TENNESSEE ANTHROPOLOGIST

JOURNAL OF THE TENNESSEE ANTHROPOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

VOLUME XXI, NUMBER 2
FALL
1996
ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE OF AFRICAN-STYLE RITUAL
AND HEALING PRACTICES IN THE UPLAND SOUTH

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ABSTRACT

There is increasing evidence from the archaeological record of strong continuity between
ritual practices by slaves in the American South and West and Central African ritual. Artifacts
recovered from African-American contexts at Locust Grove, a plantation in the Upland South,
also suggest that African-style healing and ritual might have been practiced there. The material
from Locust Grove is compared with ethnographic and historical data from West and Central
Africa, and with archaeological data from other regions of the South, specifically the Carolina
lowcountry. It is suggested that African ritual traditions first coalesced in the coastal region of
South Carolina and Georgia, and through interstate slave trade eventually diffused to the Upland
South.

Introduction

As more archaeologists focus their research on colonial and antebellum plantations in the
South, numerous artifacts are being identified that appear to be associated with African-style
conjuring and healing rituals (Brown and Cooper 1990; Ferguson 1992; Orser 1994; Samford
1996; Wilkie 1995; Stine et al. 1996). While most of these artifacts have been recovered from
slave sites in the Coastal Plain, they also occur on Upland South plantations. This paper
describes objects from slave contexts at Locust Grove, a plantation in the Upland South, that
parallel ethnographic descriptions of amulets and charms used in West and Central African
rituals and historical accounts of their continued use in the United States. This area of research
is becoming increasingly prevalent in African-American archaeology to document continuity
and change of African cultural practices in the New World (Edwards 1996; Franklin 1996;
Klingelhofer 1987; LaRoche 1996; Russell 1996; Wilkie 1995; Young 1996). In addition to
reflecting African cultural practices, the amulets and charms recovered in slave contexts may
represent ways that slaves coped with the many risks they faced in their daily lives (Young
1995).

Locust Grove

Locust Grove, located on the Ohio River in Jefferson County, Kentucky (Figure 1), was
established in the late eighteenth century by the Croghan family. In 1822, Locust Grove had
a moderately large slave community consisting of 41 individuals. Archaeological investigations
which focused on this community commenced in 1987 and continued through 1989. Fieldwork
was directed by Dr. Joseph E. Granger at the Program of Archaeology, University of Louisville.
The assemblages recovered from three slave house ruins were analyzed by the author (Young
Figure 1. Location of Locust Grove.
Figure 2. Layout of Locust Grove Plantation ca. 1820.
The slave houses are situated approximately 150 meters east of the standing main house (Figure 2).

Excavations at Structure 1 revealed a complete and continuous limestone foundation measuring approximately five by six meters. A small pit cellar was found in front of the hearth. Artifacts date primarily from the late eighteenth century until just after the Civil War. Large quantities of window glass indicate that the house had at least one glazed window, although the thickness of the glass suggests that the building was occupied for a considerable period (perhaps three decades) before glass was added to the windows. Analysis of nail types and lengths strongly suggest that the house was built of logs, had a wood plank floor, and was clapboarded after 1830 (when glass was added to the window).

Structure 2 was located approximately 50 meters north of Structure 1 (see map). While a heavy quantity of domestic debris was recovered, no building foundation or pier stones were found in situ. A small brick-lined cellar and a portion of a robbed builder’s trench were uncovered. Artifacts in and surrounding the cellar and robbed builder’s trench date from circa 1820 to the mid-nineteenth century.

Structure 3 had a continuous limestone foundation that measured about five by six meters. This structure also had a pit cellar placed in front of the hearth. The relative abundance of large sixteen and twenty penny nails indicates that the house was a frame structure, rather than log. The artifact assemblage is similar to the other two, except there is an extensive postbellum occupation with significant numbers of artifacts dating to the 1920s.

In addition to architectural artifacts, domestic debris, and animal bone recovered in the excavations, a number of unusual artifacts were recovered from each of the three slave houses. These objects lack straightforward, functional interpretations, and may have been used as charms or amulets. Each of these artifacts will be briefly described.

Three possible amulets were recovered from Structure 1 (Figure 3). One is a small, faceted blue glass bead which may be only one of several beads originally deposited at the site. Because the soils were screened through quarter-inch mesh, it is believed that many other small items like beads were not recovered. Many blue beads have been recovered from African-American slave sites and appear to be associated with an African belief in the protective power that they conveyed (Stine et al. 1996). The second unusual artifact from Structure 1 is a Chinese coin of unidentified date. Similar coins have been recovered from structures in Alexandria, Virginia where Africans and African Americans were held as they awaited being auctioned. The Locust Grove coin is over an inch in diameter and was manufactured with a square hole in the center. The third artifact is a two cent U.S. coin. Unfortunately the date is illegible, but these coins were only minted from 1864 until 1873. The most interesting feature about this coin is that it has been modified. Four notches have been carved or ground into the edges so that if string or twine were wound around the coin through the notches, an “x” or cross of string would show on the faces of the coin.
AFRICAN-STYLE RITUAL

Figure 3. Possible amulets recovered from Structure 1, Locust Grove.

Figure 4. Possible amulets recovered from Structure 2, Locust Grove.
Excavations at Structure 2 containing a brick cellar, yielded several chandelier prisms and a silver dime (Figure 4). The chandelier prisms could have been worn as amulets. The silver dime was minted in 1827. It is extremely worn and an “x” or cross has been scratched on the reverse face, suggesting it may have been used as a charm.

Structure 3 contained several possible amulets or charms (Figure 5). The first is a silver teaspoon with a cross or “x” scratched on the handle. A pewter spoon handle marked with an “x” or cross was also recovered from another African-American slave site in the county (Stottman 1996). The second artifact from Structure 3 that may have been used as a charm is a plain white clay marble that had an “x” or cross incised into it before it was fired. A similarly marked white clay marble was recovered from one of the slave houses at the Hermitage near Nashville, Tennessee (Smith 1976:187, Figure 34h). Also, a perforated Chinese coin was discovered within the remains of Structure 3 at Locust Grove. It is smaller than the one recovered from Structure 1. Several chandelier prisms, identical to those from Structure 2, were also recovered.

Figure 5. Possible amulets recovered from Structure 3, Locust Grove.
AFRICAN-STYLE RITUAL

It is suggested that the objects recovered from the three slave houses at Locust Grove had religious or ritual significance to the African-American residents. The design elements of circles and crosses or “x”s are probably related to West or Central African cosmology that was transplanted and modified through contact with European culture and through the experience of racial slavery in the New World (Ferguson 1992; MacGaffey 1991; Thompson 1983). The slaves at Locust Grove during the period from 1790 until just after the Civil War seem far removed from West African traditions, but as Raboteau (1978) has noted, religious and ritual traditions show remarkable continuity and persistence.

From Africa to the Colonies

According to Sobel (1979:5) and others, there was no single “West African Sacred Cosmos” because of the tremendous variety of ethnic and linguistic groups from which Africans were stolen into slavery. West African religions were extremely diverse and complex (Joyner 1984, 1994; Karenga 1989; Raboteau 1978; Sobel 1979). Some scholars, however, suggest that a common bond united many West African religious groups that, according to Joyner (1984:143), “stressed the African’s mystical relationship to God and the supernatural.”

A number of general themes seem to apply to what little is known of sixteenth- through nineteenth-century West African religious systems. While not applicable in every instance, four specific characteristics appear to have been quite common. First is a belief in a High God or Creator (Alho 1976:44; Karenga 1989:272; Raboteau 1978:8). Second is a belief in a world of spirits that sometimes interact with or otherwise affect the living world (Alho 1976:44; Karenga 1989:272; Raboteau 1978:11). Third is a belief in a particular class of spirits, the ancestors (Alho 1976:44-45; Karenga 1989:273; Raboteau 1978:12). Finally, a belief in magic through use of medicine and charms by healers to control aspects of the spirit world was also fairly common in West and Central African societies (Alho 1976:45; Raboteau 1978:14). Sobel (1979:21) proposes that the similarities in the African religions encouraged a syncretic melding into a single “quasi-African world view in America” under slavery.

One potentially significant cultural area in Africa is the Bakongo homeland, in the region of modern Zaire and northern Angola. Elements of Bakongo religion were similar to, or incorporated into many surrounding West and Central African religious systems (MacGaffey 1988). The Bakongo symbol for the cosmos is a cross (MacGaffey 1986:42-62). The horizontal line of the cross separates the spirit and living worlds, and the vertical line represents the “path of power from below to above” (Ferguson 1992:110; Thompson 1983). In Bakongo religion, as in many other African religions, priests can control the power of God and the spirit world through the use of medicines called minkisi (Ferguson 1992:114; MacGaffey 1988:188). Minkisi are made of various objects composed of clay, crystal, and other minerals, and even sometimes animal and vegetable materials (Ferguson 1992:114; MacGaffey 1988:190, 1991). However, clay is a nearly universal ingredient of minkisi (MacGaffey 1988:1910). Minkisi are often contained in a clay pot, although other containers may serve to house the materials.
Ferguson 1992:114; MacGaffey 1988:191). Minkisi are the literal dwelling places for the spirit and personalities of the dead. They function as portable shrines (MacGaffey 1988:190-191), and serve a key role in African Bakongo religion.

A variety of beliefs and practices were imported with African slaves from different cultural origins into the New World (Orser 1994). The institution of slavery created a social environment where “an enslaved African would meet more Africans from more ethnic groups than he or she would encounter in a lifetime in Africa” (Joyner 1989:2), allowing for diffusion of West African traditions to many areas of the New World. West African ethnic and linguistic groups were not evenly or randomly distributed in the colonies (Curtin 1969; Holloway 1990:6-10; Mintz and Price 1992:11; Sobel 1979:25). Planter prejudices and shifting economic conditions helped to create clusters of Africans from specific regions and cultural affiliations. Curtin’s (1969) study shows that there were two distinguishable slave populations during the colonial era, consisting of one in the lowcountry of South Carolina and Georgia, and another in the Chesapeake region of Virginia and Maryland. According to Curtin (1969:157), South Carolina planters more often purchased Africans from Central Africa - from Angola, while slaves in Virginia and Maryland were more often from the Bight of Biafra and the Gold Coast in West Africa. Sobel (1979:25) states that:

Intercolonial and interstate slave sales later led to a general mixing of ethnic groups, but most members of the black communities in the eighteenth century were apparently ethnically distinguishable, while many were ethnically localized.

In the Carolina lowcountry, Africans and African Americans formed the majority of the population (Curtin 1969; Ferguson 1992; Holloway 1990). The dense concentration of Africans from Angola allowed for strong cultural traditions to be transplanted and melded into the society, even under the harsh system of slavery. Ferguson (1992:36) believes that “black slaves in the Carolina lowcountry led domestic lives much more African in character than those of Virginia.” The Gullah language in this region is a striking example of the strong cultural continuity, especially on the Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia. European majority in Virginia, by contrast, may have prevented an initial coalescence of West African traditions in the Chesapeake, at least during the early colonial period.

The strong ethnic ties between South Carolina and West Africa are also manifested in the archaeological record. Wheaton and Garrow (1983) noted the presence of African-style housing at Yaughan and Curriboo Plantations in South Carolina, especially the earliest occupied structures. Ferguson (1992) identified a number of colonoware bowls, especially those recovered from underwater (river) sites in South Carolina, that were marked on the bases. Some were marked on the exterior, some on the interior. Most of the marks were “x’s” or crosses, or some variation of this motif (swastika), and a number of these symbols were enclosed in circles or squares. Some pots were marked prior to firing, some after. The marks appear to be Bakongo cosmograms, and Ferguson (1992) suggests that the bowls were the containers of minkisi (i.e., the pots were medicine bowls). African ritual traditions, some of which originated
African-style Ritual during the Antebellum Period

It has long been recognized that African-American religion in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries embodies a complex amalgam of traditional African beliefs and Christianity (Genovese 1974:224; Hall 1993; Joyner 1993; Mitchell 1975; Raboteau 1978; Rawick 1972; Sohel 1979). Numerous sources document the belief in witches, charms, haunts, and conjuring that originated in Africa and continued into the twentieth century (Genovese 1974:224; Joyner 1994; Raboteau 1978). Genovese (1974:224) suggests that charms were prevalent in African traditions, yet the specific spirits associated with protective objects were eventually forgotten under slavery in the New World due to the influence of Christianity. Interestingly, the magic connected with the charms survived. After many African Americans converted to Christianity in the late eighteenth century (Rawick 1972), there was a continuing belief in conjuring and amulets for controlling spirits and luck. Specifically, Zora Neale Hurston (1990), in her book Mules and Men, documents many traditional folk beliefs which appear closely related to an African cosmology. Approximately half of the work is devoted to “Hoodoo” practices and in the appendix she lists 38 objects used as paraphernalia of conjure (Hurston 1990:277-280). These materials include numerous herbs, but also steel dust, pictures of Saints, gold and silver items, magnets, medals, and crosses. Field workers of the Savannah Unit of the Federal Writers Project likewise interviewed numerous coastal black Georgians and recorded the uses of various charms and amulets, including copper wire, pieces of broken mirrors, finger rings, silver dimes, gold pieces, and symbols of a cross used as both good-luck charms and items to warn the wearer if he or she has been conjured (Johnson 1940). Charms and amulets were also used for healing. Disease and afflictions were often thought to have been caused by conjure. Charms were used to attract lovers and mates, to ward off evil, and to bring good luck and success (Johnson 1940:29, 92, 125, 135-136).
The use of charms and conjuring are apparent in the Federal Writers Project former slave narratives of Kentucky and Tennessee. For example, a former slave who lived in Wayne County, Kentucky related:

Every one of my children wears a silver dime on a string around their leg to keep off the witches spell. One time, before my daughter Della got to wearing it, she was going down the road, not far from our house, when all at once her leg gave way and she could not walk. Of course I knew what it was. So I went after Linda Woods, the witch doctor...(Rawick 1977b:35).

The healer bathed Della’s leg in “life everlasting,” an herbal medicine, and told Della to avoid the road for nine days. Her mother made Della wear a silver dime around her leg. Evidently, Della, once she wore the charm and followed the healer’s advice, never suffered from the affliction again (Rawick 1977a:190).

Lula Scott, who was a slave near Lexington, Kentucky related that a copper ring worn on the left ankle relieved rheumatism and a small bag of asfoedita worn around the neck provided protection from certain diseases. Also, wearing a string around the ankle or wrist kept people from cramping in water (Rawick 1977a:400). Florence Lee, a former slave who lived in Lincoln County, Kentucky also remembered that a bag of asfoedita prevented children’s diseases (Rawick 1977a:400). Sallah White, from Tennessee related that:

I kin do er lot o’ doctorin’, but I woan tell nobuddy what I use; kaze dat is my en God’s secret...I b’lieve en carryin’ one of Doctor J.C.’s lucky pieces, t’ough, en I se agent fer em. De doctor he’s a Jew, en dem luck pieces sho’ will bring you luck. I knows dat, kaze I done had seven law suits, en I win all of em...

Henry Bibb, a man who escaped slavery from his cruel master in Kentucky, went to a conjurer to buy charms to make a girl love him. He remembered:

After I paid him, he told me to get a bull frog, and take a certain bone out of the frog, dry it, and...scratch her [the women he loved] somewhere on her naked skin with the bone, and she would be certain to love me, and would follow me in spite of herself; no matter who she might be engaged to, nor who she might be walking with (Bibb 1849 in Ososky [1969:73]).

Bibb also tried to influence the behavior of his master through conjure. At one point, he sprinkled powdered alum, salt and other materials near his owner. Another conjurer prescribed a mixture of dried cow manure, red pepper and hair to be left in his master’s bedroom (Bibb 1849 in Ososky [1969]).

These historic accounts, dating to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, illustrate that strong continuity existed between African Americans in the South and West or Central African
traditions. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that the slaves at Locust Grove probably used charms and amulets to prevent beatings and other misfortunes, to attract lovers, and for healing and good luck.

Artifacts that were possibly used as charms or lucky pieces have been recovered from other slave contexts in the South (Brown and Cooper 1990; Ferguson 1992; Orser 1994; Singleton 1991, 1995; Samford 1996; Wilkie 1995). At Andrew Jackson's Hermitage, located near Nashville, Tennessee, numerous glass beads, three hand charms (figas), the "x" marble mentioned previously, and a raccoon penis bone have been recovered from slave contexts (McKee and Thomas 1996; Russell 1996). Drilled coins, relatively common at slave sites, have been found at the Hermitage, Monticello, and Poplar Forest, among other sites (Patten 1992; Russell 1996; Samford 1996). Smoothed ceramic sherds have been posited as having cultural meaning to African Americans (Patten 1992; Wilkie 1995), possibly as gaming pieces or for divination (Wilkie 1995). Brown and Cooper (1990) discovered collections of animal bone, pieces of iron pots, metal spoons, tubes, and other objects from a quarter at the Levi Jordan Plantation in Texas, that they argue, based on archaeological context and ethnographic analogy, were used in African derived healing practices.

There is a growing body of data that support the importance of amulets and charms in African-American slave liveways. The data encompass a number of sources, from ethnographic to historic accounts, and from former slave remembrances to the archaeological record. The Locust Grove and other archaeological materials described here are also comparable to charms and amulets described in Federal Writers Projects former slave accounts (e.g., Johnson 1940), fugitive slave narratives (e.g., Bibb 1849), and paraphernalia of conjure listed by Hurston (1990:277-278). As more data come available from different regions, the African-American experience in the U.S. and associated beliefs can be more completely understood. A particular aspect of this would include the juxtaposition of traditional African ritual with the adoption and modification of Christian practices by African Americans in the antebellum South.

Conclusions

The coins, marble, bead, spoon, and prisms recovered at Locust Grove comprise a very limited portion of the total artifact assemblage, yet their subtle presence is significant. The coins, bead, and prisms could have been worn as charms or amulets as described in former slave narratives and twentieth-century studies of African-American folklore (Puckett 1969). The spoon, marble, and prisms could have been used as medicine, or in the preparation of medicine. Their resemblance to Bakongo minkisi is remarkable. Likewise, the symbols of crosses and circles on colonoware bowls show great similarity with the Locust Grove materials. The objects recovered from slave contexts at Locust Grove in the Upland South parallel ethnographic and historical descriptions of amulets and charms used in West and Central African rituals. The recognition of the Locust Grove artifacts as amulets and charms opens up new areas of research. These areas include an investigation of how slaves at Locust Grove used these items to avoid the risks they faced in their day-to-day lives.
Thomas (1995) is absolutely correct in emphasizing that archaeologists need to cautiously evaluate the appropriateness of ethnographic analogies used for artifact interpretation. However, the recovery of pierced coins, "x" marked objects, beads, and other artifacts and their close resemblance to materials described in historical literature suggest that in many cases, the analogies are strong and indeed appropriate. Due to the materials found on sites dating from the eighteenth through twentieth centuries, archaeologists now have information concerning the formation of African-American culture and the unique character of Christianity in the South. Because many African Americans had converted to Christianity by the late eighteenth century, the artifacts suggest that slave religion was syncretic and incorporated aspects of African belief (Frey 1993; Herskovits 1958; Joyner 1993, 1994; Raboteau 1978, 1994; Sobel 1979, 1987). As suggested by Samford (1996:114), "it may now be possible to trace more fully the transformation of West African cultural traditions in the American South."

Acknowledgements

Many people have read and heard versions of this manuscript. I would like to thank Philip Carr, Charles H. Faulkner, Faye V. Harrison, Lydia Pulsipher, and Walter Klippel. I also thank Charles Orser, Theresa Singleton, and Larry McKee for all their comments concerning my research. I am sincerely grateful to Mark Groover who was a reviewer. The Kentucky Heritage Council provided funds for analysis of the Locust Grove materials. I am indebted to Bob Kelly for letting me take the Locust Grove assemblage to Tennessee for analysis. I also acknowledge Locust Grove for access to the materials. Even with all the help, all errors and omissions are the fault of the author.

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