



# AFRICAN AMERICAN ETHNICITY

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**H**ow did African American ethnicity develop in the New World? How has archaeology contributed to our understanding of this cultural process? In this article, a summary is provided of archaeological approaches to identify and explain African American ethnicity.

## The Genesis of African American Ethnicity

The history of African American cultural origins and identity has been a much-debated topic over the last century. According to Sidney Mintz and Richard Price (1976), the origins of African American culture began in West Africa and quickly developed in the New World. As Africans were forced into slavery, they were separated from their family, friends, and their *ethnos*. Thus, in order to survive, they had to quickly adapt by bonding with strangers in the slave dungeons of Africa or on slave ships. Many of these slaves spoke different languages, followed different religious practices, and were mortal enemies. Despite these differences, they forged bonds through pidgin languages and common cultural practices. After arriving in the New World, these enslaved Africans continued to rapidly develop into a new cultural community. The speed of this cultural transformation from African to African American ethnicity was much quicker than that of European colonists, who were not enslaved and who settled the New World with those of the same cultural background. European colonists were very homogeneous in their cultural traditions, while Africans were much more diverse in their cultural origins (Mintz and Price 1976:3).

## African American Archaeology

African American archaeology has been defined by Theresa Singleton and Mark Bograd (1995:1) as “the study of material culture to describe and interpret the diverse experiences of African Americans and the social processes that affected their lives.” The development of African American archaeology as a serious subfield of historical archaeology only occurred in the last 40 years. The first African American archaeological

research began with plantation and slavery studies in the Deep South and the Caribbean. Current African American research has expanded across the U.S. and beyond the “big house” to include urban slavery, post-emancipation settlements, western frontier experiences, industrial sites, and turn-of-the-century tenant farmers.

Archaeological strategies for studying African Americans have developed along two lines of inquiry: (1) the study of everyday life, and (2) social stratification studies. The study of everyday life has included questions of subsistence (Rietz et al. 1985), housing (Otto 1984), material possessions (Kelso 1986), and health (Gibbs et al. 1980; Rathbun 1987). Social stratification studies have addressed issues of class (Otto 1984), creolization/acclulturation (Ferguson 1992; Otto 1984; Wheaton and Garrow 1985), gender (Galle and Young 2004), power and resistance (Orser 1988, 1991), race and racism (Babson 1990; Mullins 1999), and ethnicity. The latter has been the primary focus of social stratification studies in African American archaeology.

## “Ethnic Markers”

Ethnic studies in African American archaeology have focused more often on defining “ethnic markers,” or objects that can be linked to Africa or African American culture, and less time on understanding the underlying processes that formed these patterns. Archaeologists looking for ethnic markers have been defined as *separatists*, who “interpret the African American experience as a separate national experience” from Euro-Americans (Singleton 1998:172). In contrast, when “ethnic markers” are not visible in the archaeological record, archaeologists have often taken an *integrationist* perspective, “viewing cultural contact between Africans and Europeans within an assimilation model where Africans are absorbed into the dominant European culture” (Singleton 1998:172).

African American ethnic markers have been defined archaeologically in three forms. First, ethnicity has been linked to

objects made in or indigenous to Africa but that are found in the New World. For example, Jerome Handler and Frederick Lange (1978) uncovered an African clay pipe from Ghana in a Barbados slave cemetery. Second, African American ethnicity can be expressed through objects made in the New World that exhibit African styles, forms, or influence. An example is provided by Matthew Emerson (1999), who recorded seventeenth-century clay pipes in the Chesapeake Bay Region made in European forms but exhibiting West African-styled decorative motifs. African American ethnicity has also been associated with non-African materials that were used in distinctive African ways. This third form of ethnicity is the most difficult to see archaeologically. However, it is likely the most prevalent type of ethnicity that was expressed materially by frequency ratios or spatial contexts. For example, the research of John Otto (1984) at Cannon's Point plantation compared the material remains of the planter, overseer, and slave households and suggested that African foodway traditions of gumbos and stews were recognizable in the higher ratio of European-made bowls to plates found in the slave quarters.

The main critique of African American "ethnic marker" studies in archaeology has been that they are too shallow or oversimplified (Babson 1990; Singleton 1995; Singleton and Bograd 1995). Little effort has been made to explain the underlying cultural process that causes some cultural patterns to be retained while others are forgotten or transformed.

### Cultural Process of Ethnicity

In African American archaeology, there are three explanatory paradigms that address the underlying processes of African American ethnicity: (1) acculturation, (2) creolization, and (3) dominance and resistance (Singleton 1998).

#### *Acculturation*

Acculturation was originally defined by Redfield et al. (1936:149) as "those phenomena, which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of either or both groups." Today, the term "acculturation" has been linked to ethnocentric viewpoints of culture contact in which a dominant culture assimilates a minority group, erasing the differences between these groups. In archaeology, the acculturation model can be seen in the archaeology of the Yaughan and Curriboo plantations in South Carolina (Wheaton and Garrow 1985). Excavations at these plantations recorded the acculturation of enslaved Africans through the transition from African-style houses made of wattle and daub to European architectural forms, and from colonoware ceramics, a low-fired earthenware based on



Figure 1: African American family in Arrow Rock, Missouri (circa 1916).

African traditions, to European-made ceramics, which were mass-produced.

Acculturation is viewed as a unidirectional model with objects, technology, and ideology only coming from the top down. "The problem inherent in applying acculturation models in this context is that such models fail to examine the agency or human action of the colonized, enslaved, or missionized. *Acculturation* assumes that the simple replacement of African-influenced items with European items was an indication of cultural change and a loss of cultural identity" (Singleton 1998:176). In reaction to this critique, more recent studies have attempted to recognize that enslaved Africans did not relinquish their cultural identity but instead applied new cultural meanings to non-African objects (Brown and Cooper 1990; Ferguson 1992).

#### *Creolization*

A Creolization model recognizes that cultural interaction is not a one-way street, as seen in acculturation, but is a two-way

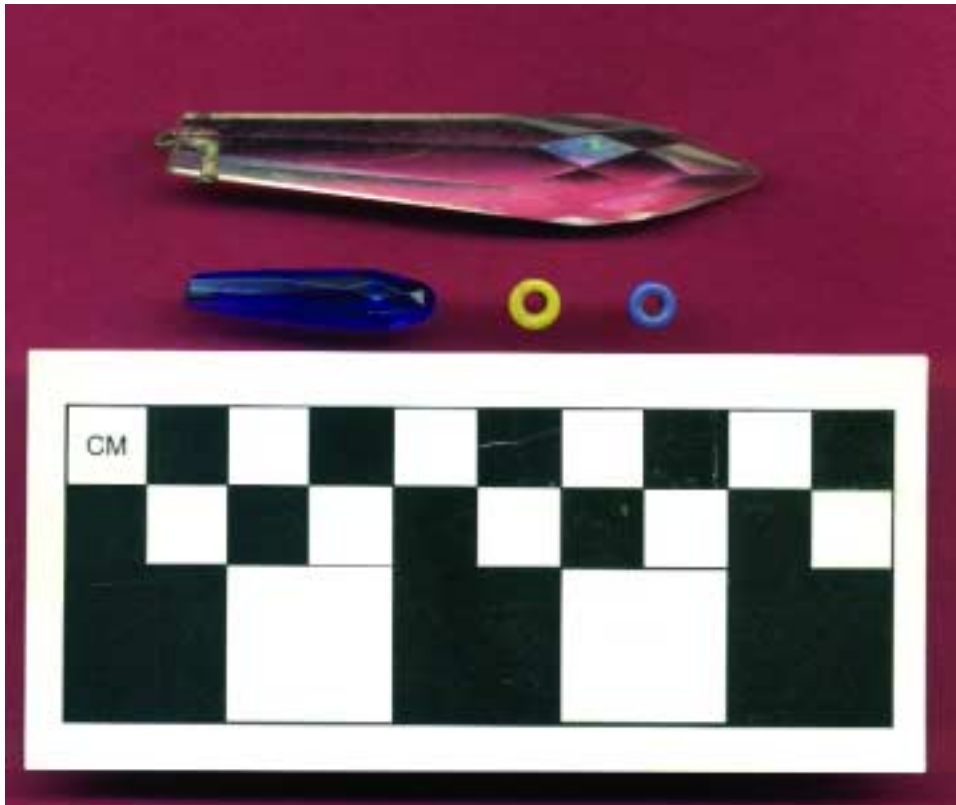


Figure 2: Crystals and beads, like these from a Postbellum community in Arrow Rock, Missouri, have been linked to African-American ethnic traditions.

relationship with objects, technology, and ideas exchanged between two or more individuals or groups (Ferguson 1992). This interaction model is not normally an equal exchange, but it does recognize human agency as well as the transformation of a cultural identity to include borrowed ideas and objects. To date, the creolization model is the best approach to understanding the interaction of enslaved Africans and other cultural groups in the New World.

There are three basic forms of creolization: (1) linguistics, (2) studies of self-identified creole peoples, and (3) racial terminology (Dawdy 2000). Linguistically, creolization is a “recombination of new elements within a conservative cultural grammar” (Dawdy 2000:1). This is often associated with creole or pidgin languages that combine elements of two or more languages, such as the Gullah language on St. Helena Island of South Carolina, which is a combination of African languages and English. The second form is “synonymous with the adaptation and development of a distinct colonial culture that does not necessarily result from ethnic and racial mixing” (Dawdy 2000:1). The final form of creolization suggests “hybridity and

syncretism’ combining genetic and cultural traits. Most studies combine all three of these definitions.

The linguistic model of creolization has been applied most often in historical archaeology, where artifacts replace language and these objects formulate a cultural grammar (Deagan 1983). Leland Ferguson (1992) has been the leading proponent of creolization and its application to African American archaeology. In his analysis of the transformation from African to African American ethnic identity, Ferguson (1992:150) suggested that creolization recognizes the “free-will, imagination, and creativity of non-Europeans” in cultural contact and exchange and the development of “new cultures from diverse elements.” He analyzed colonoware pottery of enslaved Africans in South Carolina, Georgia, and the Chesapeake Bay area. The colonoware was created in the New World through an African pottery tradition and ideology, but it is often found creolized with European forms (e.g., teapot). Despite the transition to more Euramerican material culture, enslaved Africans did not use or view these structures in the same way as Euramericans. Enslaved Africans filtered their environment

through their own identity and worldview. In this sense, objects can have multiple uses or meanings (Gundaker 2000).

Singleton (1995:133) has been critical of Ferguson's creolization explanation because "it gives primacy to evidence supporting the continuity of an African heritage rather than its discontinuity and reconfiguration" and "evidence of both should enter into the analysis of creolization." Thus, Singleton argues that the study of ethnicity should examine and explain both the cultural traditions that persist and the ones that are forgotten or transformed. Following the same line of reasoning, Singleton (1998:178) argues that in African American archaeology, creolization has focused on how enslaved Africans creolized European traditions but very little work has been done to document European creolization of African traditions. Ferguson (1992) and Anne Yentsch (1994) have begun this discussion in the area of foodways, but more work is still needed. The research of Sian Jones (1997) also provides a solution to Singleton's critique. Jones argues that the use of practice theory and its concept of the *habitus* can be used to view the development, reproduction, and transformation of identity through a sociohistorical or diachronic approach addressing the long-term change among ethnic groups.


### *Dominance and Resistance*

The social interaction between Africans and Europeans in the New World was primarily a power relationship of dominance (master) and resistance (enslaved). Paynter and McGuire (1991) state that domination is the exercise of power through the control of resources including class, race, and gender relationships. Resistance can be viewed in two extremes: (1) open defiance or (2) overt resistance. Open defiance is a conscious and sometimes violent decision to rebel against the dominant culture or class. Overt resistance can be either conscious or subconscious reactions to the dominant, including slowed work production, deliberate breaking of equipment, faked sickness, and even the retention of cultural traditions. It is in this interplay that material culture is manipulated and new identities are formed and transformed.

Within this hegemonic approach, archaeologists have attempted to view "how dominant groups exert their power and how subordinate groups resist such power" (Singleton 1998:179). Examples in African American archaeological research have included housing (McKee 1992), landscape studies (Epperson 1990; Orser 1988), and foodways (McKee 1999). Within the latter, the formation of "soul food" may provide the best example of African American identity (Franklin 2001). The term "soul food" was coined in the 1960s as an outgrowth of ethnic pride and revitalization of African American identity, but its origins go back to slavery: in reaction to enslavement and racism,

African American cooks created new recipes. This food tradition provided nutritional needs of the body as well as sociocultural and psychological needs of the soul by forming personal and community identity in the face of oppression.

### Conclusion

Despite having nothing more than the clothes on their backs, enslaved Africans retained their cultural identity through their memories, and once transported to the New World, their cultural self was used to adapt to a new environment and transform them into a new ethnic group. The major critique of African American ethnic studies has been that it is often oversimplified, focusing on the identification of "ethnic markers," and it does not address a historical perspective on the transformation of ethnic communities. Archaeological attempts to understand the underlying processes of ethnicity have led to cultural contact studies focusing on acculturation, creolization, and dominance/resistance models. In the end, the search for material correlates of African American ethnicity may be a futile effort, as it is only one level of social stratification or inequality (Berreman 1981). Other social factors can equally and simultaneously affect the material record, including age, consumer choice, kinship, socioeconomic status, gender, race, and occupation. Future research needs to not only understand the formation processes of ethnicity but also the interwovenness of ethnicity with other forms of social stratification, which together generate cultural identity. 

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