AN ETHNO-ARCHAEOLOGICAL STUDY OF WOOD AND OTHER ORGANIC MATERIALS USED BY AFRICAN-CURAÇAOAN PEOPLES DURING THE POST-EMANCIPATION PERIOD.

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ABSTRACT

Based on archaeological, ethnographic, historical documentary, and oral history evidence, an analysis was conducted of wood and other organic materials which were used by African-descendant peoples on Curaçao during the post-emancipation period. This paper examines two primary issues; first, the important place that perishable materials had in African-Curaçaoan life-ways and the omission of this material from many archaeological reconstructions. The second aspect of this paper, deals with the dynamics of material possessions in the development and expression of identity among the African-Curaçaoan people. This paper provides an inventory of artifacts for comparative use to other ethno-archaeological investigations in the region, and also opens a dialogue to re-evaluate the process of ‘parallel adaptive strategies’ versus ‘acculturation’ for identity formation of African-Caribbean peoples.

INTRODUCTION

Over a hundred years ago, William James stated that “....between what a man calls ‘me’ and what he simply call ‘mine’ the line is difficult to draw” (1890:279). Since then, anthropologists, sociologists, and archaeologists have continued to focus on the relationship between identity and personal possessions.

With this paper I would like emphasize the value of an ethno-archaeological approach and the importance of ethnographic collections, for understanding African-descendant perceptions of ethnic identification regarding possessions. In particular for this paper, wood and other organic materials noted in ethnographic collections, which are often lost in pre-emancipation archaeological sites, can offer insights for ethnographic analogies to pre-emancipation African and African-descendant life-ways and identity.

Although this paper is primarily an artifact inventory, it is also an attempt to respond to issues regarding the nature of material symbols in self-identification of African-descendant peoples. How possessions associated with them are a reflection of their own unique socio-cultural development, and not necessarily acculturation or assimilation toward European aesthetics or values. Far too often in African-Caribbean studies there has been a rush to search for “acculturation” of aesthetics and values by the African-descendants, due to their utilization of European-form goods or lack of African-form goods. Indeed, if one looks to the standard definitions of acculturation, there is consistently mentioned first-hand contact with subsequent changes in the original cultural pattern of both groups (Seymour-Smith 1986:1). However, for early Africans in the Caribbean, and in this case Curaçao, there was minimal “original cultural pattern” to be changed. The Africans, in most cases, were generally a heterogeneous composite of various linguistic and ethnic groups thrown together under slavery. As slaves they were not a clearly self-defined ethnic group, other than regarding genetic characteristics and socio-economic status. Thus a specific African-Curaçaoan ethnic identity needed to be formed from scratch. It began in the slavery period, yet the most profound self-determined formations developed in the post-emancipation period as successful adaptive strategies. Significantly, the African presence on Curaçao was of an almost equal duration as those Dutch colonists who brought them, thus an African potential for parallel adaptive strategies is just as valid, even though the African-descendants were more constrained by external limitations than were the Europeans. As well, the self-perceptions of the African-Curaçaoans changed during the immediate post-emancipation period, as their relationships with the Europeans changed. This was partially manifest in the implementation of symbolic commu-
The goal of this paper is to compile a self-perceived and self-defined African-descendent material culture assemblage for Curaçao during the post-emancipation period of 1863 to 1940. This information was acquired through the use of oral history accounts, ethnographic documents and collections, and personal interviews by the author, which were then partially reconfirmed by archaeological surveys and excavations. One of the most clear icons of African-Curaçaoan heritage was identified as the house type called a “kunuku house”, including much material culture associated with these structures. As Dittmar has noted, those possessions which have surrounded individuals the longest are most often of more social and psychological significance (1992), thus it is not surprising that the material culture assemblage self-defined as African-Curaçaoan has a large number of artifact types associated back to the slavery period. However it is important to mention here, that many of the artifacts identified in this inventory are European-made objects, often also noted in European living contexts. The importance here is that these specific items were the exclusive work domain of the Africans and African-descendants in all contexts, and thus are identified as African-Curaçaoan by the society.

This paper is not meant to be the final definitive inventory of African-Curaçaoan material culture, yet all of the items noted here were identified by the society itself as representative for African-descendants and in kunuku house contexts on the island from 1863 to 1940, as a kind of core inventory. In this photograph from the 1940’s, we are able to note many of the identified artifact groups from this inventory (Figure 1).

AFRICAN-CURACAOAN MATERIAL CULTURE INVENTORY (1863-1940)

The following wood and other organic material artifact groups were self-defined by various sources as representative of African-Curaçaoan material culture. Some of the more prominent of these sources include oral histories compiled by Rose Mary Allen, and interviews with authorities on Curaçao culture such as Ellis Juliana, Richenel Ansano, and Frank Martinus-Arion, among others. Given are the Papiamentu (local language) and English translated names. This is done to provide possible linguistic connections for similar artifact references on other islands in the region.

Kas di Pal’i Maishi (Kunuku house and associated structures) (Figure 2)

WOODEN ARTIFACTS

I. Interior Household Artifacts

mesa di awa (medicinal/water specialized table)
banki di tinashi (waterpot holder specialized table)
stul i banki (chair and benches) (see in Figure 1)
baul (storage trunk)
fensu ku manga (small mortar with pounder) (Figure 3a)
krusafika (crosses and crucifixes) (see Figure 1, above the door)

II. Exterior Household Artifacts

palu di bati pana (clothes beating tool) (Figure 3b)
stripan (thatchroof repair tool) (Figure 3c)
tati (cactus pulp pounder) (Figure 3d)
pilon ku manga (large mortar with pounder) (Figure 4)
tobo (large wash tub) (see in Figure 2)
III. Kitchen Artifacts

basora (stick broom) (Figure 5a)
pal’i lele (cooking/stirring tool) (Figure 5d)
pal’i funchi (cooking/stirring tool) (Figure 5e)
chambuku (cooking/stirring tool) (Figure 5c)

IV. Field Artifacts

chi ku cha (fieldwork stick tools) (Figure 6)
siya di buriku i stribo (saddle and stirrup) (Figure 7a, stirrup; 7b, saddle)
kui (bird trap)
dakwe (basket used for maize/millet)
lanza (spear)

V. Personal Artifacts

tambu / bari (musical drum) (Figure 8; bari)
benta (musical bow) (Figure 9a)
Other recreational items (doll, pipe, spinning top) (Figure 9b,c,d)

OTHER ORGANIC ARTIFACTS

I. Interior Household Artifacts

karko (conch shell; use = musical horn, doorstop, offering) (see Figure 1 as doorstop)
kachu di kabritu (goat horn; use = “sakado” fire starter holder) (Figure 10b)
kachu di baka (cow horn; use = musical horn/rasp, fire starter holder) (Figure 10a)
kachu di bina (deer horn; use = hung on kunuku house walls) (Figure 10c)
kalbas (calabash/gourd; use = bowls, cups, measure cups) (Figure 11b, 12)
kolchon di maishi (cornhusk mattress / saddle pad) (Figure 11a)

II. Exterior Household Artifacts

piedra pa mula maishi/bati kadushi (coral grinders for corn and cactus) (Figure 13a; form for cactus)
baki di galina (cut limestone; foul feeding troughs)
koto (woven palmleaf bags) (Figure 13b)

III. Kitchen Artifacts

koko di awa (coconut ladle) (Figure 5b)

IV. Field Artifacts

slengu (cotton sling)
kanaster; graps (fish traps)
reda, trai, warnet (twine fish nets; some used with dried fish bladder floats, Figure 13c)

V. Personal Artifacts

pana sak’i harina blanku (white floursack clothing) (see Figure 1, woman seated)
lenzu di kabes (folded head scarf) (see Figure 1, woman seated)
sambarku (leather-sole sandal) (a later type called ‘alpargata’ shown in Figure 7c)
sombre di kabana (woven straw hats)
kaha di kabana (woven palmleaf coffin)
rosario traha di bonchi (rosary beads of beans) (see Figure 1, hanging on wall)

It is interesting to note that although boat building is an activity on Curaçao common among the African-descendant population, boats were not mentioned as identifiable as African-Curaçaoan culture. West African boat forms are quite dissimilar to Curaçaoan vessels which are more European-design in form.

ARTIFACT ASSOCIATIONS

Remaining in the overall African-Curaçaoan material culture artifact inventory, in addition to the wood and organic focus of this paper, were fifteen categories of metal artifacts, four categories of glass artifacts, six categories of ceramic artifacts, and one category of plaster artifacts (see Haviser 1999).

Based on an overall inventory of 62 total artifact groups self-defined as representative of the African-descendants on Curaçao, together with archaeological excavation results, some observations can be made relating to their distribution patterns at kunuku house contexts and their socio-cultural position among the population (Table 1).

Table 1. Ratios of Artifact Raw Material to Distribution Location in Kunuku House Contexts, for the 62 Identified African-Curaçaoan Artifact Groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Int. house.</th>
<th>Ext. house.</th>
<th>Kitchen</th>
<th>Field</th>
<th>Personal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wood</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Organic</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metal</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glass</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ceramic</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plaster</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Count</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td>27.4</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>19.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

interior household
wood 6 organic 4 metal 2 glass 1 ceramic 3 plaster 1
exterior household
4 3 1
kitchen
3 1 4 2 3
field
5 3 4
personal
5 2 5 4 1
Total Count
20 16 15 4 6 1
% of Total
32.2 25.8 24.2 6.4 9.7 1.6

As to functional categories, it was found that 30.6% (19) of the total artifact groups were associated with food preparation and acquisition. If one considers that from slavery times until the mid 20th century, it was the Africans and African-descendants who primarily produced and prepared food for themselves and other ethnic groups. Then the identification with food items falls into that category of long-term associated possessions noted by Dittmar as having more significance. The second most com-
mon functional artifact groups was musical instruments with 16.1% (10) of the total groups. Many of these artifacts are further identified as symbols of resistance during the repressive years just after emancipation. Yet it is of interest to note, that many of these musical instruments have variable cognitive applications, where ordinary tools and discarded items became musical symbols of adaptive success. The third and fourth most common artifact functional groups are respectively, personal dress/hygiene objects and religious objects. These artifacts are suggestive of the very personal nature of the self-perception for African-descendants by the society in general, indicating that material appearances are considered an important extension of self-identification for the population.

As to raw materials used for these artifact groups, in Table 1 we also note that over half, or 58%, of the identified African-descendent artifact groups are made of wood or other organic raw materials. This was the stimulus for this paper, and should be a serious consideration for Africanist archaeologists in the region, such that these materials do not preserve well in the archaeological record and are often overlooked as to their significance in reconstructing African-Caribbean life-ways. Metal artifacts were the second most noted material with 24.2% of the total groups. As Goucher (1999) has noted, metal working particularly iron work, has great personal, social, and spiritual significance in continental Africa as well as the Caribbean.

In regard to area distribution, we also note here that over a quarter of the artifact groups (27.4%) are associated with the Interior Household area at kunuku houses, and an additional 21% are noted for the Kitchen area. Curiously, the Exterior Household area is noted with only 12.9% of the total groups, which may be an indication of both less artifact placement in the area, as well as, rigorous cleaning activities around the yard, thereby removing miscellaneous artifacts.

**CLOSING COMMENTS**

Before emancipation, the African-descendant population began to construct a new cognitive map for self-identification, as individuals and as a group. This was originally based on the concepts of a traditional agrarian society, whereby a sense of self was aligned to what Dittmar calls an “ascribed identity” (1992:11) based on inherited position and kinship ties. With the advent of emancipation and into the 20th century, the cognitive map of the African-descendants shifted more towards an “achieved identity” (1992:12) based on what social position an individual achieved alone, with material wealth and possession symbolism playing an important role. From this, available resources were exploited when they fulfilled the physical and/or symbolic needs of the group, not just as an imitation of the elites. Indeed African-descendant market systems for these specific goods are well known on the island. When imitation of European material forms were made, it can be seen as an African-descendant adaptive strategy fulfilling a need for participation in the European-controlled social status symbolism for the island, rather than an assimilation of European values and identity. As an example, we may look at the binding materials used in the roof beams of the kunuku house structures. The original material was acquired from nature, as strips of split wood. This was replaced in the late 19th century with copper wire, an item imported by the Europeans. The use of the copper wire did not require the African-descendants to identify with the importers, but rather was a successful adaptation for their needs. The process of binding continued, only the raw material changed. To compliment these types of insights into the cognitive maps of the African-Caribbean peoples. The better preservation of a wider range of artifact types for the post-emancipation period, found at both archaeological sites and in ethnographic collections, particularly regarding wood and other organic materials, will become a fundamental research basis for future African sites archaeology.

In closing, it should be remembered that one of the essential aspects of ethnic identity is a sense of continuity (de Vos 1975). This also applies to the African-Curaçaoan community. It is the community itself which has defined this inventory of African-descendant material culture, based on their self-perceived views of the “African” contribution to the society. These identified material symbols are an indicator of continuity for the unique African-Curaçaoan ethnic group, from slavery times through early adaptive formation, and into this century. There are still today African-Curaçaoans who build thatched kunuku houses, as seen in Figure 15, and although this gentleman is using as a roof binding, nylon cord made in Taiwan and sold by a local Chinese merchant, he has no sense of identification or
acculturation with the Chinese. He is proudly making an African-Curaçaoan house, using an adaptive strategy employing accessible resources.

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Figure 1: Interior of a kunuku at knip, Curaçao, in the 1940's (Ozinga) 1959.)
Figure 2: Kunuka house at savonet, Curaçao, exhibiting a West African design double front entrance.

Figure 3: Wooden household artifacts
Figure 4: Large wooden mortar with pounding stick

Figure 5: Various wooden kitchen artifacts
Figure 6: Wooden fieldwork paired-stick tools

Figure 7: Wooden donkey saddle and stirrup, leather-sole shoes
Figure 8: Wooden stave barrel drum with goatskin head

Figure 9: Various wooden musical and recreational artifacts
Figure 10: Various artifacts of cow/goat horn and deer antler

Figure 11: Cornhusk mattress / saddle pad and gourd bowls
Figure 12: Calabash and gourd containers: b, a toy spinning top.

Figure 13: Coral grinding stone, fish bladder net-float, woven palm-leaf bag.