MAGIC AND EMPOWERMENT ON THE PLANTATION: AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATION OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN WORLD VIEW

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Despite the growing material evidence of African-American religious practices, attempts to understand these materials in their cultural context are still limited. This study represents an attempt to recognize, interpret, and understand religious artifacts from four African-American assemblages recovered from Oakley Plantation in West Feliciana Parish, Louisiana. A review of archaeological, oral historical, and ethnographic evidence suggests that continuities in magical traditions among African Americans were a response to European-American domination and oppression. Attempts to manipulate supernatural powers was an African-American means of controlling their fate and circumstance in a world where they were granted little political, social, or economic power.

As more archaeological research is conducted on African-American sites, the number of artifacts recovered related to African-American ideological systems has increased. As of yet, however, only a few archaeologists have attempted to fully understand these artifacts and their cultural significance (e.g., Brown and Cooper 1990; Cabak 1990; Ferguson 1992; Klingelhofer 1987; McKee 1991; Orser 1994; Patten 1992) and even more archaeologists fail to recognize these materials at all.

I present in this study a description of ideologically significant artifacts recovered from Oakley Plantation, in West Feliciana, Louisiana. My review of ethnographic and oral historical sources provides information on potential uses of these materials, and I discuss what these objects mean in the broader scope of plantation studies. It is hoped that this will not only help archaeologists working on African-American sites to recognize the materials specifically described, but also to understand the cultural ideas represented by these artifacts. In this way, archaeologists will be able to identify a broader range of spiritually significant artifacts.

The Historical Context

First as slaves, and then as freed persons, African Americans have created a unique cultural tradition from African and European influences in Louisiana. From religion to medical care, folklore to cuisine, and language to music, African-rooted traditions were transformed in Louisiana to form a vibrant ethnic culture (Botkin 1945; Clayton 1990; Hurston 1990; Saxon et al. 1989; Tallant 1946).

The influx of Africans to the Louisiana colony began by 1719, when the French were importing African slaves. The last French slave ship landed in New Orleans in 1743 (Hall 1992:35). During that period, the Company of the Indies brought nearly 6,000 Africans to Louisiana, the majority of whom were from Senegambia, the area stretching between the Senegal and Gambia Rivers in West Africa (Hall 1992:29). In 1763, the Spanish, who already controlled the Florida Parishes of Louisiana, acquired all French holdings in Louisiana west of the Mississippi (Hoffman 1985). Under the Spanish, Senegambia, the Bight of Benin, the Bight of Biafra, and Central Africa provided the majority of the slaves brought into Louisiana (Hall 1992:284).

With them, African slaves brought their cultural identities: languages, religions, oral traditions, and way of life. The expression of these cultural traditions became evident in Louisiana. Perhaps the most flamboyant of these continuities are seen in religion, particularly Voodoo. Derived from the African religion of Vodu, and blended with Catholicism, Voodoo became common in much of the Caribbean. Despite a 1782 ban on importing Caribbean slaves into Louisiana, the state quickly became famous for its own Voodoo cults (Tallant 1946). The aftermath of the Haitian rebellion of 1791 brought new immigrants carrying Voodoo beliefs to the state (Mulira 1990:35).

While Voodoo is the best-known African-based religion in Louisiana, diverse African belief systems and magical practices have been common throughout the state. These are expressed through Catholic and Baptist churches alike, and through the works of separate religious specialists, such as spiritualists and conjurers.

The oral, historical, and ethnographic record of religious and magical beliefs in Louisiana is rich. Lyle Saxon, director of the Federal Writer's Project Ex-Slave Narratives in Louisiana, was particularly interested in recording magical practices in the state, as well as any available information on the Voodoo
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Queen Marie Laveau. The ex-slave narratives, and subsequent publications based upon the interviews (Saxon et al. 1989; Tallant 1946), provide a wealth of oral historical data. Research conducted by Zora Neale Hurston (1990) in New Orleans among “Voodoo Priestesses” in that city and Newbell Niles Puckett’s (1926) work with “witch doctors” throughout Mississippi, provide additional sources of ethnographic analogy for the interpretation of archaeological remains of a religious or magical nature.

The Sociocultural Context

While understanding the African basis of slave culture is important, it is equally necessary to recognize the American context of these cultural practices. African-American culture is more than reinvented African culture. Numerous African ethnic groups were incorporated into the slave populations of the New World. The practices and beliefs that have come to represent a distinct African-influenced subculture within the southern United States are not drawn from any single African ethnic population, but from all of the represented African ethnic groups. As such, while it is important to review the African origins of cultural traditions found in the “New World,” it is just as important to understand how a new African-influenced ethnic identity was forged by the slave populations and how this ethnic identity shaped black society. Enslaved Africans encountered the beliefs and practices of European and North American Indian cultures. When the cultural values and practices of these other groups were complimentary to the African world view, the practices of other cultures were absorbed into African-American life. The practices and beliefs discussed in this paper are by no means limited to African-American populations. Root doctors, spirit possession, and the use of magical charms, can be found throughout black and white populations of the south. Whether individual practices are of European or African origin is of less importance than the recognition that these practices are retained because they are compatible with the African-American world view.

Too often, magical beliefs are seen as archaic oddities, as holdovers from a past time. Anthropologists and folklorists such as Lyle Saxon, Robert Tallant, and Niles Newbell Puckett, recorded "Negro Superstitions" as signs of pervasive ignorance among African Americans, or something to be humored, without understanding the significance of the beliefs or their function. Strong archaeological and oral historical evidence demonstrates that these ideological beliefs and practices were pervasive and continual from the period of slavery through the twentieth century. Among West African peoples, the function of magical systems and beliefs in witchcraft are well understood by anthropologists. Fear of magical retribution for wrongdoing aids in maintaining social control and certain standards of behavior (Marwick 1970). Such is also the case with African-American Hoodoo. When an individual has stayed far enough from the group’s acceptable behavior, they are “fixed.” As in Africa (Marwick 1970; Nassau 1969), “fixes” are only effective if the potential victim knows of the spell. Zora Neale Hurston describes a woman scorned by her lover for another. Paying a sum of $100.00, she requested the conjurer to whom Hurston was apprenticed to put on a death spell. From the time of the death dance till the spell’s taking effect, a period of nine days was to pass. Hurston was disappointed that the effectiveness of the spell was never tested, for before the set period had passed, the man heard rumors of the curse, dumped his new lover, and returned to his former lover, who in turn called off the spell (Hurston 1990:240–243). The spell, contrary to Hurston’s comments, seems to have worked as intended.

While Hoodoo is perceived by most European Americans today as a form of “black magic,” bent upon casting curses, the vast majority of spells and charms requested from conjurers have always been related to matters of the heart. Spells, powders, potions, charms, and candles guaranteed to halt a straying lover or return a wife to a husband are frequently mentioned in the literature (e.g., Clayton 1990; Hurston 1990; Saxon et al. 1989; Tallant 1946).

The nature of slave family relationships has received a great deal of attention in the social historical literature (e.g. Burton 1985; Bush 1990; Fox-Genovese 1988; Gutman 1976; Malone 1992; White 1985). Whereas historians have disagreed as to whether a nuclear family unit was the norm for slave families, there is general consensus that such a family arrangement was the social ideal for African Americans. The circumstances of slavery, such as the sale of children from parents and husbands from wives, made stable family relationships difficult to maintain. The powerlessness of male slaves to protect their wives from European-American sexual advances only served to increase strain in marital relationships (Fox-Genovese 1988; White 1985). Flight from bondage as a family was often impossible, forcing fathers to choose between their families and freedom (White 1985). During the postbellum period, while the fear of separation through sale was removed, the stresses of poverty, racism, and mobility still strained marital relationships.

Despite the difficulties facing African-American couples, researchers agree that the family was the most important social relationship in the African-American community (Blackwell 1985; Fox-Genovese 1988; Malone 1992; White 1985). As Ann Patton Malone (1992:272) wrote:
The chariot of their domestic organizations conveyed most Louisiana chattels through the dangerous, enfeebled circumstances of enslavement with their humanity intact. Along with their religious belief and folk culture, Louisiana slaves' families, households, and communities provided them with respite, comfort, love, support and encouragement when the pain of bondage grew too great.

Like too many researchers outside of anthropology, Malone has labeled the distinct ethnic traditions that African-Americans utilized to reinforce familial bonds with the vague term of "folk culture." Archaeological research at Oakley Plantation suggests that continuity and elaboration of African-based spiritual traditions, as evidenced in the archaeological record, served to ensure the preservation of the African-American family and community.

**Archaeological Investigations at Oakley Plantation**

Oakley Plantation was founded in 1796 as a cotton plantation in Feliciana Parish of Spanish West Florida. At its economic peak in the 1840s, the plantation comprised over 3,000 acres of land and over 200 slaves (Wilkie 1994). The plantation remained in the ownership of the same family, and was continuously farmed by African Americans until the 1940s. In 1947, 100 acres of the plantation, including the planter's house and plantation yard area, were sold to the State of Louisiana for preservation and interpretation as the Audubon State Commemorative Area (Figure 1).

Archaeological excavations were conducted at Oakley Plantation as a National Parks Service funded National Register Testing Program during 1991 and 1992. The research was conducted as a joint effort between the University of California, Los Angeles and Louisiana State University.

During field research, 40 acres of the Audubon State Commemorative Area were systematically surface surveyed and a total of 187 1-by-1-m units were excavated. Three loci, consisting of two housesites and their associated refuse (F-5 and F-30), and one refuse dump (F-29) within the study area provided the majority of the artifacts related to the African-American experience at the plantation (Figure 2).
The earliest African-American assemblages recovered from the plantation date to the 1840s (Table 1), and are associated with the archaeological remains of a cabin built near the Great House at this time. This cabin was also occupied during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The slave period assemblages are believed to be domestic waste from a servant family (Wilkie 1994).
Table 1. African-American Features Excavated at Oakley Plantation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Date&lt;sup&gt;1&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Function/Affiliation</th>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>1842.5</td>
<td>Slave cabin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1897.5</td>
<td>Household of Silvia Freeman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>223.8</td>
<td>Household of Freeman daughters</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>1943.6</td>
<td>Slave dumpsite</td>
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<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>1939.2</td>
<td>Household of Sam Scott</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<sup>1</sup> Calculated from South’s (1977) Mean Ceramic Date formula, but with date ranges from other chronologically diagnostic materials such as glass, rubber, and plastics. The decision to use materials in addition to ceramics was made because ceramic technology changes very slowly after the mid-nineteenth century, making these materials less reliable alone for dating late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century assemblages. For a fuller discussion of the dating of the site, the reader is referred to Wilkie (1994).

The late nineteenth-century materials recovered from this cabin are known from oral history to be from the household of Silvia Freeman, who worked as a cook for the planter family from at least 1886 until her death between 1900 and 1910. Freeman, a widow, lived in the house with her five children. Two of the children, Eliza and Delphine Freeman, upon reaching adulthood, also worked as domestics for the family, and continued to live in their mother's house until the 1930s. Distinct assemblages associated with the two later cabin occupations were recovered (Wilkie 1994).

The fourth African-American assemblage from Oakley was recovered behind a standing tenant house in the yard area of the plantation. From oral historical data (Cummings 1991; Hulbert 1992), this house is known to have been built in 1920 by Sam Scott, and lived in until 1949, when he was evicted from the plantation by the State of Louisiana. Scott worked as a yard hand, responsible for the maintenance of plantation equipment. His wife, Nettie, worked as the last cook for the planter family (Hulbert 1992).

Together, these assemblages provide data related to the African-American experience at Oakley Plantation from the period of slavery through to the end of the plantation era.

The African Spiritual World Transformed

During analysis, a number of artifacts were encountered whose function was not immediately apparent. Included among these were water-ground and hand-ground porcelain triangles, curated Native American lithics, a cowrie shell, and a coin with a hole pierced through it (Table 2). In addition, several artifacts of known Christian significance were recovered. In an attempt to identify the meaning of these materials, African and African-American religious practices as recorded by historians and ethnographers were reviewed.

In West Africa, illness is seen as either the result of natural agents or sorcery (Marwick 1970). Within the African diaspora, illnesses generally have three possible causes: natural, spiritual or human, with spiritual ills resulting from witches, ghosts, or other supernaturals, and human causes being the result of sorcery (Laguerre 1987:5). The symptoms of any illness can be treated by a root doctor (who may or may not also be a spiritualist). To cure a human or spiritually caused illness, a magical specialist must be employed (Laguerre 1987:5). Artifacts related to both physical and magical curing were recovered at Oakley (Wilkie 1994). My focus is on those artifacts which were used to avoid illness or bad luck, or to counteract spells because of their magical properties.

The African-American perception of a spiritual side to illness is indicative of a broad sympathy towards supernatural realms. “Superstitions” and a tendency to believe in magic, ghosts, witches, and other such spirits, were often commented upon by European Americans observing African-American life from the earliest days of slavery through the mid-twentieth century.

In antebellum West Feliciana, Bennett Barrow (Davis 1943) complained his slaves were in a panic due to an omen foretelling the end of the world. In the ex-slave narratives (Clayton 1990), a woman told of her grandmother’s unfortunate encounter with the Loup Garou (Louisiana’s resident werewolf), while
another woman related the best ways to witchproof one's house. Sociologists and anthropologists working from the 1920s through the 1940s (e.g., Cohn 1935; Powdermaker 1939) often referred to these traditions and beliefs in a derogatory or flippant manner. Even Newbell Niles Puckett (1926), whose *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* focused upon recording such magical beliefs and practices, was prone to attributing many of these traditions to European roots, calling the Negro a repository of European "mental heirlooms" (Puckett 1926:2). None of these researchers recognized the African basis of these beliefs.

Closer study of these "folk traditions," however, suggests a strong continuity with the ideological and magical systems of Africa. This recognition is by no means new: Zora Neale Hurston (1990), Melville Herskowitz (1941), and Robert Tallant (1946) as well as Newbell Niles Puckett (1926), all discussed or alluded to this possibility. More recently, Robert Farris Thompson (1983) has demonstrated the ongoing impacts of African spiritual and artistic traditions on the cultures of the diaspora. Although there is growing interest in the study of African-American life and material culture, the study of African-American ideological systems is still new: Eric Klingshofer (1987) presented archaeological evidence of cosmological systems from Garrison plantation; Kenneth Brown and Doreen Cooper (1990) have reported the discovery of a root-doctor's tool kit and home at Jordan Plantation in Texas; and miscellaneous artifacts, such as ground clay, "gemstone" chipped glass, and figurines have been found at many archaeological sites, but very little synthetic research has been conducted (Patten 1992).

Leland Ferguson (1992), in his discussion of *mniskai* charms and Bakongo river cults, has provided the best synthesis of cosmological, archaeological, and ethnographic evidence. Ferguson has tied cosmograms found on the bases of intact colonoware pots from river contexts in South Carolina, with similar cosmograms used by the Bakongo of Africa. Ferguson reports that almost half of slaves brought to South Carolina were from this region (Ferguson 1992:114). The presence of these Bakongo-influenced bowls in South Carolina represents a continuity in the practice of making offerings to water spirits. Ferguson's work underscores the necessity for archaeologists to recognize those materials which may represent traditional African belief systems and to attempt to understand the meanings these materials may have held for the users.

**Africanisms and Christianity**

In Louisiana, the most widely known African-rooted magical traditions are those associated with Voodoo. Voodoo, strictly defined, is a syncretism between the African religion Vodou and Catholicism (Herskovitz 1941; Simpson 1978). The pantheon of Catholic Saints has become merged with the pantheon of Orisha found in Yoruba. Although New Orleans, a strongly Catholic city, is most famous for its Voodoo cults, the association of Voodoo-type beliefs and practices with solely Catholicism has ultimately served to deny the strong influences this African-based ideological system has had on African-American Protestant groups, and the widespread nature of these beliefs.

The people of the plantations do not refer to "Voodoo," but rather, "Hoodoo." Hoodoo, as used in the ex-slave narratives, is used to describe attempts to control the actions and health of other people (or prevent others from controlling you) through the use of potions, charms, and incantations (Botkin 1945; Clayton 1990; Hurston 1990). The professional practitioner of these arts is called a "Hoodoo," and was often an important figure in the community (Clayton 1990; Puckett 1926; Tallant 1946). "Conjures" and "tricks" are terms used to describe cast spells. "Hands," "Tobies," "Gris-Gris," or "Charms" are the terms found in the ethnographic and oral historical record to describe magical charms (e.g., Clayton 1990; Hurston 1990; Puckett 1926; Tallant 1946). "Gris gris" and "greegree" are commonly used in West Africa, and have been found there as names for amulets (Nassau 1969).

The populations studied by Puckett were predominantly Baptists as opposed to Catholics, but still shared many common Hoodoo magical beliefs and practices. Walter Pitts (1993) has demonstrated the modern importance of "possession" within African-American Baptist ritual, tracing the origins of the ecstatic state (often referred to as "getting the spirit") to African possessions. Continuity in African possessions is well documented among Voodoo practitioners. The importance of possession among Baptists suggests that the possibility of other African continuities existing within this church must be explored.

Frederick Law Olmstead, in his letters commenting on slavery, stated that he had never encountered any slaves as devout in their Christianity as an Uncle Tom (of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*), but had been assured they existed (McLaughlin 1981:166). In making this statement, Olmstead expressed his doubt that slaves had fully embraced a European form of Christianity, as Stowe's portrayal of the Christ-like Uncle Tom suggested. Olmstead describes meeting a planter who had witnessed "the Negroes in his church, during 'a season of revival' leap from their seats, throw their arms wildly in the air, shout vehemently and unintelligibly, cry, groan, rend their clothes, and fall into cataleptic trances" (McLaughlin 1981:167). Again, such behavior appears to have a basis in African possession. In addition to continuities
in the African ecstatic state, African-American Baptists have been found to employ West African-based preaching styles and musical cycles during the course of a church service (Plits 1988, 1989a, 1989b, 1991).

Perhaps, given the evidence of strong African continuities among modern African-American groups, archaeologists should make greater attempts to recognize and understand material reflections of these African-based beliefs. The ideological assemblage of Silvia Freeman illustrates that the line between African-American Baptists and African-American Catholics is blurred. Included in Freeman's assemblage are a rosary medal, a porcelain hand-painted nativity figure, and a fragment of a Christ's-head medal (Figure 3). Such materials, among European-American assemblages, are associated with Catholics, possibly Episcopalians, but certainly not among most Protestant groups. Silvia Freeman, however, is known to have been a member of Mt. Pilgrim Baptist Church.

Ethnographic and oral historical data from Louisiana and Mississippi illustrate that Saints were called upon and prayed to by black Baptists and Catholics alike to fulfill specific requests (e.g., Puckett 1926; Hurston 1990; Saxon 1989; Tallant 1946): St. Joseph could provide luck in getting a job; St. Mary, a cure for sickness; and St. Michael, to conquer, to name a few (Hurston 1990). A St. Anne medal has been recovered by the author from a house at Riverlake Plantation known to have been inhabited by an African-American Baptist (Wilkie 1994). In addition, excavations at an eighteen-century New Orleans African cemetery recovered one circa 1800 grave containing an African male and a rosary (Orser 1994:37–38). It is likely that these items were introduced to the material culture of Afro-Baptists by Catholics from New Orleans and west of the Mississippi River.

The use of saints' medals by African-American Baptists is not surprising when one considers the similarities between these medals and traditional African charms. Once blessed, saints' medals, crucifixes, rosaries, and other items, are perceived as holy objects, containing spiritual power. In the same way, Africans believe that charms derive their strength from the spirit contained within the object, not the object itself. Just as a saint's medal can be blessed to give it strength, a number of natural and human-made items can become vessels for spiritual power for a West African (Nassau 1969; Thompson 1983). Of interest to the archaeologist, river stones, ceramics, shells, and bits of mirror are potential containers of spiritual power (Thompson 1983).

Scholars of Voodoo have long recognized the syncretism between the African Orisha of Yoruba and the Catholic Saints. For example, Ogun, an Orish associated with iron, becomes associated with the sword-brandishing saints, such as Michael and James (Herskovitz 1941; Thompson 1983:172–173). The incorporation of these "Catholic" Saints into Baptist households may demonstrate the closer ties these religious manifestations share with their African roots than with European-American-defined Christian denominations. It is important to recognize that the user of such a medal is probably incorporating the object into their material culture because it is compatible with their world view.

While the presence of a rosary, Christ's-head medal, and nativity figure can be easily understood in the context of syncretic transformations in African religious beliefs, the exact role of other artifacts, while certainly of ideological significance, are more difficult to precisely define. These include the curated Native American lithics, the water-ground porcelain sherd, the perforated coin, and cowrie shell.

Power Objects

Included in the slave assemblage, and both of the Freeman and the Scott assemblages (Table 2), were curated Native American projectile points and scrapers (Figure 4). All of these lithics predate historic contact (Neuman 1984), and therefore do not represent the activities of Native Americans living as contemporaries of the African Americans. No evidence of prehistoric occupation has been found within the modern State Commemorative Area. Finally, the artifacts do not show evidence of repeated wear typical of lithics used as flint-and-steel strikers.

Charles Orser (1985) has likewise reported the curation of Native American lithic artifacts at an African-
American tenant house site in South Carolina. Likewise, projectile points have been recovered from African-American sites at Skunk Hollow, New Jersey (Geismar 1982); Jordan Plantation, Texas (Brown and Cooper 1990); Monticello, Virginia (Patten 1992); Simon's Island, Georgia (Sue M. Moore, personal communication 1994); and at the King's Bay Plantations, Georgia (Adams 1987).

John Hulbert (1992), a former tenant of Oakley, remembered finding arrowheads occasionally while plowing his fields. When he found any of these artifacts, he would give them to his grandmother, “who wanted them for something or other,” but he did not know why. “Arrowheads” and flint are still sold in New Orleans today as good luck charms and as components of charm bags.

Orser (1985) attributed the presence of a lithic cache at Millwood Plantation to an arrowhead collector within the tenant family. At Oakley, the points have been discarded or abandoned, and are found among the household trash, suggesting the owner had become bored with the object, or that its use had passed. These artifacts could be dismissed as a representation of individual whim reflected in the archaeological record.

Every period of African-American occupation at Oakley is associated with at least one of these artifacts (Table 2). The artifacts were recovered from trash middens and refuse piles clearly associated with African-American housesites. Despite extensive excavations of trash deposits related to the European-American planter family at Oakley, and testing throughout the rest of the park, no lithic artifacts were recovered from these areas. It would appear, as a result of archaeological testing, that there is a direct correlation between the presence of lithic artifacts and African-American housesites at Oakley.

Finally, African-Americans involved in intensive agriculture are most likely to accidentally encounter lithic artifacts while working. Archaeological testing at Oakley concentrated in the yard area of the plantation. Small house gardens represented the extent of agricultural activities in this area, and persons living in the yard would be less likely to accidentally encounter such objects than someone participating in full-time agricultural pursuits. This again suggests the objects had cultural meaning beyond souvenirs.

Although the exact function of these artifacts at Oakley cannot be determined, Ed Murphy, an informant of Newbell Puckett's from Columbus, Mississippi, interviewed in the 1920s, provides some insight:

One old conjure doctor in Mississippi told me [Puckett] that the Indian arrowheads often found in the locality were not made by man at all, but were fashioned by God out of thunder and lightning. To use one for good luck, strike a spark from it with your knife (if the spark flies readily, you know that you have a good knife) and let the spark fall upon a piece of powdered punk. Let the punk smolder into ashes, which are to be wrapped in a piece of newspaper and carried with you always for good luck [Puckett 1926:315].

In the procedure described above, the projectile point does not provide the final charm, but is only used to produce it. The association of Native American artifacts with African-American magical practices is further suggested by archaeological evidence from Jordan Plantation, outside of Houston, Texas. Kenneth Brown has excavated an African-American cabin he believes was occupied by a shaman, or conjurer. Objects recovered from this house included pieces of chalk, bird skulls, spoons, remains of medicine, and chert scrapers (Brown and Cooper 1990). The association of chert scrapers with artifacts otherwise related to healing at this site suggests that an ideological interpretation of the Oakley lithics is appropriate.
Curated Native American lithic artifacts are not the only potential charms represented at Oakley. Among the artifacts deposited during the occupation of Delphine and Eliza Freeman was an 1855 English "Britannia" penny with a hole punched through it (Figure 5). Such artifacts are not unknown on other archaeological sites. Singleton (1991) reports such coins were recovered from Monticello, Virginia, and King's Bay, Georgia. William Hampton Adams (1987), who worked at King's Bay, reported that several Spanish Medio Reals with holes punched in them were recovered from the slave cabins. The Works Project Administration (WPA) ex-slave narratives from Georgia include descriptions of silver coins being worn to avoid harm from conjures (Adams 1987:204). Likewise, two coins with holes punched in them were recovered during the excavation of a late nineteenth-to early twentieth-century black cemetery in Arkansas (Rose and Santeford 1985). During the 1920s and 1930s, several sociologists and anthropologists studying rural black populations reported variations on this same practice in Mississippi and Louisiana. Hortense Powdrometer (1939:288) found Mississippi African Americans wore punctured dimes around the ankle to ward off evil. Cohn (1935:138), also working in Mississippi, found a variation on this practice. He learned of silver dimes, bearing the birth year of the wearer, being kept in the toe end of shoes. Puckett (1926) documented the most variety in the practice, adding that some people argued copper coins were as, or more effective, than the silver ones. Puckett found that coins worn around the neck, waist, and ankle, could all serve to turn away evil tricks. These practices can still be observed among African-American populations throughout Louisiana today.

Tallant (1946:227), in his study of New Orleans Voodoo, found a 1918 Times Picayune article in which an elderly African-American woman credited the horseshoe on her house, the red string on her bedpost, and the silver dime in her stocking for her surviving yellow fever epidemics. Silver dimes worn around the ankle also served to ease stomach cramps, or, when worn around the neck, served as cures for rheumatism (Puckett 1926:362, 375). Pennies worn in shoes also served to cure rheumatism, while pennies worn around the waist or neck were used to prevent indigestion, blood poisoning, and to aid teething babies (Puckett 1926:346, 362, 376, 388).

Clearly, the metal comprising the coin is often an important element. Hurston (1990) and Haskins (1978) both record the use of filings ground from silver dimes as ingredients in various conjures. Both authors cite examples of silver being used to detect whether a person had a conjure placed on them or not. Haskins (1978) reports doctors placing a dime on their patient's tongue. If the dime turned black, the patient had a fix put on them. In an 1898 study, Haskins found the same practice, using a lump of silver rather than a coin. Coins provided a convenient source of precious metals to the public. However, there are certainly instances where a coin, as a distinct form, is important. Gambler's charms, used to ensure wins, and payments to the dead, which bribed the dead not to walk, rely upon the currency value of the coin, not the composition. Likewise, in the case of wearing the coin with a specific date, the form is vital. Hurston (1990) also describes a conjure to exorcise snakes from the body, which specifically requires a silver quarter with a woman's head on it, be filed upside down into a cup of sweet milk.

No reference to coins being used in these ways in Africa has yet been found by the author. However, metal bracelets of copper, silver, and gold are often credited with similar healing powers throughout West Africa (Nassau 1989). In America, coins, as the only source of these metals, seem to have been incorporated into the African tradition, and their powers then elaborated upon. When looking at the potential meanings of coin charms to the wearer, it is perhaps best to heed Hurston's (1990:277) warning to potential ethnographers: "It would be impossible for anyone to find out all the things that are being used in conjure in America. Anything may be a conjure, and nothing may be a conjure, according to the doctor."

Puckett (1926) came to a similar conclusion when working as a healer himself. The average conjurer, he found, used his imagination and wits to create, within overall defined boundaries, the specifics of their cures. While it is impossible to know exactly how the coin from the Freeman assemblage was used,
some general statements can be made. The most
notable feature of the coin is not its foreign manufac-
ture, but its date of manufacture, 1855. This date
corresponds to the year of Silvia Freeman’s birth. This
hardly seems to be a coincidence, and strongly sug-
gests the charm had belonged to Silvia Freeman. Rose
and Santeford (1985:75) found a coin dated 1854 in
the grave of a woman. The age of the woman and the
date of her interment suggested to them that the
artifact may have been a birth coin. The Oakley coin
was found in deposits dating after Silvia Freeman’s
death, suggesting she did not part with it while alive.
The coin was recovered under the house, and may
have been lost accidentally. No references discussing
the discarding of fetishes and charms have been found
to date.

A group of artifacts whose function is not as easily
interpreted are a number of intentionally ground cer-
amic sherds. These artifacts are roughly the same
size (Figure 6), and tend to be triangular in shape.
They were recovered from all the African-American
contexts at Oakley. Levels from which the ground
sherds came included glass and ceramic sherds lack-
ing similar wear, suggesting that these artifacts were
not created as a result of site formation processes. The
only deposits subjected to water damage were recov-
ered from the Scott house. The effects of running
water on ceramic artifacts from this area, however,
was only to wear away their decalcomania designs,
not smooth their edges. Given the contexts from which
these artifacts were recovered, the ground surface of
these ceramics were the result of human activity. No
clear-cut suggestion of their function is available in the
oral historical or ethnographic record. Similar
artifacts have been recovered at other sites, such as
Poplar Forest (Patten 1992). Patten has suggested that
these artifacts may have functioned as gaming pieces,
such as used in the African game of Mankala, in di-
ving through “casting,” or as components of a charm

Several means of divining are common in West
Africa. The Yoruba use a system known as Ifa, which
is based upon a series of 256 figures or permutations,
and uses 16 palm nuts on a divining board. In the
absence of palm nuts, alternative materials may be
substituted. Ifa is ordinarily consulted by men, not
women (Parrinder 1969). The Ashanti have a form of
consultation, called nso ayaa. A pot or bowl is filled
with water, leaves, cowries, and marbles. A priestess,
stirring the water, calls a god, and when answered,
removes a spoonful of the mixture. The divination is
based upon the contents of the spoon (Parrinder 1969:
149). Divination is conducted by specialists, not by
the individual. While such practices should be con-
sidered when interpreting material culture from Af-
rican-American sites, it seems uncertain that the num-
bers of these ceramic sherds recovered from the dif-
Figure 6. Examples of ground ceramic sherds recovered from Af-
rican-American household assemblages at Oakley Plantation.
ferent assemblages represent divination, and alterna-
tive interpretations need to be explored further.

One of these alternatives would be the incorpo-
ration of these sherds into charm bags. The use of
charm bags is well documented in Louisiana (e.g.,
Haskins 1978; Hurston 1990; Malbrough 1992;
Thompson 1983). Robert Farris Thompson, provided
Fu-Kai Bunseki, an expert on the Kongo, with de-
scriptions of charm bag construction and tying from
Puckett’s (1926) work in Mississippi. He found the
contents, construction, and uses remarkably similar to
minkisi still constructed in Kongo. In addition, the
red flannel charm bags, still common in Louisiana
(and even sold to tourists in New Orleans) appear to
be derived from minkisi wambi, or danger charms, used
by the Bakongo, and contained in red cloth (Thom-

A survey of oral historical and ethnographic in-
formation in Louisiana and Mississippi has failed to
find evidence of any African-rooted gaming practices.
Former tenants from Oakley did not recall any such
games (Cummings 1991; Hulbert 1992). The manu-
facture of these artifacts would require some invest-
ment of time. Gaming pieces could have been more
easily created by reusing other materials such as but-
tons, coffee beans or nut shells. In West Africa, coffee
beans or nuts are commonly used as counters in Man-
kala (Merrick Posansky, personal communication
1994). In interpreting these items, it may be this
ground surface finish that is most important. Hurston
(1990) describes polished rocks and river rocks being
significant for some people as power objects. Klin-
glehofer (1987) and Patten (1992) both record the
presence of polished stones at other African-American
sites. Thompson (1983), in his discussion of Bak-
ongo water spirits remarks upon the power of these

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spirits and the importance of materials drawn from riverbeds. River stones are common charm elements (Thompson 1983:81). In texture and appearance, the porcelain sherds are very similar to river stone. These artifacts could be created by abrasion, using water and sand, both common in the Feliciana parishes. By using water in the manufacturing process, the conjurer could infuse the artifact with spiritual power. Yet another interpretation is that these artifacts are the by-product of other activities, with the sherds themselves being used as abraders. Until further research is conducted, however, the meaning of these materials remains unclear.

A number of ideologically significant artifacts were also recovered from disturbed contexts at the Freeman House. These included a cowrie shell fragment and a quartzite flake. No references specifically to quartzite have been found by the author in the oral historical or ethnographic record. However, this rock, unusual to the region, could have been a component of a charm bag. Cowrie shells have been found throughout the New World in association with African-American sites (Patten 1992; Pearce 1993).

Among plantation assemblages containing cowrie shell is Ashland-Belle Helene, a Louisiana plantation approximately 60 miles south of Oakley (Babson 1989). Cowries have long been used in Africa as a currency, adornment, and component of art (Thompson 1983). The majority of the cowrie shells found in African-American assemblages are reported from antebellum contexts in Virginia. The cowrie shell fragment from Oakley does not belong to any of the Cypraea species native to this continent (Reher 1981; Sutty 1990), and has been tentatively identified by the author as Cypraea stercoracea, or Rat Cowrie (Abbott 1964). This species is native to Africa. The inclusion of this artifact in the Oakley assemblage suggests that this object was of cultural significance. Unfortunately, the nature of its cultural meaning is unclear.

A final artifact with possible ideological significance recovered from Oakley is an iron horseshoe found at the Freeman house. While it is possible that the inclusion of this artifact in their assemblage is incidental, oral historical references to the importance of horseshoes as apotropaic devices (materials/objects used to turn away evil) on houses are common throughout the WPA ex-slave narratives (Clayton 1990; Saxon et al. 1989), and when speaking to plantation tenants (Biben 1993; Cummings 1991; Hulbert 1992; Miles 1992). Puckett (1926), also reported the importance of horseshoes as a protective device on houses, and emphasized the European origin of this belief. The incorporation of European folk beliefs into the African-American magical belief system illustrates the process of functional substitution that transformed African into African-American culture.

Conclusions

In the current intellectual climate of archaeology, interest in ideological systems has grown (e.g., Hodder 1989; Leone 1988; Miller and Tilley 1984). The development of African-American ideological systems can only be fully studied by using archaeological data to place religious and magical beliefs, as related in the oral historical record, in their sociocultural context.

Archaeological studies of continuities of African traditions in New World slave populations have most frequently focused upon continuities in pottery traditions, as evidenced by the presence of colono-wares (e.g., Armstrong 1985, 1990; Ferguson 1980, 1992). A review of artifacts recovered from African-American sites, however, reveals as much evidence of continuities in African world views. Unlike colono-wares, which virtually disappear during the nineteenth century, continuities in magical traditions are found in the archaeological record of Oakley Plantation through the twentieth century. As more research is directed towards recognizing archaeological manifestations of past ideologies, it is anticipated that a greater appreciation will emerge of the role of African-based religious traditions played in the preservation of the African-American family and community during slavery and the Jim Crow South.

The manipulation of the spiritual world in an attempt to maintain family bonds represents an African-American means of empowering themselves against the context of racism and oppression in which they lived. Instead of viewing the African-American family merely as a victim of the whims of white injustice, researchers need to recognize how African Americans asserted their personal power in a spiritual realm where European Americans had no authority. The continuity in magical practices seen in the antebellum and postbellum assemblages of Oakley represents a uniquely African-American means of controlling the circumstances of their lives. In a world where the humanity of slaves, and later, tenants, was devalued, African Americans appealed to a higher power. Archaeologists must learn to identify the artifacts associated with this empowerment if they are to fully understand the African-American experience.

Notes

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