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Eric Adams

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## **Religion and Freedom: Artifacts Indictate that African Culture Persisted Even in Slavery**

*by Eric Adams (Omni Magazine Vol. 16, No. 2, November 1993 p. 8) Reprinted by permission, copyright 1993, Omni Publications International Ltd.)*

More than two centuries ago, in Annapolis, Maryland, a Black slave living in the home of a prominent Roman Catholic signer of the Declaration of Independence buried in a dark corner of a basement workshop a collection of quartz crystals, polished stones, bone disks, and pierced coins.

No one knows for sure the identity of the slave or why he or she buried these treasures beneath the home of Charles Carroll of Carrollton. But for all the unanswered questions, this particular find could be, as one Yale University art historian calls it, a "Rosetta Stone" in the study of the birth of African-American culture.

The cache, containing more than 20 items and covered in the dirt by a bowl with an asterisk painted inside it, was discovered two years ago during a decade-long project funded by the Charles Carroll House, Inc. Archaeologists and students from the University of Maryland's College Park campus, led by anthropology professor, Mark P. Leone, are excavating sites around Annapolis searching for clues about the daily life of both enslaved and free African Americans.

"This find is so exciting because of the specificity of it," says Yale's Robert Farris Thompson, who examined the artifacts last year. He recognized them as elements of African culture, indicating that such culture survived during slavery. Historians [although not historical archaeologists! ed.] had previously assumed that White society thoroughly quashed the expression of African culture and religion by slaves.

Africans in Kongo, a region in southwest Zaïre and northern Angola, still use the sort of items in the cache, according to Thompson. They wear the pierced coins, for example, on a string or chain he says. Kongo parents often put them on small children as charms. "If they're characterized by chubbiness -- ntandu -- it will help them achieve thinness -- mikaso," he explains. The bone disks, also pierced and worn around the body, represent ideas at the core of Kongo classical religion, he continues. "They have a very precise phrase to tell us why they would want to wear them: lunda lukengolo lwa lunga, or 'keep your circle complete.' As long as the circle is not broken, you're safe."

"All major world religions have some way of miniaturizing their religion. Right here, hidden in the soil of Annapolis, is the Kongo equivalent to a miniature crucifix, a small irreducible essence of the religion," says Thompson of the bone disks, adding that the crystals and the asterisk -- a "cosmogram" -- are also significant elements of Kongo religion.

Charles Carroll, whose family was among the wealthiest in Maryland, was one of the largest slave importers in Annapolis, bringing them from West Africa, including Sierra Leone. Nevertheless, Maryland still had fewer slaves than most other colonies and states, making it

harder, historians had reasoned, to perpetuate many native customs. Moreover, as the archaeological project is revealing, Blacks in Annapolis gave the appearance of living much like Whites did. Free Blacks, in particular, used Western goods purchased from the same markets Whites used.

But the Carroll House dig, besides raising very serious questions about how successful Whites were in rubbing out African culture, has also changed the way archaeologists and historians view the development of African-American culture, according to George Logan, site supervisor for the dig. The artifacts and other material turned up in the dig show that African and European cultures didn't remain separate. "It's a creolization, a process of different cultures coming together and forming a different product on its own," he says.

Understanding how individual elements of African-American history combined to create a separate, and ultimately free, culture is crucial, says project leader Leone. In fact, it provided the motivation for this part of the project.. "Our 'mandate' from the African-American community, whom we were collaborating with very closely on the formulation of our research, was to discover what conditions were like in freedom," Leone explains. "They said they were familiar with slavery, but they wanted to hear about freedom -- their freedom and their ancestors' freedom."