

2004

"I Looked to the East---": Material Culture, Conversion, and acquired Meaning in Early African America

Jason Boroughs
College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/etd>



Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#), [African History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Boroughs, Jason, "I Looked to the East---": Material Culture, Conversion, and acquired Meaning in Early African America" (2004). *Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects*. Paper 1539626444.
<https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-22nc-xs91>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.

“I LOOKED TO THE EAST . . .”

Material Culture, Conversion,
and Acquired Meaning in Early African America

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Anthropology
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

by

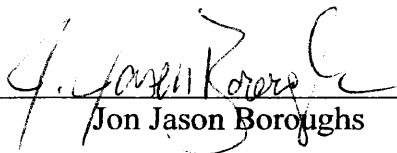
Jon Jason Boroughs

2004


APPROVAL SHEET


This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts



Jon Jason Boroughs

Approved by the Committee, September 30, 2004


Grey Gundaker, Chair


Audrey J. Horning, Professor


Marley R. Brown III, Professor


Ywone Edwards-Ingram
Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

To my parents, for their patience and support
and for Céline, my inspiration and my joy

N'zungi! n'zungi-nzila.

Man turns in the path

N'zungi! n'zungi-nzila.

He merely turns in the path

Banganga ban'e! E ee!

The priests, the same

N'songi! N'songi nzila.

The guide, who points the way.

Song from the *Lemba* rite translated from KiKongo
by Jansen and MacGaffey, 1974 (34), MacGaffey, 1986 (44, 259)
from Fukiau kia Bunseki, *N'Kongo ye Nza Yakun' zungidila* (1969) 28.

Table of Contents

	Page
List of figures	vi
Abstract	vii
Introduction	2
A note on sources	6
I. Change	
Common objects and acquired meaning	8
II. Continuity	
Expressions of the cosmogram (<i>Kongo Yowa</i>): material and metaphysical	20
In Conclusion	49
Bibliography	54
Vita	60

List of Figures

Figure		Page
1	Objects found within overturned Pearlware vessel. Charles Carroll House, Annapolis	19
2	Wooden <i>minkisi nkondi</i>	19
3	<i>Yowa</i> – the movement of the sun across the mirrored worlds of the living and the dead	21
4	Fu-Kiau’s seven directions: depicting the ordered movement of humans through the universe.	23
5	Section of duplex cabin at Levi-Jordan Plantation Quarter showing room in which four deposits were discovered	36
6	An assortment of 19 th century pierced coins from the African American South, some heavily rubbed from wearing.	39
7	Sub-floor pits in quarter dwelling. Kingsmill Quarter, Williamsburg.	41
8	Pierced items from sub-floor pit in eighteenth century context. Richneck Quarter, Williamsburg	43
9	Items of potential ritual significance. From sub-floor pit in southeastern corner of Carter’s Grove Quarter dwelling.	43
10	Glass beads recovered from sub-floor pit in quarter dwelling. Atkinson Site: Carter’s Grove, Williamsburg.	43
11	Utopia sub-floor pit with mounded earth and artifacts <i>in situ</i> .	44
12	Eden House sub-floor pit with artifacts <i>in situ</i> .	46
13	Quilt patterns identified as “symbolic compasses”. Each are variants of the <i>Yowa</i> .	51
14	Sections from two appliqué quilts, made by Harriet Powers, circa 1886	52

Abstract

If the key to comprehending material objects is to understand the contexts in which they were created, altered, and used, then it would be beneficial to examine the symbolic and cultural processes through which they acquired meaning. The conversion narratives and documented vision experiences of formerly enslaved African Americans give us a unique opportunity to view symbols in action; to see how changing cultural, religious, and historical contexts have shaped the forces by which material objects and the constructed landscape were endowed with meaning and significance. The basic premise of this paper is to investigate how traditional West and Central African religious elements were transformed in unique ways in America, and more specifically, how certain symbols acquired multiple meanings in the context of Protestant Christianity. I believe that by using multiple lines of evidence; material, historical, and oral, we may gain the greatest insight from which to base our archaeological and historical interpretations.

“I looked to the east. . .”

Material Culture, Conversion, and Acquired Meaning
in Early African America

Introduction

A confluence of interrelated events occurring between the American Revolution and the 1830s fashioned an era of unprecedented change that transformed the religious landscape of the American South. It was not until the eve of the Revolution that imported Africans and their descendants in the southern American colonies began to flock to Christian sects in sizeable numbers. Revivalism and the development of the itinerant circuit fueled the popular religious movements of the time, including the Great Awakenings, and signaled the decline of the prominence of the Anglican ministry, which had always privileged the gentry classes, in favor of the more accessible evangelical denominations.¹

The Baptists and Methodists, in particular, won many converts among the poorer sort. As the eighteenth century headed to a close, their influence spread rapidly into the plantation quarters in Virginia and South Carolina. With the invention of the cotton gin in 1793, America became a major exporter, and the demand for enslaved labor among the expanding cotton plantations of the Deep South rose dramatically. However, the close of the African slave trade in 1808 forced plantation owners to look elsewhere. In Virginia, the labor intensive tobacco crop had exhausted soils by the nineteenth century, instigating the break up of many large plantation holdings. In an effort to turn a profit in tough

¹ For an in depth analysis on the Evangelical movement and class conflict in Virginia at the time of the American Revolution see Rhys Isaac. *The Transformation of Virginia 1740-1790* (Williamsburg, 1982) 161-177. Also, S. Frey and B. Wood document the rise of Evangelism throughout the region in *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830* (Chapel Hill, 1998) 149-181.

times, thousands of enslaved Virginians, a large number of whom had been indoctrinated into the evangelical faiths, were sold south. Between 1800 and 1815, the number of black Baptists and Methodists more than doubled and continued to grow and expand through geographic migration and revival meetings. The congregation of First Baptist Church, the cradle of the faith in Richmond, which comprised 360 souls in 1809, boasted a membership of 1,830 in 1831.²

The climax of this era of religious introspection occurred in 1831, when the religious visions and charismatic leadership of an enslaved lay preacher named Nathaniel Turner formed the basis of a violent insurrection in a sleepy rural hamlet in southeastern Virginia. In August of the same year, Southampton County found itself in the midst of a bloody standoff that left fifty-five whites dead and a band of forty or so rebel slaves scattered to surrounding plantations, swamps, and forests. Eight days after the series of events that would later become dubbed the Southampton slave insurrection, the *Richmond Enquirer* was by no means at a loss for words. On August 30, 1831 the paper printed of the revolt,

“What strikes us as the most remarkable thing in this matter is the horrible ferocity of these monsters. They remind one of a parcel of blood-thirsty wolves rushing down from the Alps; or rather like a former incursion of the Indians upon the white settlements . . . The danger is thought to be over – but prudence still demands precaution. The lower country should be on the alert – The case of Nat Turner warns us. *No black man ought to be permitted to turn a Preacher through the country.*”³

The *Enquirer* profiled Turner as “A fanatic preacher . . . who had been taught to read and write, and permitted to go about preaching in the country . . . [he] pretends to be a Baptist

² S. Frey and B. Wood. *Come Shouting to Zion* 149-181

³ Tragle, Henry Irving. *The Southampton Slave Revolt of 1831: a compilation of source material*. (Amherst, 1971) 43-45 (emphasis is mine)

preacher – a great enthusiast – declares to his comrades that he is commissioned by Jesus Christ, and proceeds under his inspired directions . . .”

Turner fled to the Great Dismal Swamp after the initial attacks, where he was able to evade capture for several months, fueling a hysteria that spread across Virginia and North Carolina in the aftermath of insurrection. He was eventually apprehended and imprisoned in the county seat at Jerusalem. As he sat in a prison cell awaiting trial and certain execution, he dictated his account of the revolt to local physician Thomas Gray, who published a manuscript in 1831 under the heading *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. In the months following Turner’s execution, as many as fifty-thousand copies of the *Confessions* may have been sold. The widely circulated pamphlet outlined Turner’s visions and religious experiences as the foundation of the revolt.

According to the *Confessions*, Turner believed himself to be a reincarnation; the second coming of Christ sent to free his brethren from bondage. Thomas Gray asserted that Turner, while awaiting trial and certain execution, professed to him that “Christ had laid down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men, and that I should take it on.” Interviewing him in prison, Gray asked, “Do you not find yourself mistaken now?” To which Nat responded, “Was not Christ crucified?”⁴ History, it would seem, is not without a sense of irony, for as one scholar has noted, “as Jesus before him, he went to his death in a city called Jerusalem.”⁵

In the wake of the Southampton insurrection, many slave owners came to view religion in the quarter as dangerous and potentially volatile. Fearing another rebellion, the white response materialized in two stages. The immediate reaction of the state was to

⁴ Kenneth S. Greenberg. *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (New York 1996 [1832])

⁵ Mechal Sobel. *Trabelin’ On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* (Connecticut, 1979) 166.

execute fifty-five slaves as conspirators. However, as many as two hundred, most of whom had absolutely no connection with Turner, may have been killed by white mobs. In 1832, the Virginia general assembly briefly considered abolishing slavery but decided instead to pursue a repressive policy of legislation against African Americans, both free and enslaved. The so-called “black codes” outlawed unsupervised preaching by blacks both in organized churches and in plantation meeting houses, restricted the size of slave gatherings, and disallowed the teaching of slaves to read and write. The second stage was a long-term restructuring of the evangelical churches that was intended to rationalize the system of slavery to the enslaved.

Many historians and scholars of religion have attributed the overwhelming success of this wave of proselytization to a general affinity between the evangelical factions and West and Central African cultural norms that was not present in Anglican doctrine.⁶ If this line of inquiry is correct then it is reasonable to assume that for conversion to have been an attractive and feasible realization, African Americans must have successfully integrated traditional (and varied) African religious and symbolic concepts with the tenets of evangelistic Christianity. It is therefore my contention that a careful reading of transcribed religious visions and conversion narratives may help us to understand the manners in which free and enslaved African Americans constructed a new world of diverse cultural and religious elements and how those same elements were articulated through other material and expressive media.

⁶ See: Frey and Wood. *Come Shouting to Zion* (Chapel Hill, 1998); Eugene Genovese. *Roll Jordan Roll* (New York, 1975); Rhys Isaac. *The Transformation of Virginia 1740-1790* (Williamsburg, 1982); Mechal Sobel. *Trabelin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* (Princeton, 1979) – Enslaved and free blacks associated the ecstatic style of Evangelistic worship with an African conception of spirit possession, Baptism was compatible with West African notions of spiritual protection and veneration of ancestors, etc.

Following Leland Ferguson's pioneering study of African American archaeology in the South Carolina lowcountry, historical archaeologists have begun to identify material representations of the Kongo *Yowa* (figure 3) upon sites once occupied by free and enslaved African Americans throughout the South.⁷ Archaeologists have tended to interpret the presence of the cosmogram as either an ethnic marker identifying the origins of enslaved persons or as an index of acculturation/creolization. However, if we are to construct the most informed interpretations, I believe that we, as scholars, must recognize the *Yowa* as more than simply a static graphical symbol of African origin or the material residue of magical practice. I will treat the cosmogram as a dynamic, accretive, and adaptive symbolic complex that was endowed with spatial, temporal, and moral implications: It was a *map* that not only guided man's movement through but illustrated his place within the universe and, for all intents and purposes, *defined the self*.⁸ Following, I will use the *Yowa* as a means of understanding religious conversion in America. I will be looking more specifically at movement (physical, temporal, and spiritual), spatial orientation, and associated material indications of process and activity.

A note on sources

The primary sources for this study are the words and personal reflections of those who experienced the evangelical movements first-hand; transcribed and recorded in narratives collected throughout the South in the 1920s and 1930s. I have paid particular attention to a series of autobiographies collected by graduate researchers from the

⁷ Leland Ferguson 1989, 1992; Kenneth Brown 1998; Mark Leone and Gladys-Marie Fry 2001; Christopher Fennell 2003 – identified and interpreted graphical and material expressions of the Kongo *Yowa* or patterns of deposition alluding to the cosmogram in interior spaces.

⁸ MacGaffey (1986) 42-134, Fu-Kiau (2001), Thompson and Cornet (1981) 43-44, and Gundaker (1998) 44-46, (1996) 73

anthropology department at Fisk University between 1927-1929. Under the guidance of Paul Radin, the Fisk interviewers asked former bondsmen and women, now elderly African Americans, to recall the circumstances and conditions of their lives under enslavement and perhaps more importantly, to describe their personal religious and conversion experiences. I have relied somewhat less upon the narratives collected by interviewers from the WPA sponsored Federal Writer's Project, who collected the life stories and experiences of freed African Americans between 1936-1938. The social and political climate of the South in the 1930s was such that many narrators may not have felt comfortable expressing their true feelings on the conditions of their enslavement to the WPA interviewers, who by a vast majority were white. In contrast to the majority of writers employed through the federal patronage of the Works Progress Administration, the Fisk University researchers were themselves African Americans. Other sources include a large body of folklore collected from black communities in virtually every southern state and published by Newbell Niles Puckett in 1926 under the heading *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*.

I. Change

Common Objects and Acquired Meaning

One of the primary motivators for change over time in the material records of African American sites is the same driving force that governed patterns of material acquisition upon most historic sites in America: consumerism. Enslaved African Americans were not only active creators of their material worlds, but participants in local economic and exchange systems as well. Although slaves were reliant upon plantation provisioning systems for many foodstuffs and material goods, there is ample evidence that most were, in at least some meager fashion, active consumers. Barbara Heath, in a case study of slavery and consumerism in middle Virginia (late 18th – mid 19th centuries), discovered that the enslaved gained access to the flow of goods from local stores through a variety of means. Many slave owners allotted parcels of land for bondsmen to supplement the food supplies rationed to them, of which excess produce could be bartered to purchase goods from local merchants. Bondsmen and women sold hand crafted items, such as straw and grass baskets and brooms, handmade clothing, and quilts, in local markets. In addition, some skilled and artisan slaves were hired out to other plantations, often earning a meager compensation. Heath reported that the account book of a merchant in New London, Virginia listed payments from slaves for material goods between 1771 and 1776 as cash, handicrafts, raccoon skins, chickens, eggs, cotton, and corn.

Heath found that cloth, clothing, sewing supplies and accessories, including buttons and ribbon were among the most popular purchases. Slaves in middle Virginia also commonly purchased rum, brandy, molasses, sugar, salt and pepper, shad, herring, bacon, plums, and coffee as well as items associated with food preparation, storage, and serving; including ceramics, pots and pans, pewter, tin, and glass vessels, and cutlery. Personal effects, including razors, horn combs, wash bowls, chamber pots, spectacles, and smoking pipes were recorded in account books as well. Finally, some invested in tools and raw materials.⁹

The notion that enslaved peoples were consumers has important and far-reaching implications for archaeological interpretations of African American sites. It demonstrates that bondsmen actively shaped their material worlds by selectively choosing material components among the goods available to them. Their choices, albeit constricted by their abilities to accumulate cash or items for exchange, were based upon prevailing cultural mores as well as the necessity for the creation and maintenance of specific and unique identities. Archaeologists are therefore in an exceptional position to observe how social and cultural concepts were put into action through material means: “some Africans and African Americans believed that [evil] spirits travel in straight lines and are thrown off course by random designs. That some of the ceramic objects found on slave sites are mixed and varied in colors, probably resulting from slaves’ preferences, based on their beliefs, and not from an inability to acquire matched sets of things.”¹⁰

⁹ Barbara Heath. “Slavery and Consumerism: A Case Study from Central Virginia” in *African American Archaeology Newsletter*, No. 19 (Winter, 1997)

¹⁰ Ywone Edwards. “Trash Revisited: A Comparative Approach to Historical Descriptions and Archaeological Analysis of Slave Houses and Yards” in Gray Gundaker, ed. *Keep Your Head to the Sky: Interpreting African American Home Ground* (Charlottesville, 1998) 251

In a 2001 article entitled “Spirit Management among Americans of African Descent”, Mark Leone and Gladys-Marie Fry corroborated archaeological data with folkloric sources in an attempt to interpret recognizable patterns in the material records of African American sites in Annapolis, Maryland and elsewhere throughout the South. They began the study with several basic assumptions, the first being that the “use of West African religious traditions among Americans of African descent in North America has been quite well established.” And that the material remnants of African American religious practices might be recognizable in the archaeological record, in the living and working spaces of free and enslaved African Americans. Second, the primary sources cited within the study, chiefly the large body of interviews collected from the freedmen during the Great Depression, “reflect the world of meaning” of those from whom they were gathered. Finally, the pattern of magical and religious practices known commonly as *Hoodoo*, while grounded in West African religious concepts, experienced a long history of development in eastern North America.¹¹

Leone’s interest in the subject was first peaked when a group of clustered material objects was discovered within an archaeological deposit in the corner of a room in an eighteenth century house he was excavating in Annapolis in 1990. The cache of artifacts, including quartz crystals, perforated bone discs, a black river pebble, two coins, straight pins, metal buttons, and several other items were discovered within a broken and overturned English pearlware (late 18th – early 19th century) bowl featuring a blue asterisk upon the base (*Figure 1*). Soon after, similar caches, possibly as many as twelve in all, were discovered in nineteenth and twentieth century contexts in other eighteenth

¹¹ Mark P. Leone and Gladys Marie-Fry. “Spirit Management among Americans of African Descent” in Charles Orser, ed. *Race and the Archaeology of Identity* (Salt Lake City, 2001) 143-157

century houses in Annapolis. The archaeologists concluded that the groupings of artifacts resembled Kongo *minkisi* (singular: *nkisi*); assemblages of material objects and natural substances that, when properly combined and activated, became endowed with spiritual energies that could be directed towards beneficial or malevolent ends.

In an effort to determine the extent of the material pattern that began to become apparent in Annapolis, the authors reviewed published site reports from Virginia and North and South Carolina.¹² Two patterns emerged from the data. The first was in the composition of similar archaeological deposits: nails, pins, bits of glass, buttons, bones, beads, coins (mostly pierced) and ceramic sherds were the most common artifacts recovered. The second was in the locations of similar caches of artifacts, “under chimney bases or hearths, under a room’s northeast corner, and around doorways: under their sills, over the door, and by doorposts.”¹³

Confronted with a seemingly recurrent material pattern, Leone and Fry turned to the extant primary sources for interpretive insight. The authors compiled an exhaustive list of material items and organic substances used in the construction of protective charms and its dialectical counterpart, malignant conjure, identified in early twentieth century interviews with former bondsmen,

“there are 239 separate references to the use of specific material objects alluding to hands, mojos, bundles, and similar Hoodoo ritual objects. Standard to the analytical literature in folklore is the distinction that bundles were used for two different purposes: protection or retribution. Our data show that 75 percent of the intentions were to protect; 25 percent were to cause harm. Central to these beliefs was the understanding that good fortune and misfortune were the result of humans manipulating spirits.”

¹² Out of 36 published site reports from African American locales in Virginia, 17 included materials collected and reported in such a way as to be useful for their study; 7 were included from North Carolina and 12 of 75 were considered usable from coastal South Carolina.

¹³ Compiled from Virginia sites and deposits dating between 1702 and 1920 (146-147).

Of their findings, eighty-three percent of items identified as components of protective charms, either to counteract acts of malicious conjure, for health and vitality, or for good luck could be described as personal charms worn close to the body, fastened around the neck or ankle, or simply carried on one's person. The remaining seventeen percent comprised household charms, intended to provide a spiritually potent barrier against evil and general ill-will for its occupants. These items were most often placed near entrances and doorways. Furthermore, about fifty percent of the named substances in WPA interviews used in malign conjure, commonly known as "fixing" or "tricking", were used in the construction of protective charms as well. From this data, the authors concluded that certain items, namely "the presence of bottles, needles, hair, or a poker is a highly reliable indicator of the use of malign conjure." Location could also be used as an identifying factor. Fixing bundles were placed in high-traffic areas frequented by intended victims, most often under steps, in the fireplace, or buried under pathways or in yards. The closer the proximity of the implements of conjure to the intended target, whether for protection or injury, the greater its potency.

Like so much else in life and scholarship, Leone and Fry's approach to the subject of conjure and magical practices in African American communities has both high and low points. By supplementing the archaeological data with primary folkloric sources, they were able to extrapolate many of the social and cultural contexts in which the excavated materials originally functioned and made sense. They were also able to identify a coherent pattern in the material record and associated processes of deposition in the living and work spaces of free and enslaved African Americans throughout the South. However, by utilizing the WPA narratives to create an extensive list of conjure

materials and not reviewing the cultural processes by which the materials themselves were assigned meaning, they may have severely restricted the scope of questions that could be asked of the larger body of research. Simply put, Leone and Fry demonstrate that most of the material items used in Hoodoo were interchangeable *because* they served as symbolic and material representations of religious concepts.

The materials themselves had no intrinsic value. Quartz crystals, for instance, could be substituted for broken bits of glass, mirror fragments, or other shiny objects because it was the symbolic metaphor that these items alluded to, most likely the reflective property of water, that gave them significance.¹⁴

Furthermore, Leone and Fry comprehensively searched and coded the early twentieth century interviews for elements of Hoodoo, but they did not account for one of the greatest influences upon the development of African American culture and society in the South at the time: Evangelistic Christianity.

They began their study with several basic assumptions, one being that the system of magical and religious practices defined as Hoodoo, although based in West African traditions, had experienced a long historical development in America. That development not only included, but was *defined* in terms of Christianity. The folklorist Newbell Niles Puckett, while collecting in the Deep South in the 1920s, found that,

“almost all the conjurers of my acquaintance have been even more religious than ordinary Negroes – some of them being ministers. Almost all of them mix scriptural quotations promiscuously with conjure prescriptions, and some of them run especially to the Trinity idea in mixing roots . . .”¹⁵

¹⁴ Robert Farris Thompson and Joseph Cornet. *The Four Moments of the Sun* (Washington D.C., 1981) 44, R. F. Thompson. *Flash of the Spirit* (New York, 1983) 117-18, Wyatt MacGaffey. “Complexity, Astonishment, and Power: The Visual Vocabulary of Kongo Minkisi” *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol.14, No. 2 (January, 1988) 191

¹⁵ Newbell Niles Puckett. *The Magic and Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* (New York, 1969) 565

The WPA narratives hold great prospect and immense research potential. They comprise the greatest body of descriptions of life under enslavement in the words of the freedmen themselves. However, we are, in a sense, left with an incomplete portrait of the lives and experiences of the multitudes of former bondsmen and women interviewed. The social and political climate of the South in the 1930s was such that many narrators may not have felt comfortable expressing their true feelings on the conditions of their enslavement to the federally sponsored interviewers, who by a vast majority were white. Furthermore, the efficacy of many Hoodoo practices, to use Leone and Fry's definition, depended upon "being kept secret from the objects of its magic, as well as from unbelievers of both the African American and European worlds."¹⁶ By quantifying the primary sources, the research model proposed by the authors does not take into account external factors, such as the willingness of informants to speak of Hoodoo, especially malevolent conjure, with outsiders. Nevertheless, Leone and Fry's study demonstrates the significance of first-person accounts to our comprehension of the past and illustrates the value of using multiple lines of evidence from which to draw inferences.

Leone and Fry's study outlines another problem for archaeologists intent on interpreting the material signatures of African American magical and religious practices. The vast majority of material items used in Hoodoo were common objects whose intended function would most likely not be recognized if they were scattered throughout an archaeological deposit. How then are we, as outsiders, to interpret archaeological contexts in which the objects recovered could have been endowed with multiple meanings? To approach this question, it is first useful to review some basic assumptions in which archaeologists, as modern people, "read" and understand recovered artifacts.

¹⁶ Leone and Fry. "Spirit Management among Americans of African Descent" 143

First and foremost, historical archaeologists often recognize artifacts by drawing analogies with familiar material items. For instance, a roughly straight and thin sliver of wrought iron, approximately four centimeters in length, recovered from a seventeenth century stratigraphic deposit in eastern Virginia is instantly recognizable as a nail because it closely resembles its modern counterpart. From this assumption, its function as a fastening implement is somewhat apparent as well, especially if it is recovered in and amongst other structural debris. In all likelihood, the identification of the nail as an architectural artifact is a correct inference, and the excavating archaeologist, satisfied with this interpretation, would simply wipe the sweat from his or her brow, place the artifact in a bag with a label and continue. But what of common artifacts that may have fulfilled roles other than their most obvious, apparent, or intended usage? Iron nails, for instance, were also used in the construction of Kongo *minkisi nkondi*, wooden figurines; they were driven into the charm, provoking the spirit captured within the figurine, thereby directing it towards a desired end (*Figure 2*).

Lewis Binford, in a 1962 article entitled “Archaeology as Anthropology”, suggested three levels of function, each dependent upon the context of a material item’s usage.¹⁷ James Deetz offers a fine explication of Binford’s concept,

“*Technomic function* is strictly utilitarian and relates directly to the technology of a culture. A candle used for lighting serves a technomic purpose, since it solves a problem directly imposed by the environment. The *socio-technic function* of an artifact involves its use in a social rather than a technological way. Our use of candles at formal dinner parties is a good example of socio-technic function. . . . *Ideo-technic function* sees the use of artifacts in religious and ideological contexts. Votive candles in the Catholic Church, and the candles of the Jewish menorah serve an ideo-technic function.”

¹⁷ Lewis Binford. “Archaeology as Anthropology” *American Antiquity*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (October, 1962) 217-26

It would thus appear that context is the key to understanding the significance of material objects. Deetz explains how the humble archaeologist may run into difficulty in ascertaining the contexts of use and deposition of historical artifacts, “Obviously, the same artifacts can function on all three levels much of the time. It is important that the archaeologist realize this and attempt to determine what kind of function his artifacts served for their owner and users.”¹⁸ The modern historical archaeologist is faced with a daunting task to be sure, especially when confronted with religious and cultural practices that may have required a degree of secrecy for effectiveness.

Further confounding the picture is the fact that plantation provisioning systems may have obscured some meaningful and spiritually relevant African and African American patterns of material use and deposition. Within the confines of their enslavement, African Americans had to make do with the material goods that were available to them, often assigning multiple functions to material objects; pure necessity compelled slaves to improvise in ingenious ways. Used, broken, and recycled objects, although a material consequence of life in the quarter, may have held symbolic importance as potential components of medicinal, protective, and harming rituals as well.

Ywone Edwards explored the processes of deposition and accumulation in the yards and households of enslaved African Americans and its classification as “trash” by historic observers and archaeologists alike. She wrote,

“The trash of slave yards and houses included more than what fits a normative definition of discarded, reused, and improvised material. Some trash was deliberately buried underground. Other materials on the ground in plain view that appeared to outsiders to be trash may have been used by African Americans to invoke supernatural aid . . . Slaves created objects and fashioned their landscape in ways that revealed their need to interpret and negotiate with the sacred and secular world.”

¹⁸ James Deetz. *In Small Things Forgotten: An Archaeology of Early American Life* (New York, 1996) 74-5

The broken ceramic sherds, fragments of glass, accumulated mounds of shell, and other seemingly discarded items that resembled “trash” to the casual observer were, in many cases, objects of potential spiritual significance. Edwards argued that many of the material and natural substances that were described in historical accounts and recovered in archaeological investigations of African American yards and households were similar to the materials found in the construction of Kongo *minkisi* and African American charms. Furthermore, these objects could have been related to West and Central African religious concepts, such as ancestor veneration and spirit manipulation. Under the daily psychological assaults of life under enslavement, depositional practices associated with medicating the landscape may have empowered many bondsmen in ways that may have been invisible or incomprehensible to whites. Through supernatural means they sought the protection and healing power of the ancestors, “Surrounding themselves with certain objects linked to ancestral and other spiritual power probably served to bolster slaves’ courage, helped to keep their thoughts clear of potentially dangerous intentions, and renewed their hopes.”¹⁹

It is fairly apparent that many free and enslaved African Americans employed spiritual means to affect change in their lives, whether for protection, healing, or retribution. However, we are just beginning to understand the ways in which the descendants of Africans in America manipulated elements of the material and natural worlds to do so. Archaeologists have recovered artifacts from sites once occupied by African Americans that could be described as the material implements of spiritual and religious practices. That being said, we must now turn our attention beyond the mere

¹⁹ Ywone Edwards. “Trash Revisited . . .” 246-271

recognition of these objects to a discussion of the historical, socio-cultural, and religious contexts in which they were created, modified, and used. What did they mean to those who left them behind? And how did African Americans adapt traditional West and Central African religious practices to New World contexts and situations, most notably the introduction of Protestant Christianity?



Figure 1 – objects found within overturned Pearlware vessel, including quartz crystals, water-worn black river pebble, faceted glass bead, two coins, perforated bone discs, alloy buttons, straight pins. Note the blue asterisk within the bowl's interior. Charles Carroll House, Annapolis.



Figure 2 – wooden *minkisi nkondi* – iron nails and spikes driven into each figurine to “excite” the spirit interred within. Also of note are the fragments of mirror glass sealing compartments for sacred medicines within the stomach area. Both from Kongo: mid-19th – early 20th century. Left: private collection, www.Africadirect.com. Right: *National Museum of African Art*, Washington D.C.

II. Continuity

Expressions of the Cosmogram (Kongo Yowa): metaphysical and material

The Bantu speaking peoples from the Congo-Angola region of West Central Africa comprised a significant and influential group among the enslaved populations of North America.²⁰ Although the multitudes of Africans that survived the Atlantic crossing were diverse in ethnicity, language, and religious practices, the cosmology of the Kongo peoples contained many elements, especially those relating to healing, protection, and the importance of ancestors, that resonated throughout African descended populations in America. Their influence is reflected, among other places, in the religious visions and conversion experiences of the enslaved, and in the material signatures of many sites once occupied by African Americans. This chapter will focus upon how symbolic elements of Kongo religion and cosmology acquired multiple meanings, often overlapped with evangelical precepts, and were rearticulated through material and metaphysical media in America.

The *Yowa* is the graphical expression of Kongo conceptions of the continuity of life, community, and man's place in the universe. It consists, in its simplest form, of a

²⁰ The Kongo people of western Angola and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly Zaire) are estimated to be the ancestors of as many as a quarter to a third of contemporary African Americans. Because of migration, resale, and illegal smuggling the enslaved American population became a diverse mix of Senegambians, peoples from the Gold and Windward Coasts, the Bights of Benin and Biafra, and Congo-Angola. One scholar has noted that "this situation forced them to emphasize similarities in their heritages and to achieve adaptations that interleaved diverse traditions without necessarily obscuring all traces of their origins." Grey Gundaker. *Signs of Diaspora – Diaspora of Signs* (New York, 1998) 215, 65; Sobel 1979 (3-5). For other demographic information, see Curtin 1969 (157), Holloway 1990, Joyner 1984 (205-6), Rawley 1981, Sobel 1979 (23-31), and Walsh 1997 (67-70).

pair of intersecting horizontal and vertical axes (*Figure 3*). The horizontal line represents the break, a watery barrier (*kalunga*), between the land of the living, visualized as a great mountain of earth (*ntoto*), and that of the dead, its mirrored counterpart in the lower world, said to be composed of white clay (*mpemba*). The vertical line signifies the connection and the continual flow of energies between *Nzambi Mpungu* (supreme being), the living, and the realm of the ancestors, “God is imagined at the top, the dead at the bottom, and water in between.”²¹ At the point of intersection stands man (*muntu*), “between the earth and the skies, and between the upper and lower world, to communicate [with] the completely complete higher living energy (*Nzambi*), and the ancestors, (*bakulu*).”²²

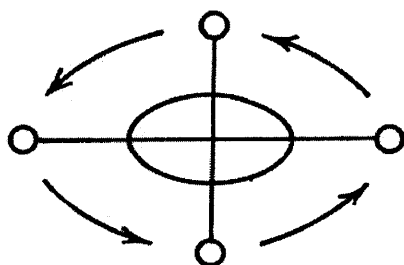


Figure 3 – *Yowa* – the counter clockwise motion of the sun around the mirrored worlds of the living and the dead

The points at the ends of the axes are sometimes embellished with circles or discs, symbolizing the four moments of the sun (dawn, noon, dusk, midnight), and associated stages in the cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth of man,

“The world, in Kongo thought, is like two mountains opposed at their bases and separated by the ocean. At the rising and setting of the sun, the living and the dead exchange day and night. The setting of the sun signifies man’s death and its rising, his rebirth, or the continuity of his life. Bakongo believe and hold it true that man’s life has no end, that it constitutes a cycle . . . and death is merely a transition in the process of change.”²³

²¹ R.F. Thompson. *Flash of the Spirit* (New York, 1983) 109

²² Kia Bunseki Fu-Kiau. *African Cosmology of the Bantu-Kongo* (New York, 2001) 36

²³ John Janzen and Wyatt MacGaffey. *An Anthology of Kongo Religion: Primary Texts from Lower Zaire* (Lawrence, 1974) 34. Fukiau kia Bunseki. *N’Kongo ye Nza Yakun’ zungidila* (1969) 26,28,30

In Kongo philosophy, a great emphasis is placed upon cyclical time and the maintenance of a balanced equilibrium between vital and historical forces,

“Mono i kadi kia dingo-dingo (kwenda-vutukisa) kinzungidila ye didi dia ngolo zanzingila. Ngiena, kadi yateka kala ye kalulula ye ngina vutuka kala ye kalulula.

I am going-and-coming-back-being around the center of vital forces. I am because I was and re-was before, and that I will be and re-be again.”²⁴

The four moments of the sun embodied a plan for human spiritual growth and development as well, as each had to make his own unique journey through life, seeking accumulated knowledge and strength, all the while relying upon the wisdom and guidance of ancestors, “The summit of the pattern symbolizes not only noon but also maleness, north, and the peak of a person’s strength on earth. Correspondingly, the bottom equals midnight, femaleness, south, the highest point of a person’s otherworldly strength.”²⁵

The *Yowa* can also be understood in terms of directional energies; man’s life was a tug-of-war between horizontal and vertical influences. If one was able to successfully integrate the forces represented by the cosmogram in the course of his life, the Bakongo would say that he is a balanced (*kinega*) person. Dr. Fu-Kiau Bunseki explains the concept of directionality in present day Bantu-Kongo cosmology,

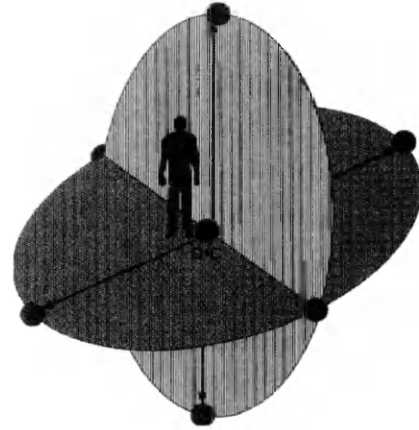
“On the ‘V-H’ ground, vertical – horizontal (*Kintombayulu – Kilukongolo*), the human being (*muntu*) has two planes for his motion/movement. On the horizontal plane he can move in four directions: forwards, backwards, leftwards, and rightwards. Motions towards these four directions are for learning . . . The vertical plane allows him to walk downwards, upwards and for ‘perfect’ health, true self-knowing and self-healing, walk innerwards.

²⁴ Fu-Kiau. *African Cosmology of the Bantu-Kongo* (frontispiece)

²⁵ Thompson. *Flash of the Spirit* 109

The Bantu people, in their teaching, believe that the human being suffers mostly because of his lack of knowing how to walk towards this 7th direction, the innerwards direction. Their own words put it so perfectly well: *Kani ka bwe, kana ku lumoso-ku lubakala-ku n'twala-ku nima-mu zulu evo mu nsi ukwenda, vutukisa va didi I yand.* (No matter what, you may walk leftwards, rightwards, forwards, backwards, upwards or downwards, you must come back to the core/center)."²⁶ (Figure 4)

Figure 4 – Fu-Kiau’s seven directions: depicting the ordered movement of humans through the universe. Image from Fu-Kiau, 2001



In order for humans/*muntu* to facilitate communication between the realms of the living, ancestors/*bakulu*, and God/*Nzambi* (designated by the vertical axis on the *Yowa*), the peoples of the Kongo developed a complex system of sacred medicines (*minkisi*). *Minkisi* were a means to manage and direct the spiritual forces to which all humans were exposed. They were intended to affect change within peoples’ lives, generally in a healing or protective capacity, however they could be used to harm as well. The *nkisi* (singular) was a manufactured object that contained medicines and other substances that became activated through ritual means. *Minkisi* were intended to capture a spirit in motion, either an ancestor that had returned from the dead or the wandering and bewildered soul of a victim of witchcraft. Once a spirit activated the *nkisi*, it had a disposition and a life of its own and could be commanded by its owner to heal, cure, or injure; “the manufacture of *minkisi* blurred the lines between magic and religion.

²⁶ Fu-Kiau. *African Cosmology of the Bantu-Kongo* 133-35

Minkisi were spiritual beings who interacted with and often assisted humans in earthly endeavors.”²⁷

Elements used in the construction of *minkisi* could be classified into three basic categories. Medicines intended both to attract a supernatural entity (spirit-embodiment) and bind it to a specific trait (spirit-directing) relative to the charm’s intended purpose were combined in a formulaic manner and placed within a container. *Minkisi* containers varied greatly and could be made of natural or organic materials, such as leaves, shells, cloth, ceramic vessels, and wooden statues, among others,

“Outer materials such as clay, cloth, or ceramic demarcated the powers of the otherworldly beings the charms contained. Some charms were tightly bound with cord, to represent attachment, impenetrability, or entanglement; others were formed with hollow spaces so as to be inhabited by spirits that would be made to work for their owners with prayers and oaths.”²⁸

In West Central Africa, territorial ancestral and nature spirits (*simbi*, *nkitas*, and *kilundus*) were believed to inhabit bodies of water, trees, rocks, and remarkably shaped things.²⁹

Spirit-embodiment materials subsequently included substances such as twisted and misshapen roots, rocks, items associated with water and riverbeds, cemetery earth (believed to be endowed with the spirit of the interred) and organic substances, including hair, fingernails, and other bodily exuviae. Spirit-directing materials included a wide variety of organic and material items and generally functioned through symbolic metaphor and visual punning (a knife to symbolically “cut” pain for instance). Once activated, the amalgamation of substances and spiritual entities enclosed within the charm

²⁷ Yvonne Chireau. *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley, 2003) 46; Thompson. *Flash of the Spirit* 117-21; Wyatt MacGaffey. *Religion and Society in Central Africa: The BaKongo of Lower Zaire* (Chicago, 1986) 137-148

²⁸ Chireau. *Black Magic* 47

²⁹ Ras Michael Brown. “Walk in the Feenda” (Cambridge, 2002) 306-307; Wyatt MacGaffey. “Twins, Simbi Spirits, and Lwas in Kongo and Haiti” (Cambridge, 2002) 211-226

symbolized each branch of the *Yowa*. Thus the *nkisi* not only became a living spiritual being but a miniature and balanced representation of the Kongo cosmos as well.

When the descendants of Africans in America chose to adopt Christianity they did so on their own terms and in a manner peculiar to them. The terminology used to describe conversion by freedmen and women in early twentieth century narratives suggests that they viewed Christianity not as a metaphysical or moral philosophy that needed simply to be accepted for one to be converted, but as a potent spiritual commodity that had to be earned. In a narrative collected in the 1920s, a man born into bondage in 1861 wished to relate the significance of religion in his life to a Fisk University interviewer. He explained, “We must see, feel, and hear something, for our God talks to his children.”³⁰ His conversion, like so many others, was the result of a series of vision experiences in which he interacted with and was assured his salvation by God. Through rigorous vision quests, commonly termed *seeking*, free and enslaved African Americans sought to experience the power of God first-hand and in a transformative capacity.³¹

The religious visions and conversion experiences dictated to interviewers by African Americans in the first decades of the twentieth century demonstrate that enslaved peoples actively employed African notions of spirit, power, and causality as they passed through a series of stages in a symbolic cycle of death and rebirth, from sinner to salvation.³² Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of conversion narratives recorded by Fisk University researchers between 1927 and 1929 contain specific and often

³⁰ Clifton Johnson, ed. *God Struck Me Dead: Voices of Ex-Slaves* (Cleveland, 1993) 114-115

³¹ For an analytical description of seeking and initiation into the adult Christian community among the Sea Island communities, see Margaret Washington Creel. *A Peculiar People: Slave Religion and Community – Culture Among the Gullahs* (New York, 1988)

³² Sobel. *Trabelin’ On* 108-122; Albert J. Raboteau. *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1978) 266-272.

multiple references to the cardinal points, reflecting an awareness of directional influences and spiritual power very much in tune with the *Yowa*, and Kongo cosmological principles in general.

In a narrative entitled *You Must Die This Day*, a former slave described the vision she experienced at the height of conversion. She was working in a cotton field when she heard a voice telling her repeatedly that she was to die. Upset, she ran home to check on her baby and then to a thicket, where she was struck by the power of God and fell to the ground, “a little man appeared and said ‘My little one, follow me.’” “As quick as a flash” she became separated from her body, “little Mary came out of old Mary, and I stood looking down on old Mary . . .” Witnessing the souls of the departed agonizing in hell, Mary left her corporeal body tainted with earthly transgressions “at hell’s dark door.” She recalled, “*I traveled on east*”,

“As I went on I saw a well, and there was an old man. I went to him and asked for a drink of water. He turned, clapped his hand, and said, ‘Hi’ – calling a pack of dogs. *They ran me towards the north*. I saw a level plain and a lot of long-horned cows. They blew at me. . . . I was afraid, and as I looked up *I saw a man coming from the north* in midair, and he said, ‘Go on, for I will suffer no hurt nor harm to come to you.’ I went on and came to a high fence, and I cried, ‘Lord, how can I get out of here?’ . . . *I looked to the east* and there, nearby, was a little white path. I followed this and came to the top of the hill. . . . *I looked to the east* and saw a beautiful field with golden wheat and sheep there, eating. *I looked to the south* and saw a beautiful green pasture, and the sheep there were grazing. They turned their heads in the same direction and continued eating and began to bleat, saying, ‘Mama! Mama!’ Then a voice on the inside answered me in the same tone.”

Declaring to her interviewer, “Since that day I have been traveling, trusting in the Lord”, she related, “Through the spirit I have come to see the meaning of the thicket briars, the snakes, the dogs, and the cows. They were my enemies.”³³

³³ Johnson. *God Struck Me Dead* 63-64 (emphases are mine)

In her vision, Mary was chased by a pack of dogs. Thompson found that, “According to the Bakongo, ‘between the village of the living and the village of the dead there is a village of dogs.’”³⁴ In West Central Africa, dogs were considered seers, able to distinguish forces beyond the world of the living. Perhaps therein lies the origin of spirit-hounds (also known as hell-hounds), the presumed minions of Satan that chased many while “in the spirit.” Mary was chased to the north, where she encountered Jesus descending from the sky with a promise of protection. The northern point of the *Yowa* is associated with the peak of a person’s strength in the world of the living, noon, and maturity, suggesting that Mary was experienced and ready to receive conversion.

When Mary came to the top of the hill, she experienced heaven as a “beautiful field with golden wheat and sheep.” This bit of Christian imagery is a recurrent theme in conversion experiences and signals acceptance into God’s flock, the Christian elect. When the newly converted testified in church or the meeting house (retelling their vision experiences to the congregation), the congregation interpreted this image as God’s seal of approval.³⁵ Mary looked to the south to see another pasture of grazing sheep. The southern point of the cosmogram signifies midnight, the height of a person’s otherworldly strength, and the process of rebirth. The southern half of the *Yowa* also represents the realm of the ancestors in the land of the dead. As the sheep turned in unison and cried to Mary, she received the approval and protection of the ancestral spirits who had made the journey before her.

Mary continued to travel and look towards the east until she reached the top of the hill. The right, or eastern, point of the *Yowa* is perhaps the most significant quadrant of

³⁴ Thompson. *Flash of the Spirit* 121

³⁵ “I had to come through right before I could be called a pure Christian. . . . When I testified in the church I had to tell all the things I had seen and heard.” Johnson. *God Struck Me Dead* 128

the cosmogram. Analogous to sunrise and birth, east is the most frequently referenced cardinal direction in the collective body of early twentieth century conversion narratives. It signals the entrance of all humans into the world of the living, and accordingly, the entrance of the newly converted into God's flock. A freedwoman recalled her first encounter with the Lord, through a vision experience when she was a little girl; she "saw an angel dressed in a long white robe *flying in the east* with a little infant behind. . . . I told my daddy about it, and he said it was God."³⁶ The testimonies of other former bondsmen express similar sentiments,

"In my vision I saw hell and the devil. I was crawling along a high brick wall . . . it looked like I would fall into a dark, roaring pit. *I looked away to the east and saw Jesus*. He called to me and said, 'Arise and follow me.'"

"I saw myself hanging over a gulf by a thread – oh, it was so dark in that pit! He brought me up out of that pit on a thread. *He carried me to the east part of the world and I saw many sheep in green pastures.*"

"I . . . went in the house and layed across the bed, and there I saw Jesus. *He turned my face to the east* and said, 'Go and declare my name to the world, and I will fill your heart with song.'"

"*He came to me at the east part of the world* and said, 'Alice, you must die and go to hell this day.' I fell down and said, 'Have mercy on me.'"

"*We journeyed east and saw the heavens and God*. Jesus Christ himself brought me to Fountain Creek Church and said, 'This is your home.'"³⁷

Several informants reported hearing prayers and singing coming from an easterly direction immediately before or soon after experiencing conversion visions. The morning after receiving a vision, one man recalled hearing a voice that, "came to me from the east singing:

³⁶ Johnson. *God Struck Me Dead* 91 (emphasis is mine)

³⁷ Ibid 58, 75, 111, 125, 149 (emphases are mine)

Your sins are all washed away,
 Free, free, my Lord.
 Your sins are all washed away,
 Free, free, my Lord.
 Your Father's done set you free."³⁸

The significance of benevolent spiritual influences associated with the east was demonstrated through various folk beliefs as well. The folklorist Newbell Niles Puckett recorded in the Deep South in the 1920s that "The Negroes say that a dream when the east wind is blowing will come true . . ."³⁹

Fu-Kiau's seventh direction, the inwards direction, played a significant role in conversion experiences as well. Mary recalled hearing a voice on the inside that responded to the call of the sheep she encountered in her vision. A great many others also heard voices "on the inside" during conversion experiences,

"I always prayed, and the prayer was on the inside crying, 'Mercy, Lord!'"

"a voice that seemed loud enough for everyone to hear would cry on the inside, 'Remember, I have called you with a holy call, and for your disobedience I will chastise you, and you shall go. *Up to the very present time I am guided by the voice from within.*"

"the voice kept on mourning . . . *Later God revealed to me that it was my soul crying out for deliverance.*"⁴⁰

Through these spiritual encounters, most witnessed themselves in two forms, two distinct bodies; "[God] showed me myself in two parts of me.", "I declare to you I saw myself in two bodies.", "little Mary came out of old Mary". As one informant explained, "There is a man in a man. The soul is the medium between God and man."⁴¹ This essential being,

³⁸ Johnson. *God Struck Me Dead* 75, 164, 109

³⁹ Newbell Niles Puckett. *The Magic and Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* (New York, 1969) 497

⁴⁰ Johnson. *God Struck Me Dead* 114, 101, 20 (emphases are mine)

⁴¹ Ibid 143, 148, 63, 13. Mechal Sobel, in *Trabelin' On* (1979) 109, 112-14, and *Teach Me Dreams: The Search for the Self in the Revolutionary Era* (Princeton, 2000) 45-46, discusses the importance of the "little me" spirit figure as a West and Central African conceptualization of the soul that emerged frequently in African American dream and conversion experiences.

or “man in a man,” was represented as a miniature spirit figure with both a consciousness and a voice of its own. The “little me” typically served as a witness to the death of the physical body, “Little me was standing looking down on the old, dead me lying on a cooling board”, “Little William stood looking down on old William, my earthly body . . . lying at hell’s dark door.”⁴²

Many informants reported encountering another form of miniature spirit figure during their experiences. These spirit guides were likened to the size of small children, and were most often wearing robes of white or themselves the “color of pure snow.” In a narrative entitled *Barked at by the Hellhounds*, an informant recalled, “I was feeding some hogs . . . when a little white man appeared before me as plain as day and said, ‘Follow me.’ . . . Something on the inside of me began to cry ‘Mercy!’”⁴³ In Mary’s experience, as in most, these “little white men” functioned as guides, leading the “little me” away from hell and towards the east, towards heaven. However, some recognized the spirit figures as God himself, “God came to me as a little man . . . he came dressed in white.”⁴⁴ A freedwoman recalled a vision she experienced some time after conversion,

“Once I saw a huge image in the form of a man carved out of marble. His head lay in the east; his length and breadth were too great to comprehend. Out of his stomach came a little man who spoke in a soft voice saying. ‘Behold, I lay in Zion a stone, a tried stone. I am a rock in a weary land, and a shelter in the time of storm. He that prays to me shall never perish. Amen.’”⁴⁵

She recognized the little man as the spiritual essence of God. As with humans, he was the essential “man in a man,” however, he dwelled within a figure beyond the scope of

⁴² Ibid 148, 151; “Cooling board” was a slang term for a wooden plank upon which the dead were laid in preparation for burial.

⁴³ Ibid 149

⁴⁴ Ibid 91

⁴⁵ Ibid 101 - Note how the informant recognized God as the animating spiritual essence in the abdomen of a large marble figure, basically a large scale representation of an anthropomorphic *Nkisi* (see figure 2).

human comprehension.

As each human is endowed with his or her own “little me,” it is conceivable that the little white guides could have been recognized as the spirits of departed ancestors, assisting the living through the benefit of accumulated communal wisdom. The color white signifies the essence of the realm of the ancestors – *mpemba*, the KiKongo word for the land of the dead also refers to white clay – the substance of the ancestors and all that they embody. In Christian contexts, sufficient evidence exists to suggest that white embodied purity of heart as well. As one informant related,

“Nudder time I see’d myse’f laid out on a table. Dat same littl’ w’ite man wid de lily-w’ite hands cut me plum’ open, tu’k mah heart out, an’ rinsed hit in drippin’ blood until it wuz w’ite ez snow.”⁴⁶

Some experienced heaven as a place full of little white spirits, themselves included among them, illustrating the convergence of Christian and West African notions of the afterlife, community, and the importance of ancestors.⁴⁷

“One night I was carried off to a little white house by the Captain (Jesus), and I heard singing, and there were a whole lot of little white children, and they were all bowing to me and singing welcome. The next morning my hands and feet were new.”

“A little, small child came to me . . . I followed this little white boy . . . to a little white building and a lot of little white children, all the same size, and all looking the same. I was in the midst of them, and then I heard a voice, ‘If I call you through deep water, it won’t cover you; if I call you through fire, come on.’”⁴⁸

The notion of traveling is a very important concept in Afro-Christianity. As in West and Central African societies, people are beings in motion, constantly subjected to

⁴⁶ Puckett. *The Magic and Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* 541

⁴⁷ Sobel convincingly argues that the symbolic significance of the color white in conversion narratives is the product of West and Central African cosmological and moral precepts, and that it is not a form of self-hate reflective of the socio-political reality of bonded life in the New World (ie. skin color) (1979) 113-116, (2000) 46-47.

⁴⁸ Ibid 110, 165

unseen forces and pulled in opposing directions. Conversion narratives illustrate the significance of benevolent and malefic energies, expressed through directional referencing. Although she experienced many trials and tribulations in her journey, encountering “enemies” intent of chasing her from her chosen path, Mary eventually reached heaven with the aid and guidance of the Lord. She traveled in all of the directions (north, east, south, upwards, downwards, and inwards) described by Fu-Kiau, except for one. The vision experiences of several other bondsmen bear witness to the elements of death and danger associated with the west,

“Later I was chased by the devil. He chased me in a broad and rocky road . . . *I traveled in a western direction, but when my soul was freed I traveled eastward.*”

“One other time I saw Jesus in a vision, and this time it was a warning of death. *I saw in the west* one evening a cloud, and in it I first saw a man’s foot, but as I looked I saw the head exposed at another point in the cloud. About a month after this a very dear uncle of mine died, and I think that this vision was a warning.”

“*I saw a train come out of the west.* It was loaded with people, red-eyed, wild, and excited, and such scrambling and cutting up I never saw. I looked at it, and it went on by.”⁴⁹

Consequently, the left, or west, branch of the *Yowa* corresponds to sunset, the entrance of the night, and the extinguishment of a man’s life as he prepared to enter *ku mpemba*, the realm of the ancestors.

The proclaimed “King of the Delta Blues,” Robert Johnson, widely rumored to have bartered his soul to the Devil for his guitar playing ability, sang of the oppositional pull of directional spiritual forces in the lives of many African Americans. In *Cross Road Blues*, cross roads themselves often understood to be spiritually charged reproductions of the cosmogram upon the constructed landscape, he sang,

⁴⁹ Ibid 114, 145, 153 (emphases are mine)

“I went to the crossroad
 fell down on my knees (prayed)
 I went to the crossroad
 fell down on my knees
 Asked the Lord above ‘Have mercy, now
 save poor Bob, if you please . . .

Standin’ at the crossroad, baby
 risin’ sun goin’ down
 Standin’ at the crossroad, baby
 risin’ sun goin’ down . . .

And I went to the crossroad, mama
 I looked east and west
 I went to the crossroad, baby
 I looked east and west
 Lord, I didn’t have no sweet woman
 ooh-well, babe, in my distress”⁵⁰

The concepts of cyclical time, exemplified by the *Yowa*, and of spiritual travel and struggle were embedded as much within the daily lives of African Americans as in the precepts of Afro-Christianity. For Kongo peoples,

“The soul moves in time’s circle as an indelible point of light and certainty. That is why the Kongo moral precept, ‘from humiliation stems honor’ (*mu diavwezwa mweti mena dianzitusu*) has such depth and resonance. For according to this vision, as we die the ‘petty deaths’ of accident and humiliation, the superior dimension to our consciousness has already distanced itself from pain in order to plan the appropriate counter-attack, the appropriate return to full assertion. And so we come back, stronger for the testing, more impressive for the return.”⁵¹

In order for one to be converted to the religion of God, one had to humble himself before “the Boss.” Puckett recorded that one of his informants was told by the Lord to get lower and lower, “He kept on ‘humblin’ hisse’f until finally he got under the very feet of Jesus

⁵⁰ Lyrics taken from *Cross Road Blues* (take 1), in *Robert Johnson: The Complete Recordings* (Sony Music Entertainment, 1990). Thompson recorded that in Kongo, “Extensions of the cosmogram into social space” include “the frequent usage of a crossroad, or a branch in a path, as a site for communication with the other world.” (1981) 44; MacGaffey also discusses the importance of crossroads as ritual spaces (1986) 116-120.

⁵¹ (R.F. Thompson 1989, 29) – quoted from Grey Gundaker. “What Goes Around Comes Around: Temporal Cycles and Recycling in African-American Yard Work” 73

– then ‘ligion’ came.”⁵² The struggle, as a form of accumulated experience, is something that all must endure in order to be open to the rejuvenating spiritual power of God.

In a narrative entitled *To Hell with a Prayer in My Mouth*, a newly converted informant stated, “Ever since that day I have been falling down and getting up, always looking to God because he promised to never leave me alone or forsake me.”⁵³ Another informant from South Carolina, explaining that life under enslavement and emancipation was fraught with both physical and psychological hardship, related to a federal interviewer,

“Does I believe in ‘ligion? What else good for colored folks? I ask you if dere ain’t a heaven, what’s colored folks got to look forward to? They can’t git anywhere down here. De only joy they can have here, is servin’ and lovin’; us can git dat in ‘ligion but dere is a limit to de nigger in everything else. Course I knows my place in dis world; *I ‘umbles myself here to be ‘zalted up yonder.*”⁵⁴

The conversion process itself was experienced as a convergence of time present and time immemorial, a representation of the Kongo cosmogram in motion.

As Fu-Kiau explained, humans move through life seeking and acquiring experience and knowledge. God, however, worked in his own time, “I heard one day, while I was out praying, a voice as if a mighty rumbling of thunder saying, ‘Mollie, Mollie, you must pray a little harder. You haven’t come to the right place yet.’”⁵⁵ When potential converts and seekers had “come to the right place,” they were literally struck by the power of God. Most experienced conversion as a series of ordered events: physical manifestations of a symbolic death, visions of God and the Other World, and spiritual rebirth as one of God’s elect. Recalling the manner of his conversion, an informant wrote,

⁵² Puckett. *The Magic and Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* 541-2

⁵³ Johnson. *God Struck Me Dead* 94

⁵⁴ FWP, South Carolina Narratives: Anne Bell (emphasis is mine)

⁵⁵ Johnson. *God Struck Me Dead* 128

“when everything seemed lost I was delivered . . . I was sin-sick. . . . I was sick all over, and Tuesday, coming out of the field, my teeth were clenched and I was in chains of sin and I fell down by the side of a chicken coop. . . . the voice of God spoke to me and said, ‘I am the way.’”⁵⁶

When they were struck by God converts shed the “chains of sin” that had afflicted their spirits and bodies. The burden was thus released. It was also at this precise moment that each experienced a spiritual and symbolic death, “[Dead], Ise layin’ dere in de weeds dead in sin.”⁵⁷ As they died, they passed into the fourth quadrant of the *Yowa*, signifying rebirth, midnight, and the height of a person’s otherworldly power. In this liminal state, informants met God, encountered ancestors, and emerged anew, reborn as true Christians, “The next morning my hands and feet were new.”, “They just shined.”⁵⁸

The journey was complete.

In the past two decades, as more and more African American sites have been excavated, several historical archaeologists have begun to notice patterns that suggest intentional depositional practices with reference to the cardinal directions. At the Levi-Jordan Plantation in Brazoria, Texas, Kenneth Brown has discovered one of the best examples of geomancy to date upon an African American site. The archaeological deposits within the fifteen by fifteen foot room he has interpreted as a “curer’s cabin” most likely post-dated the Civil War and had a *terminus ante quem* of 1892, when the plantation was abandoned. Within the dwelling Brown discovered four intentionally buried deposits of associated objects similar to the caches interpreted by Leone in Annapolis to be *minkisi*. The caches were buried in the four corners of one of four chambers within the duplex-style structure, and oriented to the cardinal points. Brown

⁵⁶ Ibid 72-76

⁵⁷ Perdue, Bardeen, and Phillips, eds. *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves* (Charlottesville, 1976) 320

⁵⁸ Johnson. *God Struck Me Dead* 110, 165

concluded that the four deposits functioned within a single context, and that the deposits, when connected, recreated the figure of the cosmogram, consecrating the room as a ritual space (*Figure 5*). Based upon this interpretation, he postulated that a ritual specialist, most likely a healer, had occupied the cabin.⁵⁹

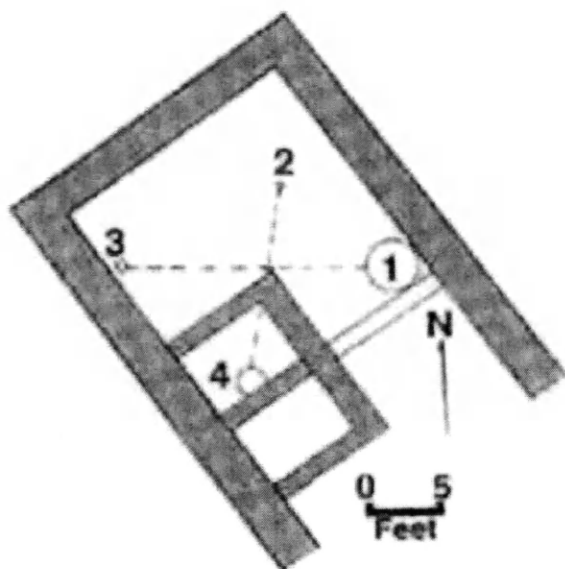


Figure 5 – Section of duplex cabin at Levi-Jordan Plantation Quarter showing room in which four deposits were discovered, effectively recreating the *Yowa* and consecrating the room as a ritual space. Image from Levi-Jordan Plantation Public Archaeology Website www.publicarchaeology.org/webarchaeology/html/archaeol.htm

The first deposit, discovered in the eastern corner of the room, including three stacked iron kettle bases, several cubes of white chalk, a sealed tube fashioned from two brass bullet casings, two bird skulls, several patent medicine bottles, and a thermometer, was interpreted as a ritual kit of potential healing capacity by Brown. An unusually large amount of nails, small water rolled pebbles, mirror fragments, knife blades, a small (4 cm) white porcelain figurine, concave metal disc, and several ocean shells were found in association nearby. Brown interpreted the latter grouping as the material remains of a wooden *nkisi nkondi* (*see figure 2*), a carved figurine that was hollowed near the stomach

⁵⁹ Archaeological descriptions taken from www.publicarchaeology.org/webarchaeology/html/archaeol.htm (Levi-Jordan Plantation Public Archaeology): Kenneth Brown. *On the Curer's Cabin and Interview* (1998)

area for the purpose of inserting a small human effigy, imitating the “man in a man” recognized by many informants during conversion visions.⁶⁰

The second deposit consisted of seven silver coins, dated between 1853 and 1858, buried within an intentionally excavated hole in the northern corner of the room. The coins; four quarters, two dimes, and a half-dime, had been tightly wrapped within a coarsely woven cloth object, interred, and aligned on a north – south axis with the dime, the only perforated coin, on the outside and facing the south. Another deposit was discovered underneath the bricked floor of a hearth, in the southernmost point of the room. Several of the bricks had been intentionally removed *after* the completion of the hearth, under which a small hole had been excavated. A layer of clay had been inserted to form a plaster surface at the base of the hole and then covered with a layer of ash and broken ocean shell (oyster and whelk) and a few small nails. The hole had been refilled with soil and brick fragments and the original bricks replaced.

The last deposit had been intentionally situated beneath the floorboards adjacent to the cabin’s entrance, also the western corner of the room. It consisted of two iron kettles, placed one inside the other, with a few small metal, shell, glass, and bone fragments, and three inches of ash contained within the upper kettle and covered with the intentionally broken remnants of the sides of yet another iron kettle. A number of objects were placed around, or possibly in lines radiating from, the kettles. Towards the northeast were two Confederate military buttons, several large bones, metal chain links, and a bayonet. Toward the southeast were several more lengths of metal chain, shell, a quartz crystal, glass fragments, two additional Confederate military buttons, and

⁶⁰ Nails and iron spikes were driven into the wooden figurine to excite the spirit captured within the *nkisi*, commanding it to obey the owner, hence the high frequency of nails relative to the rest of the site. See Chireau (2003) 47, MacGaffey (1988) for descriptions of *minkisi nkondi*.

numerous large iron objects, including a hinge, spike, bolt, and a fragment from an iron plow. Brown concluded that this set of artifacts, because of its location near the entrance, likely formed a protective *nkisi*, intended to provide a barrier from outside elements intending harm to the occupants.⁶¹

The intentionally placed groupings of artifacts within the so-called “curer’s cabin” at the Levi-Jordan Plantation illustrate an awareness of directional spiritual forces indicative of the *Yowa* and illustrated through narratives of conversion contemporaneous with the occupation of the site. Brown’s interpretation of the cabin as a ritually defined and protected space is probably correct, in that many of the deposits may have served to attract benevolent spiritual forces while blocking others. The placement of the hollow kettles by the entrance, for example, may have served as a filter, effectively “catching” and neutralizing any ill-will that visitors passing through the threshold may have intended.⁶² The same group of objects, placed in the western extremity of the room as well, may have also served to block the elements of death and danger associated with the west in conversion narratives.

Furthermore, the placement of seven silver coins at the northern corner of the cabin and along a north – south axis may have been intended to invite the healing powers of God/*Nzambi* and the ancestors, represented by the white shell and ash in the southern feature beneath the hearth. Pierced coins have been found on nineteenth and twentieth century African American sites throughout the South. Leone and Fry found that coins

⁶¹ Kenneth Brown. *On the Curer’s Cabin and Interview* (1998)

⁶² Ywone Edwards points out the use of other symbolic filters by African Americans, such as the construction of irregular paths to confuse evil spirits (believed to travel in straight lines) and the placement of brooms and bean seeds near entrances to ward off unwelcome visitors. “Trash revisited: A Comparative Approach to Historical Descriptions and Archaeological Analysis of Slave Houses and Yards” (Charlottesville, 1998) 251

were utilized by informants in the WPA narratives as a protection from conjure and to relieve the pain and discomfort of rheumatism. Coins, as circular objects, are material representations of the continuity of life, the cyclical nature of temporal and vital forces represented by the cosmogram. The KiKongo addage “*lunda lukengolo lwa lunga* – keep your circle complete” is applicable.⁶³ Silver dimes, in particular, were considered to be the most effective. They could be strung and worn around the neck or ankle, or simply carried in a pocket or shoe (*Figure 6*).



Figure 6 – an assortment of 19th century pierced coins from the African American South, some heavily rubbed from long-term wearing. *Image from www.middlepassagemuseum.org*

Silver, in many conversion narratives, is a symbolic metaphor for spiritual and physical healing. Consider the following experiences for instance,

“Once while I was sick I saw in a vision three people, and one was a woman. They looked at me and said, ‘He is sick.’ The woman said, ‘I can cure him.’ So speaking she took out a little silver vial, held it before me, and vanished.”

“One night I remember I was sick, and the doctors said I couldn’t live. . . . To my mind, in the spirit, a little silver pipe was let down from the top of the ceiling, and three angels came down. . . . They gave me water out of the little silver pipe. I could feel each drop on my tongue. They told me this was the water of life.”⁶⁴

Iron pipes are traditional grave markers in the African American South, signifying

⁶³ Eric Adams. (quoting R.F. Thompson) in “Religion and Freedom: Artifacts Indicate that African Culture Persisted Even in Slavery” *Omni Magazine* Vol. 16 No. 2 (November, 1993) 8; Maria Franklin reports the discovery of several coins at Locust Grove Plantation in Kentucky with 4 notches etched into the sides, in such a manner as to facilitate stringing across its face, creating an X shape – thus reproducing the cosmogram. (Franklin, 1997)

⁶⁴ Johnson. *God Struck Me Dead* 20, 123

spiritual travel, through smoke or water, and the connection between worlds.⁶⁵ The silver pipe through which the sick man received “the water of life” also served as a metaphor for spiritual death and rebirth. Simulating the vertical, or north – south, axis of the cosmogram, it connected him with heaven, and God, as he lay in his presumed death bed/grave. Consequently, there are four examples of iron pipes employed as grave dressings associated with the cemetery adjacent to and contemporary with the Levi-Jordan Plantation.⁶⁶ It could be argued that the roll of silver coins may have replicated the symbolic role of the silver pipe in the above experience, as a material bridge between worlds intended to accommodate spiritual and corporeal healing.

Similar examples of historic deposits associated with African Americans that exhibit sensitivities to directional spiritual influences have been identified upon archaeological sites in Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina as well. Mark Leone noticed that recognizable *nkisi* caches were either located at thresholds, the entrances and exits to rooms and structures, or in the northeast corners of interior spaces, the region of the *Yowa* associated with life and maturity. He also reported the 1998 discovery of a layout of intentionally buried caches in Annapolis similar to that of the “curer’s cabin” at the Levi-Jordan Plantation.⁶⁷

In the lower Chesapeake region of Virginia and North Carolina, rectangular sub-floor pits are common features encountered within eighteenth and nineteenth century quarter dwellings housing enslaved Africans and African Americans. It is not uncommon

⁶⁵ Thompson. *Flash of the Spirit* 139; Grey Gundaker. “What Goes Around Comes Around: Temporal Cycles and Recycling in African-American Yard Work” in *Recycled: Re-seen: Folk Art from the Global Scrap Heap* (New York, 1996) 73

⁶⁶ David Bruner. “Hidden Power: Burial Practices from an African-American Slave and Tenant Community” paper presented at the Society for Historical Archaeology Annual Conference, 1998

⁶⁷ Mark Leone and Gladys-Marie Fry. “Spirit Management among Americans of African Descent” in Charles Orser, ed. *Race and the Archaeology of Identity* (Salt Lake City, 2001) 147, 151-52

to find ten or more of the pits of varying dimensions within a single two-room structure. Historical archaeologists have pondered the significance of these features since they first encountered them in the 1970s. They are comparable in size and shape to European style root cellars, which are typically situated adjacent to hearths, taking advantage of the warmth to keep root vegetables such as potatoes from freezing in winter. However, sub-floor pits are often spaced throughout the whole of a dwelling's interior, leading many archaeologists to conclude that they were used as storage or hiding places for valuable or pilfered items (*Figure 7*).⁶⁸ Sub-floor pits are typically filled with domestic refuse, and it makes sense that they could have been constructed for the personal storage of household items. However, there is ample evidence to suggest that many of the pits may have been utilized for other purposes as well.



Figure 7 – Sub-Floor Pits in quarter dwelling. Kingsmill Quarter, Williamsburg.
Image from Kelso, 1984

Maria Franklin reported a sub-floor pit within an eighteenth century slave quarter on the Richneck Plantation, near Williamsburg, that contained what she believed to be a “symbolic lock.” The pit appears to have been used a storage chest, as it was sectioned in half and lined with wood. Within a single row of dry-laid brick along the west wall, she

⁶⁸ William Kelso. *Kingsmill Plantations, 1619 – 1800* (New York, 1984); Frasier Neiman. “Sub-Floor Pits and Slavery in 18th and Early 19th Century Virginia” paper presented at SHA annual conference, (1997)

discovered a large pure white quartz cobble in place of a removed brick. As there was a contemporaneous, almost inexhaustible, supply of brick not more than fifty feet from the structure and there are no indigenous quartz outcroppings, she presumed that the quartz cobble was curated and intentionally positioned in the pit. She interpreted the presence of the mineral as a symbolic device invoking the protection of ancestors in order to safeguard its contents; a visual warning to those who might be tempted to look within.⁶⁹

Ywone Edwards noticed that “Some of the trash, such as shells, bottles, ceramics, and pierced objects found in root cellars . . . resembles the trash used to dress or medicate the yard, thus protecting the inhabitants and their property.”⁷⁰ Many of the objects recovered from African American sites in the Chesapeake region that could be interpreted as bearing spiritual or ritual significance are commonly found in sub-floor pits: bits of chalk and quartz, water rolled river pebbles, copper wire, brass rings, pierced and modified items such as beads, buttons, shell, bone and metal discs, cowrie shells, drilled pewter spoon handles and tobacco pipe bowls, and coins (*Figures 8 – 10*). The majority of the pits, in all likelihood, functioned as storage spaces, accounting for the frequency of personal items and small-finds recovered from them, however, some sub-floor pits may have served multiple functions, quite possibly for protective or healing purposes as well.

Patricia Samford has encountered two sub-floor pits within eighteenth century quarters, one in Williamsburg, Virginia and the other in Edenton, North Carolina, which she has interpreted as examples of West African style ancestral shrines. At the ironically named Utopia Quarter, on the Kingsmill Plantation in Williamsburg, she noticed that one

⁶⁹ Maria Franklin. “Out of Site: Out of Mind: The Archaeology of an Enslaved Virginia Household 1740-1778” PhD dissertation, The University of California, Berkeley (1997) 243-45

⁷⁰ Ywone Edwards. “Trash revisited . . .” 263



Figure 8 – Pierced items from sub-floor pit in eighteenth century context. Richeck Slave Quarter, Williamsburg. Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

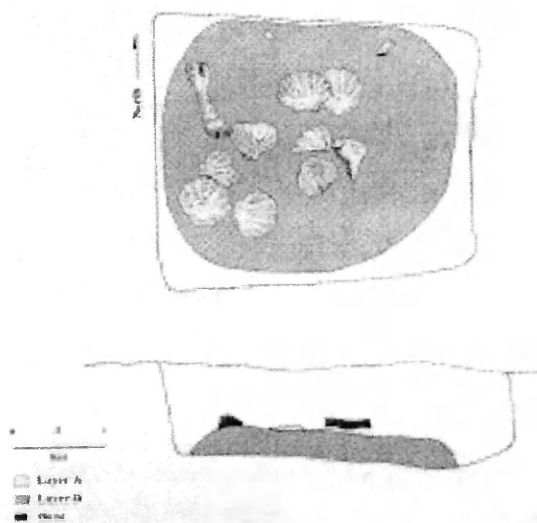
Figure 9- Items of potential ritual significance, including a tobacco pipe bowl, chalk, a brass ring, black river pebble, and several alloy buttons. Recovered from a sub-floor pit in the extreme southeastern corner of a quarter dwelling; Carter's Grove, Williamsburg. *Photo by the author*



Figure 10- Glass beads recovered from a sub-floor pit in a quarter dwelling on the Atkinson Site, Williamsburg. Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

of the eleven sub-floor pits within a 16 x 24 foot earthfast dwelling, dating between 1720 and 1750, differed from the others in the manner of its construction and the composition of its contents. Feature 44, a 4 x 3 foot rectangular sub-floor pit, was located in the extreme southeast corner of the dwelling. The pit contained two layers of fill. Layer A consisted of an organic brown sand containing 93 artifacts. Layer B, the lowest level, consisted of an intentionally mounded and leveled area concentrated in the center of the pit. Layer B contained only six artifacts, however, the majority of artifacts recovered from Layer A were concentrated at the bottom of the layer, with many of them resting atop Layer B (*Figure 11*).⁷¹

Figure 11 – Utopia sub-floor pit with mounded earth and artifacts *in situ*. Image from Samford, 1999



⁷¹ Patricia Samford. "Strong is the Bond of Kinship: West African-Style Ancestor Shrines and Subfloor Pits on African American Quarters" in Franklin, Maria and Fessler, Garret eds., *Historical Archaeology, Identity Formation, and the Interpretation of Ethnicity* (Williamsburg, 1999), "Power Runs in Many Channels: Subfloor Pits and West African-Based Spiritual Traditions in Colonial Virginia" PhD dissertation, The University of North Carolina (2000)

Among the artifacts arranged upon the surface of the mounded platform were seven complete fossil scallop shells, three large cow bones, two kaolin tobacco pipebowls, and one pipestem. Additionally, half of the artifacts recovered from Layer A, including kaolin pipestems, sherds of tin-glazed earthenware, and shell, were white. Samford also found that the soil contained high quantities of grape pollen, suggesting that libations of wine had been poured upon the platform. Taken as a whole, the shell, as a reference to the watery barrier separating the living from the land of the dead, the white bones, pipe bowls and stem fragments – composed of *mpemba* – white clay, and the presence of wine suggested to Samford that feature 44 may have functioned as an ancestral shrine. The fact that the pit was located in the southeast corner of the structure, the region of the *Yowa* corresponding to the realm of the ancestors and rebirth, lends additional credence to her theory. Additionally, the presence of the pipebowls may have served as a metaphor for spiritual travel (through smoke), in much the same way as the silver pipe and grave markers from the previous example. Consequently, several adults interred within the cemetery at Utopia were discovered to have kaolin smoking pipes tucked beneath their arms.⁷²

At the Eden House site, west of Edenton, Samford encountered a sub-floor pit, dating to the first half of the eighteenth century, which she believed to be another example of an ancestral shrine. One of the four pits in the 24 x 16 foot structure contained an array of complete and nearly complete artifacts strategically and intentionally arranged upon its floor (*Figure 12*). A pair of iron scissors and a kaolin smoking pipe with four inches of intact stem were placed on either side of two complete wine bottles in the northeastern corner of the pit. Two iron axe heads, crossed to form an

⁷² Garrett Fessler, James River Institute for Archaeology, Inc. – personal communication

X, were discovered along the western edge of the pit. Finally, along the south wall of the feature lay a clear leaded-glass decanter flanked by two complete wine bottles.

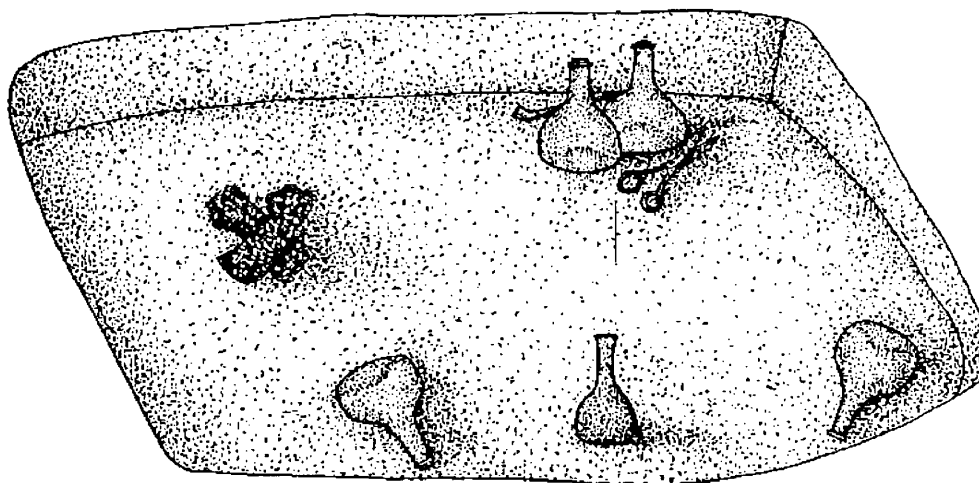


Figure 12 – Eden House sub-floor pit with artifacts *in situ*.
Drawing from Samford, 2000

In a time when even the most affluent recycled and reused glass wine bottles, the intentional deposition of five in a pit underneath the floor of a slave cabin makes quite a bold statement. It is fairly apparent that the material objects were arranged in a meaningful pattern, yet Samford’s interpretation of the feature as the material remnant of an ancestral shrine is not as convincing an argument as that for feature 44 at Utopia. However, if we review the assemblage of artifacts within the pit in terms of spatial orientation, another plausible alternative presents itself. The northeast corner seems to be the most prominent, with an array of artifacts including a white clay pipe and an open pair of iron scissors, forming an X.⁷³ Samford noticed this as well,

⁷³ Puckett noted in the 1920s that “Negroes claim that it is unusually bad luck to leave the scissors uncrossed (closed)”, suggesting not only an awareness of, *but a beneficial and intentional behavioral practice* in relation to the *Yowa*. *The Magic and Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* 406. Leone and Fry also identified the importance of the northeast corners of interior spaces through repeated depositional practices, namely deposited *nkisi* bundles in African American work spaces in Maryland. “Spirit Management . . .” 147, 151-52

“Although the significance of the northeastern placement of many groups of spiritual objects is unknown, it may be related to the northeastern quadrant of the Bakongo cosmogram, which corresponds with birth and life. In fact, most of the artifacts from the lower soil level were encountered in the northeast portion of the feature.”⁷⁴

The placement of the iron axe heads to the west may have served a similar purpose as the grouping of iron kettles in the western corner of the “curer’s cabin” at the Levi-Jordan Plantation. The heavy cutting edges of the axe heads could have served as a warning and a deterrent for malefic spiritual energies originating in the west.

Furthermore, the collection of bottles may have functioned in a comparable manner to bottle trees, found throughout the present-day South and attributed to Kongo origins, intended to protect a household from evil spirits through invocation of the dead.⁷⁵ The hollow spaces inside the bottles, and the fact that they are made of glass (a metaphor for water – a spirit-embodying medium) makes them a perfect means of either collecting benevolent spiritual energies or trapping malevolent spirits. It could therefore be argued that the Eden House sub-floor pit may have effectively functioned as a medicating household charm, the pit itself functioning as both a container for sacred medicines and a point of contact between worlds intended to invite the protection of ancestral spirits while effectively blocking others.

Perhaps if we exerted more spatial control over the manners in which sub-floor pits are currently excavated, we might better interpret their intended and adapted functions. Piece-plotting individual artifacts within excavated strata in three dimensions, although time consuming, could yield new insight into whether objects were simply

⁷⁴ Samford also reported that six white chalk fragments and the base of a terra-cotta flowerpot, “whose round shape and pierced central hole are reminiscent of a Bakongo cosmogram”, were recovered from the pit as well. Both are common symbolic representations and material substances used in the construction of *minkisi*. “Strong is the Bond of Kinship” 84-85

⁷⁵ Thompson. *Flash of the Spirit* 142-45

tossed into the pits at random or intentionally (and meaningfully) ordered in ways that we may be just beginning to comprehend. However, until more quarters are unearthed and associated sub-floor pits documented, we must remain content with speculation and inference.

In Conclusion

Representations of the *Yowa* appear time and time again in healing and protective contexts throughout African America. Leland Ferguson identified incised combinations of X's and O's upon the bases of eighteenth century Colonoware bowls, produced by slaves for their own usage, as cosmograms. He interpreted the association of the earthenware bowls, dredged from riverbeds along South Carolina lowcountry rice plantations, with water as evidence that they had likely formed components of protective *minkisi*.⁷⁶ Puckett recorded that, "Conjurers make a cross on a person's breast to remove snakes from within him; two needles crossed in the crown of your hat prevent any 'trick' from harming you."⁷⁷ In a WPA compiled set of "folk remedies and superstition" from Richmond County, Georgia, federal interviewers found that "If you start some place and forget something don't turn around without making a cross mark and spitting in it, if you do you will have bad luck."⁷⁸ By drawing or tracing a crossmark, a point of contact between worlds was created, allowing for the spiritual energies represented by the vertical axis of the *Yowa* to penetrate the human realm. To peoples that believed that

⁷⁶ Leland Ferguson. *Uncommon Ground: Archaeology and Early African America: 1650 – 1800* (Washington D.C., 1992) 109-120, "The cross is a magic sign: Marks on eighteenth century bowls in South Carolina" Paper presented at Symposium, *Digging the American Past* (Mississippi, 1989). Several pewter spoon bowls from quarters at Kingsmill in Williamsburg and Garrison Plantation in Maryland appear to have been etched with symbols resembling the *Yowa* as well. Ferguson (1992), Klingelhofer (1987)

⁷⁷ "Snakes" are an illness brought about through malevolent conjure, most often ingested through whiskey or other drinks – the afflicted was believed to literally have snakes living beneath his skin (attacking from within). Puckett. *The Magic and Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* 566

⁷⁸ FWP, "Compilation Richmond County – Ex-Slave Interviews: Folk Remedies and Superstition" Georgia Narratives: Augusta.

evil traveled in straight lines, it was beneficial to ask for the protection of ancestors before turning back upon one's path, into any potential misfortune that may have followed.

Jacqueline Tobin and Raymond Dobard have argued that many of the geometric design elements incorporated into African American quilts may have comprised a secret symbolic code able to have been recognized and read by those fleeing bondage along the Underground Railroad.⁷⁹ The quilts needed simply to be displayed, being "aired" out of a window for instance. Each of the patterns that the authors claimed to have been utilized by escaping slaves to navigate the way to safe houses or avoid dangerous patrols could also be interpreted as reproductions and variations of the *Yowa* (Figure 13). It is the precise nature of the spiritual and religious concepts that the cosmogram embodies that make the symbol and its variants suitable for usage as "symbolic compasses."

In Christian contexts, the cosmogram was endowed with multiple meanings. As the symbol overlapped with the Christian cross, it became a symbolic metaphor and a means through which to invoke the healing and protective power of Jesus as well, "De 'ligion uv de Lawd Jesus Christ will keep off all conjure."⁸⁰ One informant recalled that she had asked Jesus, in a vision, to protect her from evil spirits, claiming "he did that." She related,

⁷⁹ "Quilts represent one of the most highly evolved systems of writing in the New World. Every combination of colors, every juxtaposition or intersection of line and form, every pattern, traditional or idiosyncratic, contain data that can be imparted in some form or another to anyone. All across Africa, geometric designs, the syntax of quilt tops, have been used to encode symbolic or secret knowledge." Jacqueline Tobin and Raymond Dobard. *Hidden in Plain View: The Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad*. (New York, 1999) 8-9

⁸⁰ Newbell Niles Puckett. *The Magic and Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* (New York, 1969) 566;

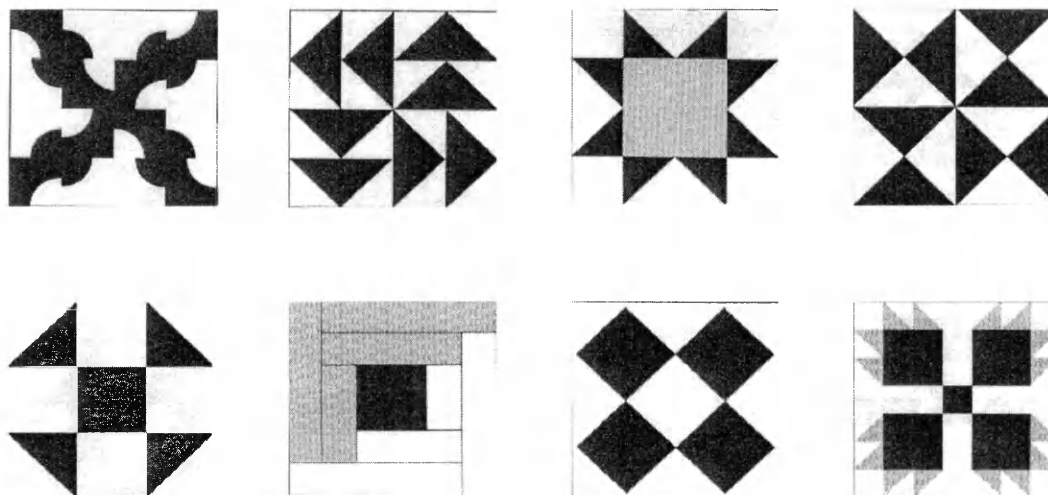


Figure 13 – Common quilt patterns identified by Tobin and Dobard as “symbolic compasses”. Each could be interpreted as variants of the *Yowa*. Images from Tobin and Dobard, 1999.

“I remember one time when I was almost conjured by a hoodoo, and I prayed to the Lord and asked him to save me from him. I promised him if he would protect me and save me from being destroyed that way I would serve him the balance of my days. This he did, and I mean it has been a blessing.”⁸¹

Another, after falling ill, explained that she “was tormented by old Satan nearly every day” until,

“One day, while lying there in bed, I saw a star. It came and rested right on the window sash, where the pieces that hold the panes of glass cross one another. I looked through that star and saw the heavens open, and a sword came out and was laid on my bed beside me. A voice said to me, ‘When Satan comes, show him this sword.’ The devil came back and started towards me, but when he saw the sword he vanished, and I never saw him again.”⁸²

Here we have an illustration of how representations of the cosmogram, the star and the intersection of the window came, referenced several levels of meaning while being mobilized for defense against sickness and evil intent. It was a common belief in the

⁸¹ Clifton Johnson. *God Struck Me Dead* (Cleveland, 1969) 127

⁸² Ibid 146

early twentieth century that tracing a crossmark upon a Bible and placing it underneath a pillow before going to bed would prevent witches from riding one while sleeping.⁸³ It should therefore come as no surprise that quilts, as textiles that contained the body while sleeping, often incorporated protective symbolic elements as well. The circa 1880s appliqué Bible quilts of Harriet Powers illustrate a blending of *Yowa*-derived symbols with Christian imagery, biblical and historical events.

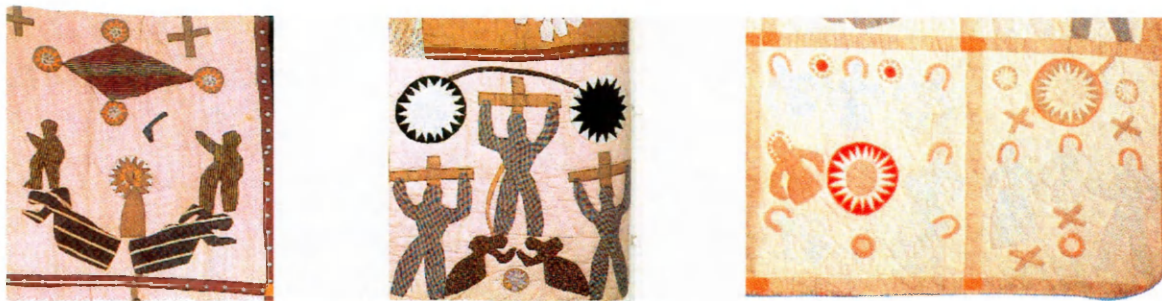


Figure 14 – Sections from two appliqué quilts, made by Harriet Powers, circa 1886 - Note blending of Christian imagery with presence of *Yowa* inspired symbols.
Images from Fry, 1990

The conversion narratives and transcribed vision experiences of formerly enslaved African Americans give us a unique opportunity to view symbols in action; to observe how changing cultural, religious, and historical contexts have shaped the forces by which material objects and the constructed landscape were given meaning and significance. This paper has been an attempt to investigate the ways in which traditional African religious and symbolic elements were mobilized, endowed with additional and alternate meaning, and rearticulated through metaphysical and material media in America. We are just beginning to recognize the extent and significance of symbolic and

⁸³ Puckett. *The Magic and Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* 568; “Witch riding” was a common term for a form of malign conjure – witches (living people) attacked one while sleeping, literally riding them until daybreak. “Pining away,” a deterioration of physical health, was the corporeal result of this form of spiritual assault.

religious patterns in the material records of sites once occupied by free and enslaved African Americans and it is my hope that the observations contained within this study might serve as ethnographic aids to historians, archaeologists, and other scholars of the past.

Bibliography

Abbreviations: FWP – Federal Writer’s Project
 WPA – Works Progress Administration

*all unpublished narratives were accessed and printed from the Library of Congress archives online at website: *Slave Narratives from the Federal Writer’s Project 1936-1938* [<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html>]

Adams, Eric

1993 “Religion and Freedom: Artifacts Indicate that African Culture Persisted Even in Slavery” *Omni Magazine*. Vol. 16 No. 2 (November, 1993)

Arens, W., and Ivan Karp, eds.

1989 *Creativity of Power: Cosmology and Action in African Societies*. Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington D.C.

Binford, Lewis

1962 “Archaeology as Anthropology” *American Antiquity*, Vol. 28, No. 2

Brown, Kenneth

1998 “On the Curer’s Cabin” and “Interview” from www.publicarchaeology.org/webarchaeology/html/archaeol.htm (Levi-Jordan Plantation Public Archaeology Website)

Brown, Ras Michael

2002 “Walk in the Feenda” in Heywood, Linda L. ed. *Central Africans and Cultural Transformations in the American Diaspora*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

Bruner, David

1998 “Hidden Power: Burial Practices from an African-American Slave and Tenant Community” paper presented at the *Society for Historical Archaeology* Annual Conference, Atlanta

Chireau, Yvonne

2003 *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition*. University of California Press, Berkeley

Creel, Margaret Washington

1988 *A Peculiar People: Slave Religion and Community-Culture among the Gullahs*. New York University Press, New York

Curtin, Philip C.

1969 *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census*. University of Wisconsin Press, Madison

- Deetz, James
1996 *In Small Things Forgotten: An Archaeology of Early American Life*. Anchor Books: Doubleday, New York
- Edwards, Ywone
1998 "Trash Revisited: A Comparative Approach to Historical Descriptions and Archaeological Analysis of Slave Houses and Yards" in Grey Gundaker, ed. *Keep Your Head to the Sky: Interpreting African American Home Ground*. University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville
- Fennell, Christopher
2003 "Consuming Mosaics: mass produced goods and the Contours of choice in the upper Potomac region" PhD dissertation in Anthropology, University of Virginia, Charlottesville
- Ferguson, Leland
1992 *Uncommon Ground: Archaeology and Early African America: 1650 – 1800*. Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington
- 1989 "The cross is a magic sign: Marks on eighteenth century bowls from South Carolina" Paper presented at symposium, *Digging the American Past*, May 17-21, University of Mississippi
- Fett, Sharla
2002 *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations*. University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill
- Franklin, Maria
1997 "Out of Site: Out of Mind: The Archaeology of an Enslaved Virginia Household 1740-1778" PhD dissertation in Anthropology, The University of California, Berkeley
- Fry, Gladys-Marie
1990 *Stitched From the Soul: Slave Quilts from the Ante-Bellum South*. Dutton Studio Books, New York
- Frey, Sylvia and Wood, Betty
1998 *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830*. University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill
- Fu-Kiau, K. Kia Bunseki
2001 *African Cosmology of the Bantu-Kongo: Principles of Life & Living*. Athelia Henrietta Press, New York

- 1969 *Le Mukongo et le monde qui l'entourait – N'kongo ye Nza yakun'zungidila* (The Mukongo and the world that surround him). Recherches et Synthèses, No. 1, Office National de la Recherche et de Développement, Kinshasa
- Genovese, Eugene D.
1976 *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made*. Vintage Books, New York
- Georgia Writer's Project
1940 *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies Among the Georgia Coastal Negroes*. Savannah Unit, Georgia Writer's Project, Works Progress Administration – University of Georgia Press, Athens
- Greenberg, Kenneth S., ed.
1996 *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. The Bedford Series in History and Culture, St. Martin's Press, New York: [1832]
- Gundaker, Grey
1998 *Signs of Diaspora – Diaspora of Signs: Literacies, Creolization, and Vernacular Practice in African America*. Oxford University Press, New York
- 1996 "What Goes Around Comes Around: Temporal Cycles and Recycling in African-American Yard Work" in *Recycled: Re-seen: Folk Art from the Global Scrap Heap*. Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York
- Heath, Barbara
1997 "Slavery and Consumerism: A Case Study from Central Virginia" *African American Archaeology Newsletter*, No.19 (Winter, 1997)
- Holloway, Joseph E.
1990 "The Origins of African-American Culture" in Joseph Holloway, ed. *Africanisms in American Culture*. University of Indiana Press, Bloomington
- Isaac, Rhys
1982 *The Transformation of Virginia 1740-1790*. University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill
- Janzen, John and MacGaffey, Wyatt
1974 *An Anthology of Kongo Religion: Primary Texts from Lower Zaire*. University of Kansas Press, Lawrence
- Johnson, Clifton A. ed.
1969 *God Struck Me Dead: Voices of Ex-Slaves*. The Pilgrim Press, Cleveland

- Johnson, Robert
1990 *Cross Road Blues* (take 1), in *Robert Johnson: The Complete Recordings*. Sony Music Entertainment, (CD compilation)
- Joyner, Charles
1994 *Down by the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community*. University of Illinois Press, Urbana
- Kelso, William
1984 *Kingsmill Plantations, 1619 – 1800: Archaeology of Country Life in Colonial Virginia*. Academic Press, Inc., New York
- Klingelhofer, Eric
1987 “Aspects of Early Afro-American Material Culture: Artifacts from The Slave Quarters at Garrison Plantation, Maryland” *Historical Archaeology*, Vol. 21, No. 2
- Leone, Mark P. and Fry, Gladys Marie
2001 “Spirit Management among Americans of African Descent” in Charles Orser, ed. *Race and the Archaeology of Identity*. University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City
- Levine, Lawrence W.
1977 *Black Culture and Black Consciousness.: Afro American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*. Oxford University Press, New York
- MacGaffey, Wyatt
2002 “Twins, Simbi Spirits, and Lwas in Kongo and Haiti” in Heywood, Linda L. ed. *Central Africans and Cultural Transformations in the American Diaspora*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
- 1988 “Complexity, Astonishment and Power: The Visual Vocabulary of Kongo Minkisi” *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Special Issue on Culture and Consciousness in Southern Africa, Vol. 14, No. 2
- 1986 *Religion and Society in Central Africa: The BaKongo of Lower Zaire*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago
- Neiman, Fraser
1997 “Sub-Floor Pits and Slavery in 18th and Early 19th Century Virginia” paper presented at the *Society for Historical Archaeology Annual Conference*, Corpus Christi
- Perdue, Bardeen, and Phillips, eds.
1976 *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*. University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville

- Puckett, Newbell Niles
 1969 *The Magic and Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*. Dover Publications, Inc., New York [1926]
- Raboteau, Albert J.
 1978 *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*. Oxford University Press, New York
- Rawley, James A.
 1981 *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: A History*. Norton, New York
- Samford, Patricia
 2000 "Power Runs in Many Channels: Subfloor Pits and West African-Based Spiritual Traditions in Colonial Virginia" PhD dissertation in Anthropology, The University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill
 1999 "Strong is the Bond of Kinship: West African-Style Ancestor Shrines and Subfloor Pits on African American Quarters" in Franklin, Maria and Fessler, Garret eds., *Historical Archaeology, Identity Formation, and the Interpretation of Ethnicity*. Colonial Williamsburg Research Publications, Williamsburg
- Smith, Theophus H.
 1994 *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America*. Oxford University Press, New York
- Sobel, Mechal
 2000 *Teach Me Dreams: The Search for Self in the Revolutionary Era*. Princeton University Press, Princeton
 1987 *The World They Made Together: Black and White Values in Eighteenth-Century Virginia*. Princeton University Press, Princeton
 1979 *Trabelin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro Baptist Faith*. Princeton University Press, Princeton
- Tobin, Jacqueline and Dobard, Raymond
 1999 *Hidden in Plain View: The Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad*. Doubleday, New York
- Thompson, Robert Farris
 1983 *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro American Art and Philosophy*. Vintage Books, New York

Thompson, Robert Farris and Cornet, Joseph

1981 *The Four Moments of the Sun: Kongo Art in Two Worlds*. National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

Tragle, Henry Irving

1971 *The Southampton Slave Revolt of 1831: a compilation of source material*. University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst

Walsh, Lorena S.

1997 *From Calabar to Carter's Grove: The History of a Virginia Slave Community*. University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville

Vita

Jon Jason Boroughs

Born in Richmond, Virginia on April 29, 1975, Jason Boroughs was raised in New Kent County, Virginia. He graduated from New Kent High School in June, 1993, enrolling in the University of Virginia the following fall. In May, 1997, he graduated with a B.A. in anthropology and a B.A. in archaeology, with a concentration in historical anthropology. In August of the same year, the author entered the College of William and Mary as a graduate assistant in the department of anthropology, completing coursework in 1998. Except for a brief stint as a socio-cultural Ph.D. student in the anthropology department of the University of Oklahoma in 1999, he has been employed by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation as a project archaeologist. Boroughs defended his thesis in May of 2004 and re-entered the department of anthropology at the College of William and Mary as a Ph.D. student the following August.