenomenon is the best fit with what is known of past belief systems in Central and West Africa, as well as Western Europe. Given this, there are always other interpretations or potentialities.

For example, what if the shoe is not there to protect the soul of the deceased, but rather to tie it or “fix it” to the grave? Zora Neale Hurston (1931, p. 378), in *Hoodoo in America*, offers that, “If a man tends to wander, hang one of his shoes behind the door and it will tie him home.” Certainly with the deliberate burial in water of a man’s boots apart from his body in late nineteenth-century Scotland, it was believed possible to tie the soul of the departed in the grave, to protect the living (Joule 1890, p. 135). This notion is reminiscent of an iron padlock, recovered from the fill

immediately above a late eighteenth-century coffin of an enslaved African at the Seville Plantation in Jamaica, and interpreted by modern day Jamaicans as an object used to “‘keep the duppy down,’ or to hold the spirit of the deceased in the ground” (Armstrong and Fleischman 2003, pp. 46–47).

Could this be seen as analogous to the shoes on coffin lids found in Philadelphia, Dallas, and rural Arkansas? An interesting notion, but one that seems limited and without as compelling or long standing tradition behind it. Further, given the presence of children associated with a single shoe, the overall burial demography seems at odds with a belief grounded in the necessity of “tying down” the souls of troublesome men or women who might haunt the living (see Table 1).

The fact that one archaeological example of this practice, from rural Arkansas, was of probable European descent, is equally revealing. Similarly, at least one account of a woman in the English Yorkshire countryside of the 1860s demonstrates a decidedly non-Christian cannon belief, one that parallels the use of a shoe acting as a trap for evil in the grave (Henderson 1879, p. 59): “An old Yorkshire woman was, I am told, very explicit in the directions she gave about her coffin. She ordered two holes to be made in its lid, that when the devil came in at one hole to catch her she might slip out at the other.” Further, in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Wales, “Before screwing up the coffin, salt was placed in with the body, as a sign of incorruptibility and because salt is hated by the Devil” (Jones 1930, p. 214).

Both of these instances of British folk belief run counter to stated Christian theology regarding the soul’s progress after death, and demonstrate that there is often a considerable correspondence of beliefs between disparate cultures—despite the extreme differences between the British Isles and the myriad cultures of Africa—and that such seemingly solid nineteenth-century boundaries as race and culture actually exhibit surprisingly porous borders, allowing transference and adoption of belief and practice.

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