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Sampling Many Pots: An Archaeology of Memory and Tradition at a Bahamian Plantation

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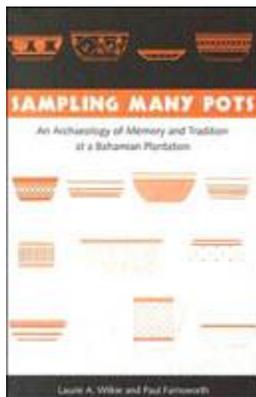
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Book Review



Laurie A. Wilkie and Paul Farnsworth. *Sampling Many Pots: An Archaeology of Memory and Tradition at a Bahamian Plantation*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005, 354 pp., cloth, \$65.00, ISBN-13: 9780813028248.

Reviewed for the African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter by Chris Espenshade, New South Associates, Inc.

This book should be on the must-read list of all subscribers to the newsletter. Although I have my minor quibbles with the volume, I found it challenging, interesting, and thoroughly worthwhile. I offer somewhat lengthy discussions of what I perceive as possible weaknesses of the study, yet I applaud the overall effort.

I believe that most readers will find this book a compelling study in African-Caribbean culture change and identity. The work benefits from good contexts, extensive excavations and analyses, and a moderately good archival record. The volume looks at the creation and maintenance of individual and corporate identities by a diverse group of African Caribbeans including African-born apprentices, enslaved creoles from the Bahamas, and enslaved African Americans brought to the Bahamas from South Carolina. The study is especially interesting because the planter was an outspoken ameliorist and provided written instructions on the care of his enslaved and apprenticed personnel. The authors, Laurie Wilkie and Paul Farnsworth, demonstrate a broad knowledge of West African ethnohistory and ethnography, and also are clearly current on the trends and recent findings of archaeology of the Diaspora. I applaud their focus on individuals as key actors in any tradition. There is much good archaeology and anthropology in this volume.

On the other hand, I believe certain readers may find the study to be mildly frustrating. Some may see the authors as pushing the envelope at numerous junctures. Whenever there are multiple possible explanations for an artifact or a behavior, the authors advocate African memory and African-derived traditions as the preferred explanations.

The first chapter is challenging. The subjects of memory and identity have not been widely addressed in archaeology, and the authors must borrow, or at least touch on, harmony ideology, sociocultural anthropology, modern psychology, practice, agency, structuration, performance, *habitus*, *doxa*, long-term and short-term memory, and tradition. When all is said and done, the authors end up with a stance that seems inherently sensible and attractive (p. 8):

We believe that individuals engage in meaningful, discursive social relations on a daily basis. Through their everyday practice, individuals reaffirm allegiances, and differences, with others and actively define their position within their broader community. Actors,

depending on the specific context of social interaction and their own sense of self and experience, may or may not be conscious of how their actions convey meanings to others.

Chapter 2 presents an overview of Bahamian history from native Indian occupations up to the Loyalist period, when Clifton Plantation was established. Chapter 3 addresses the various sources of members of African Caribbean culture in the late eighteenth century.

The fourth chapter identifies the people of Clifton plantation, including the planter and his family, the apprentices (in theory, free men of African birth), and slaves. The researchers demonstrate that William Wyly saw the establishment and operation of Clifton as a grand experiment in the 'proper way' to manage enslaved people. As part of his ameliorative mindset (improve slavery, rather than emancipate slaves), Wyly attempted to provide better housing stock, greater individual freedom (as expressed in free time for the slaves to tend their own provisioning grounds and to attend markets), more opportunity for religious training, and greater emphasis on literacy training than seen on many plantations.

Chapter 4 also discusses the apprentices and slaves. Although the authors want very badly to be able to link individuals to specific archaeological deposits and architectural ruins, most of the archaeological contexts date from 1810-1820, and we do not see good archival information on individuals until 1818, and the key piece of evidence is an 1821 slave registry. The 1821 registry is recorded by family unit, and, asking for "a moment of indulgence" (p. 93), the authors attempt to reconstruct the spatial arrangement of families by assuming the record was made by traveling cabin to cabin, in order, within the community. The remainder of Chapter 4 provides pictures of each the family units at Clifton. This presentation is a highly effective means of emphasizing the importance of individuals, each with their own history.

Chapter 5 outlines the history of the archaeological research effort at Clifton. The authors use a familiar, locus-by-locus narrative that helps create a feel for the cultural landscape. The archaeological fieldwork at the site was extensive, and the partially standing ruins, yard walls, and provision field markers provided good contexts. The choices regarding investigative techniques and excavation locations were sensible and were clearly linked to the research design.

Chapter 6 interprets artifact distribution and types. I had some issues with this chapter. The authors want to see access to arms limited to the driver, yet their data show a wide distribution of arms among the village site. Arms artifacts were recovered from the driver's house, the slave kitchen, four of the six slave houses, and both slave barracks.

The best exposure of a back yard was from Locus H. The excavations revealed two postholes carved into bedrock and a limestone hearth platform in line with the two postholes. Although the hearth platform is only 1.7 meters from one of the posts, the authors interpret the evidence as showing two distinct activity areas. However, when the artifact distribution maps are reviewed (Figures 6.7-6.9 and 6.11-6.15), the data suggest that the posts and hearth platform are part of a single structure. Why the contortions to

make these two distinct areas? One of the reasons was apparently to make a discovered coin be centered in the two-post structure, a location key to the argument that "the penny was placed so that it was lined up with both the center of the postholes and the center of the house's backdoor" (p. 174). With this penny, another penny, and a figurine face, context is key to understanding the possible protective uses of these items. This reader would have liked to have seen greater detail on all these contexts.

The discussion of yard proxemics is weakened by an implicit reliance on the Pompei principle; the researchers consider that the location of a discarded item directly reflects where that item was used (this despite their earlier argument for swept yards). For example, they state (p. 192, parenthetical in original) "as at the other houses, the intensity of utilization of space (as evidenced by densities of artifacts) is greatest at distances of five meters and farther from the house." This is true only if the following apply: the utilization of space was for refuse disposal only; and there was absolutely no secondary refuse disposal. These two conditions contradict their interpretation of backyard uses.

The authors discuss three artifacts as possibly related to *Obeah*. A figurine face was found in one corner of the kitchen beneath a floor disturbed by "the action of roots or intentional human action" (p. 201). The lack of any additional sherds of the figurine led the archaeologists to suspect that the face alone had been brought to the location. Within a single paragraph (p. 202), the same evidence that had been interpreted as possibly reflecting root disturbance of the floor is now seen as *Obeah*: "Given the placement of the head and its orientation, and its location buried under the torn-up floor, we could not rule out the possibility that this was some sort of intentional act: a shrine? an offering? a warning?" Despite the presence of many children on the slave street, and despite the fact that pan-culturally children like heads and faces as playthings, Wilkie and Farnsworth do not consider play as a possible explanation.

The second possible *Obeah* object was the fresh penny found in Locus I. This perfect penny was purposefully placed (they never explain how they know the penny was not just lost in this high-activity area) 8-10 centimeters below surface in a midden deposit that reached 32 centimeters below surface. If this penny was placed in already accrued midden, it likely dates to well after the slave occupation.

Another coin was recovered, in Locus H, again in line with the center of the back door. The context of this coin is not detailed, but it also was apparently recovered from the upper portion of the midden zone.

In Chapter 7, foodways are reconstructed based on oral history and archaeology. The discussion is somewhat confusing, because the distinction is not always made between practices that may have had resonance with African memories and practices that were a continuation of African practice. Can we safely say the Bahaman pepper pot method of cooking is an African-derived behavior, when native groups in the Caribbean were using pepper pots for hundreds of years before the arrival of Africans?

Chapter 8 is titled "Things They Bought." The authors imply that the slaves purchased any of the artifacts with a possible reference to African memory, but were supplied all the other, non-African, artifacts (e.g., low-cost plates). The ceramics discussion is problematic because we cannot possibly know the source (planter purchase or hand-me-down, or slave purchase or barter) of any of the recovered ceramics. In a very subtle circular argument, we are asked to accept that the slaves purchased certain items because those items fit with an African-derived decorative style; and, because only those of African ancestry would recognize or value that style, only those of African descent would have purchased such items. This ignores the fact that the items fitting this style were widely sold to all ethnic and racial groups in Europe, Africa, North America, South America, and the Caribbean. The degree of similarity of a Staffordshire decoration to an African-derived aesthetic cannot help us decide whether a planter or slave purchased the piece.

We also have no knowledge of the range of decorations available at the local market. This is important because Wilkie and Farnsworth argue that the Clifton African Caribbeans were demonstrating a preference for pieces matching an African-derived aesthetic. We may be seeing only the decorative preferences of a shipping clerk on the Thames or the purchasing whims of Wylly, rather than purchases reflecting the decorative memories of African Caribbeans.

The researchers use economic scaling to argue that the slaves were purchasing most of their own ceramics. In a confusing argument, they say that Wylly (a well-to-do planter, known to have spent more than required on his slaves) would not have spent the extra money to get his slaves more expensive ceramics. Instead, we are expected to believe that the cash-poor slaves spent more of *their* hard-earned money than necessary, buying the more expensive ceramics rather than buying the basics (and saving some money for foodstuffs).

By page 272, Wilkie and Farnsworth seem to be hedging their bets: "the selection of decorated English-manufactured pottery, therefore, must be seen as directed by a variety of aesthetic concerns that may or may not have been related at all to traditional preferences in pot appearance, yet still possibly influenced by those considerations." The banding on factory-turned slipware is rightly argued to be similar to West African fabrics. A few vessels with bird motifs are seen as beckoning back to the importance of birds in the mythology of some West African tribes. A geometric design hand-painted on a pearlware bowl -- at the point of its decoration in the factory in England -- must be a cosmogram, and therefore must have made the bowl attractive to the slaves (Strangely, though, elsewhere in the Diaspora, the actual creation of a cosmogram by the individual African American actor is integral to the importance of that cosmogram in ritual. Can we really say how an African Caribbean would respond to a cosmogram mass-produced by some English potter? Are we sure it would be a positive reaction?).

The hunt for African resonance continues in the discussion of ceramic pipes. As with the ceramics, issues of supply and available selection are not adequately addressed.

At page 295, the authors note "Of course, it is possible to read too much into these things." This is a brave statement to make, and I think it is an implicit recognition that not all archaeologists will accept all of their interpretations. There is little doubt that the culture of the enslaved and apprenticed at Clifton included behaviors that reached back to African origins or that resonated with an African memory. To their credit, Wilkie and Farnsworth seem to acknowledge that it is a matter of degree.

Having voiced my reservations about this volume, it is important to revisit its many strengths. The archaeological study of Clifton represents one of the most extensive archaeological examinations to date of a Caribbean plantation. There are several strong data sets from the excavations and analyses, complemented by an interesting and fairly extensive archival record. This volume documents a key time in the development of what has become the Bahamian identity.

Archaeologists of the African Diaspora range from those who readily see African-derived traits or behaviors in sites of African Americans or African Caribbeans, to those archaeologists who are extremely cautious in harking back to African origins. I think this study from Wilkie and Farnsworth underlines that range in perspectives, and I think the degree of acceptance of their arguments will vary according to the stance of the individual reader. Although I am firmly on the skeptical end of the spectrum, I found this volume an intriguing and challenging read. It is an important contribution to the archaeological literature of the Diaspora. I encourage all the subscribers to the newsletter to read *Sampling Many Pots*.