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The Evolution of the Study of African Culture in America

Submitted by John P. McCarthy, IMA Consulting, Inc.

While African-American culture is now generally recognized by the scholarly community as a distinct cultural entity which formed from the unprecedented sociocultural interaction of peoples from three continents, Africa, Europe, and the Americas, such was not always the case. It was widely held, even into the 1960s, that the forced importation of Africans into the Americas had resulted in the loss of all aspects of Africans' own culture (e.g. Elkins 1963; Silberman 1964).

The implications of this perspective were, and continue to be, considerable. The past is a social construct (reconstruction) upon which critical aspects of ideology and national policy are implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, based (Silberman 1989). These can include patterns of social domination, resistance, and collusion (Bond and Gilliam 1994). What people believe to have been true in the past has great influence on what they believe to be true and allow to happen in the present. Further, a people without a past that they remember, or without a written history, are more easily looked upon as commodities or tools to be used and exploited (see Wolf 1982 for an extended discussion of this point). In the case of Africans brought to the Americas via the slave trade, the processes of "seasoning" and terms of subsequent enslavement seemed to have eradicated their African past. As a result of these, and other issues too complex to address in this brief essay, the study of African-American history and culture has been, and continues to be, politically charged to a considerable extent. This essay briefly recounts the evolution of the study of African culture in America in the hope that it will provide a clearer context for African-American archaeology.

The modern study of African-American culture developed around the Herskovits-Frazier Debate. Melville Herskovits' (1990) pioneering study, the *Myth of the Negro Past*, first published in 1941, emphasized the importance of West African cultural carryovers, or survivals, in the formation of African-American culture, primarily relying on data from the Caribbean and continental South America. This work stood in dramatic contrast to the generally prevailing view of the period, as expressed by the work of E. Franklin Frazier (1932a, 1932b, 1939, 1957), that held that African-American culture developed as an imitation of European-American culture. Frazier argued that the experience of slavery had been so devastating as to have completely stripped enslaved Africans of all aspects of their own culture. In his view African-American culture was an imperfect derivative of European-American culture.

While weaknesses in several aspects of Herskovits' study have become evident with the passage of time, research in anthropology, folklore, history, and sociology has tended to support his argument for the continuity of various aspects of African culture in the Americas. Early studies set out, and generally succeeded, in documenting aspects of African culture in African-American religious philosophy and arts. Among these Newbell N. Puckett's (1968), *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*, first published in 1926, Carter G. Woodson's (1968), *The African Background*, first published in 1936, and W. E. B. DuBois' (1939), *Black Folk, Then and Now*, are the best known.

Research presented by Guy Johnson (1940), in *Drum and Shadows*, and Lorenzo Turner (1949), in *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect*, focused on African cultural retentions in the Georgia Sea Islands and nearby Gullah communities, specifically language. Turner was particularly successful, tracing nearly 5,000 words to west and central African cultures.

Building on that work over 20 years later, a flurry of research resulted in the clear recognition that African influences had contributed to a distinctive African-American culture. These studies included Norman Whitten and John Szwed's (1970) anthology, *Afro-American Anthropology: Contemporary Perspectives*, Peter H. Wood's (1974), *Black Majority Negro in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion*. Lawrence W. Levine's (1977), *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, and John W. Blassingame's (1979), *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*.

One impact of this extended body of research has been to bring multiple aspects of African heritage into focus in the study of African-American communities. For example, Charles Joyner's (1984), *Down by the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community* presents an analysis of the folklife at a community level. Direct African parallels are documented for a number of activities and linguistic practices.

In a parallel movement, research in the area of African-American material culture has also sought to document and understand the importance of links with Africa. Robert Farris Thompson (1969) in large part pioneered this area of study with his essay exploring African influences in American art. He and Joseph Cornet went on to document aspects of Central African carving and sculpture in the folk art of African Americans living in coastal Georgia and South Carolina in *The Four Moments of the Sun: Kongo Art in Two Worlds* (Thompson and Cornet 1981). Thompson (1983) then carried this research further in *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*. Here Thompson documented the cultural influence of five African cultures, the Kongo, Yoruba, Ejangham, Mande, and Cross River, on aesthetic and metaphysical traditions in America.

More recent work by Thompson (1990) argued that the Kongo culture of Central Africa, as opposed to West Africa cultures, has had central influence in the formation of African-American artistic culture. He cited parallels between African-American creation of cosmograms, patterns of body language and gesture, creation of bottle and plate branches/trees, and practices of adornment and decoration of graves and similar practices in the Kongo to support this proposition.

Two recent, and deservedly influential, studies concerned with African-American material culture warrant particular mention. In the first of these John Michael Vlach (1991) documented the survival and maintenance of African traditions in a wide range of folk arts and crafts, including basketmaking, ironworking, boatbuilding, textiles, musical instruments, grave decoration, gravestone carvings, and architectural forms and the organization of space in *By the Work of Their Hands: Studies in Afro-American Folklife*. He noted that these various art forms possess a cultural unity in their African heritage and that stylistic consistency in design and the process of creation (or style and performance) appears to be a major aspect of ethnic integrity in African-American material culture. While some artifacts represent the uninterrupted survival of

African traditions, such as coiled grass baskets produced in the Carolina Low Country, others such as quilts incorporate African themes into an European-American object.

Second, as most readers of this newsletter are aware, Leland Ferguson's (1992) *Uncommon Ground: Archaeology and Early African America, 1650-1800* focused largely on the ceramic earthenwares we term "Colono," or "Colono-Indian," Wares. This unglazed, low-fire earthenware is often recovered on sites associated with enslaved Africans from Virginia and throughout the southeast and is very similar to ceramics made in West Africa. Ferguson applied the concept of "creolization" to describe the cultural interactions of European-descended masters, enslaved Africans, and, to a more limited extent, Native Americans which took place as New and various Old World peoples and cultures came into contact. From this process, Ferguson argued, African Americans formed a unique culture having material and ideological components distinct from that of European-American culture.

In summary, researchers interested in the formation of African-American culture have built upon the work of Melville Herskovits to overcome the view that African-American culture developed as an imperfect imitation of European-American culture. African-American culture is now clearly recognized as a distinct cultural entity. In addition, the material aspects of African-American culture have been recognized as representing important documentation of African culture in America and the processes contributing to the formation of African-American culture.

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