

## African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter

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Volume 9

Issue 1 March 2006

Article 4

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3-1-2011

# Presentation of the Body: Living and Dead

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### Recommended Citation

Shia, Mary Keegan (2011) "Presentation of the Body: Living and Dead," *African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan/vol9/iss1/4>

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## March 2011 Newsletter

### Presentation of the Body: Living and Dead

By Mary Keegan Shia\*

#### Abstract

This study concerns the expression of African cultural practices in the population of enslaved persons interred in the African Burial Ground in New York City during the periods of Dutch and British colonial rule. The African Burial Ground was in use from approximately the mid-seventeenth century to the end of the eighteenth century and extended over five to six acres containing between 10,000 and 20,000 graves. A small portion of the burial ground was unearthed in 1991, revealing 418 human remains. I undertake an examination of the grave goods and evidence of the burial positions associated with the individuals recovered from the burial ground during the 1991 excavations, with a specific emphasis on the cosmologies and mortuary practices of the Dutch, British, Akan, Igbo, Yoruba and Fon/Ewe cultures from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. By examining these cultural practices in comparison with the findings in the African Burial Ground in New York City, as evident in Perry et. al. (2006) and Medford (2004), this study explores the extent to which members of the enslaved community undertook expressions of particular African cultural practices. The conclusion of this study supports Herskovits' observations concerning the continuing development of African cultures in America and that enslaved Africans were not stripped of their cultures during the Middle Passage of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. I also contend that new cultural beliefs and practices developed and were expressed at the New York African Burial Ground which included elements of both African and Anglo-European cosmologies and traditions.

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## I. Introduction

“In October of 1991, a press conference was held at a construction site in New York City announcing the discovery of a colonial cemetery to which an historic map referred as the ‘Negro Burial Ground’” (Blakey, 2001: 222). Lost to history due to landfill and development that began in the 1790s, New York City’s African American Burial Ground, dating originally to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, was rediscovered in 1991 as a consequence of the planned construction of a new federal office building at 290 Broadway in lower Manhattan.

In December 1990 the General Services Administration (GSA), an independent agency of the federal government, bought the land at 290 Broadway for \$104 million to construct a new thirty-four story federal office tower and a four story pavilion. The GSA representatives knew from historical maps (LaRoche & Blakey, 1997) that part of the seventeenth and eighteenth century African Burial Ground might potentially lay underneath the site. To comply with the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) of 1966, section 106, federal agencies must carry out ground testing on the construction site before building to determine if possible cultural resources lay under the site. NHPA section 106 states that any project using federal funds, must take into account the effects of their undertaking on any prehistoric or historic district, site, building, structure, or object included in, or eligible for inclusion in, the National Register of Historic Places maintained by the Secretary of the Interior. Historic Conservation and Interpretation, Inc. (HCI), a cultural resource management firm, carried out the preconstruction testing at the 290 Broadway site, and provided the archaeological portion of the environmental impact statement.

Because of land disturbances associated with previous major construction for deep basements, foundations, and utilities at the 290 Broadway site, HCI concluded after their initial tests of the site that human remains from the original African Burial Ground could not have survived in the site. HCI identified one possible exception, in an area corresponding to what in the African Burial Ground was originally called “Republican Alley.” This area had limited ground disturbance related to previous construction projects (National Parks Service Draft Management Recommendations for the African Burial Ground, 2005:13). HCI’s archaeologists began testing at Republican Alley in May 1991, and found at the site sixteen to twenty-eight feet of landfill soil containing human bones; digging further down they found intact human remains. The intact graves were protected by a deep landfill that covered the once deep ravine that was part of the topography of the graveyard in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. HCI’s

archaeologists found hundreds of preserved graves of men, women, and children beneath the Alley (Perry et. al., 2006: 95). GSA and HCI now knew definitively that a portion of the African Burial Ground was buried under the 290 Broadway construction site and that it contained human remains.

### **Public Outcry**

It was during this first phase of construction that the public and, importantly, New York City's African American community, learned through the media of the discovery of the African Burial Ground. The African American community was outraged that they were not informed directly of the finding of the graveyard, a major discovery that brought the history of African Americans in colonial New York City out of hiding and offered them the opportunity to reclaim their history.

As archaeologists removed the remains, they dug up old resentment and suspicion within the city's African American community. The black community also became perturbed at the way the remains were being handled by "outsiders" who had little knowledge of African American history and who were not sensitive to the religious or spiritual nature of the graveyard. The community saw the graveyard as hallowed ground, as well as having scientific and cultural value (Hanson & McGowan, 1998). In 1992, one year after construction began, the African American community as well as the general public realized that the African Burial Ground was a monumental discovery that would offer African Americans the opportunity to reclaim their lost history. The public felt that specific laws protecting the desecration of the graveyard were needed because GSA was continuing with excavation and construction at the 290 Broadway site and was ignoring the African American community's requests to be kept informed. Furthermore, the African American community felt that their demands surrounding the African Burial Ground, which included handling the remains with respect, conducting a comprehensive scientific analysis of the site and reporting back to the community any findings in a timely manner, were not being met (Mack & Blakey, 2004).

### **United States Government**

By December 1991, the public became aware of GSA's concerns about its construction schedule and delays that would cost the agency millions of dollars, because the archaeologists were taking too long – three to five days to excavate each burial. The archaeologists were

making measured drawings and taking photographs of the burials. Such information recorded before the skeleton is removed from the ground is vital for obtaining facts about the individual buried, such as the person's stature, the methods of internment, the position of the buried body, the shape of coffin, or the location of grave goods (Cantwell & diZerega Wall, 2001: 283). GSA explored the possibility of switching to a method of excavation in which technicians use shovels and excavated a grave in one day. Although more expedient, this method destroys a lot of information in the process. The news that GSA was considering changing methods of excavation to speed up the process outraged New York State Senator David Patterson, who, in turn, formed a taskforce of concerned citizens and preservationists to act as a watchdog until the project was completed (Cantwell et. al., 2001).

In October 1992, under mounting public pressure that turned to outrage, Congress found that GSA had failed to live up to its section 106 responsibility. With the help of Illinois Congressman Gus Savage and New York's Mayor David Dinkins, construction of the office tower and further destruction of the African Burial Ground was stopped until a research program sanctioned by the African American community was approved to excavate, catalogue, and study the graveyard (Blakey, 1994). Congress then appointed a taskforce to determine which cultural institution would be best suited to design and develop the African Burial Ground's research program. After a Congressional review of Cobb Laboratory at Howard University, one of the country's most prestigious black research universities, showed that it was the most appropriate place for the research to take place, Howard University was assigned the task of studying and interpreting the findings in the graveyard. Shortly thereafter, President Bush signed a law ordering GSA to abandon construction of the Pavilion, which was going to be built directly over Republican Alley, and approved the appropriation of up to \$3 million for a memorial on the site that had been designated for the Pavilion.

### **Research Team at Howard University**

"The very act of asserting our control of the African Burial Ground signals who we are as a people, now and in the past" (Blakey, 2001: 225). In 1992, Michael Blakey, a Howard University African American physical anthropologist, together with John Milner Associates (JMA) of West Chester, Pennsylvania, the architectural firm that replaced HCI that same year as the site's cultural resource excavator because HCI was having difficulty managing the size of the

project (LaRoche & Blakey, 1997), were asked to put together a team of physical anthropologists, archaeologists, and historians, to begin the process of establishing the full scientific and historical significance of the African Burial Ground site (Blakey, 2004: 22). JMA had gained the experience needed from a recent excavation of the nineteenth-century First African Baptist Church in Philadelphia that brought to light information on the city's early black history (Harrington, 1993). Blakey's team approached the project by articulating the importance of researching the African Burial Ground from an African Diaspora perspective, which, in their view, would illuminate the impact of captivity upon the lives of their ancestors and their living descendants and reconstruct the truth of their origins and identities that had been deliberately distorted in the effort to bolster the identity of Euro-Americans at the expense of African Americans (Blakey, 1997).

By this time, the majority of the 419 remains found at the site had been removed. The team focused their research of the graveyard on four main topics: 1) the cultural background and origins of the buried population; 2) the cultural and biological transformations from African to African American identities; 3) the quality of life brought about by enslavement; and 4) the modes of resistance to enslavement (LaRoche & Blakey, 1997; Mack & Blakey, 2004). In order to address each topic, the team engaged directly with the artifacts found at the site, which included: skeletal remains, clothing, pins, buttons, beads, rings, cuff links, shells, smoking pipes, knives, metal, coins, coffins, and coffin hardware including nails and handles. The team relied upon the methods of the following fields to help them interpret the physical evidence they found: molecular genetics, bone chemistry, skeletal biology, history and archaeology (African and African American), ethnology, conservation, and African art history.

### **Research Report**

After their analysis of the African Burial Ground and its artifacts, Blakey's team published a report on their findings under the auspices of the National Parks Service. The report documents everything found in the graveyard and attempts to reconstruct an historical record of slave life in New York City through the material findings at the African Burial Ground, paying particular attention to the ways in which subjugating African people to enslavement in the northern colony affected them physically and culturally. As it is presented, the report brings the history of slavery in colonial New York out of hiding, and attempts to show a rich and vivid

picture of colonial slave life on the streets of the city. The report's primary focus, to be more exact, is to document and recreate the ways in which New York City's African population lived their daily lives and contributed to the social and economic fabric of the city. For Blakey and the authors of the report, the finding of the African Burial Ground fills in a large gap in the history of the African American community in New York City. Prior to the discovery of the African Burial Ground, there were very few written records or materials documenting the community's existence and participation in colonial New York City. The lack of evidence documenting the existence of the African American community in New York City had marginalized the community's history and its contributions to the City's life and growth and had, once again, minimized the importance of African American work and culture to the social and economic growth of the United States.

The rediscovery of the African Burial Ground, however, finally confirmed for the African American community that its ancestors were central and not peripheral to New York City's history. Thus the primary mission of the writers of the report became to bring to light, and importantly to bring to center stage, the hidden history of their ancestors, so as to highlight the social and cultural importance of the African American community in colonial New York City and, perhaps most significantly, to provide a richer and more rounded picture of colonial American history.

### **Investigation**

Slavery in colonial New York evolved out of two colonial powers – Dutch and English. Africans came from many different regions in West and West Central Africa; they held many different worldviews and spoke many different languages. It was a multicultural city, with many African peoples mixed in with Dutch, British, German, Spanish, Portuguese and Native Americans. Blakey's report documents and partially recreates the hidden history of the African American community in New York City, but it does not account for the transition from African to African American identities or for the development of an autonomous African American culture. This goal has been at the fore-front of African American studies since the Frazier-Herskovits debate, which began in the 1940s and whose primary point of contention was the question of whether or not African culture survived the passage to the New World. The research team concluded that there was a thread of material culture that ran through the graveyard that



showed that some of the people buried in the graveyard remembered their African heritage by honoring their ancestral traditions, but they omit any analysis of the shift of identity from African to African American.

This thesis pushes the issue further by posing the following question: How does the presentation of the body in the New York City African Burial Ground help us to understand the colonial slaves' new world view as they transitioned from African to African-America identities and developed a new African American autonomous culture? My thesis examines the transition from African to African American identities and the growth of an autonomous African American culture, looking not only to documented practices, but also taking a new approach and examining West African spiritual practices, with a focus on those regions in Africa from which the enslaved came, and on their world views or, more precisely, the cosmologies that informed these practices in order to account for these two phenomena. It will also look at the western cosmologies of the English and Dutch cultures that enslaved the Africans, as I believe that these too impacted African American identities.

I hypothesize that, like the Report and Herskovits' book *The Myth of The Negro Past*, the presentation of the body in the African Burial Ground indicates that Africans enslaved during the middle passage to the new world were not stripped of their cultural practices. It will make evident that there was a rupture in the African's cosmology and a shift in their worldview, such that a new cosmology emerged, including both African and European worldviews. This new cosmology was not European and white but one that fulfilled their emotional needs because without this new culture they would not have endured enslavement. It is my belief that the significance of this project will show that some African cultural practices survived the Middle Passage intact, and were important to Africans in their transition from African to African American identities in New York City, and that African Americans incorporated these practices when building a new cosmology as an autonomous African American culture and a syncretism of African and European cosmologies. This new African American cosmology is evident in the burial practices of the seventeenth and eighteenth century New York City African Burial Ground as documented in Blakey's Report.

## **II. Slavery in New York City 1621-1782**

Many scholars have noted that the overarching view of slavery in America is that it was practiced in the south on plantations and never practiced in places as far north as New York City. In fact, slavery was a major part of the fabric of New York and New York City from the early 1600s, and was abolished only slowly, proceeding incrementally from 1777 to 1827 when the state passed its last major piece of antislavery legislation (Berlin & Harris, 2005). What is unique about slavery in New York is that it existed under two colonial powers, the Dutch from 1626-1664, and the British from 1664-1782.

The rediscovery of the African Burial Ground in Lower Manhattan in 1991 brought to light the existence and the extent of African enslavement in colonial New York during Dutch, British and early American rule. Until that moment, the critical role of free and enslaved Africans in the building and shaping of New York City had been hidden. Material evidence resulting from the graveyard discovery, the oldest known cemetery for people of African descent in the nation, offered archaeologists the opportunity to break the silence of those buried there; and use the material findings to bring to light and emphasize the brutality of the institution of slavery. Up until the discovery, “whether educated in New York or elsewhere, the public had been led to believe that the city was built by Europeans, with precious little, if any, mention of Africans” (Blakey, 2001: 223).

### **Life under Dutch Slavery: 1621-1664**

The first non-Native American settler on Manhattan Island, Jan Rodrigues, of African and possibly Afro-European decent, was a free man, navigator, sailor, and trader. Rodrigues arrived on a Dutch vessel in 1613, when his shipmates dumped him on Manhattan Island after a shipboard dispute (Harris, 2003; Hodges, 1999). Rodrigues married into the Rockaway Indian tribe and became fluent in their language. Later, he facilitated trade between Europeans and Native Americans.

During the seventeenth century, the Dutch economy was strong. With that came the desire to expand trade beyond Europe, which led to the discovery of the Hudson Valley and its abundance of furs, a new source of revenue for the Dutch Empire. The reason behind the Dutch settlement of New Netherlands was the fur trade’s great potential (Cantwell et. al., 2001), because Europeans could use fur furs during long cold winters. In 1621, the Dutch government

chartered the Dutch West India Company and awarded it exclusive rights to settle the colony of New Netherland -- this included Manhattan Island and a trading post at Fort Orange, today's Albany, and made for a monopoly on fur trade in the Americas and along the West Coast of Africa. In 1625, the city of New Amsterdam was established and placed in a strategic location at the tip of Manhattan: where the Dutch could protect the Hudson River and its interest in the fur trade (Cantwell et. al., 2001). In 1626, when Peter Minuit arrived to govern the new colony, he purchased the island of Manhattan from the Manhattans for \$24 and named the settlement "New Amsterdam."

Dutch citizens were enjoying a comfortable and prosperous life in Holland at this time and were not interested in leaving home to move, work, and build the colony of New Amsterdam (Harris, 2003). With a shortage of labor to build the colony and develop the fur trade, the Dutch West India Company began importing slaves from West Central Africa in 1626, the same year the Dutch purchased Manhattan Island from the Indians and the second year of the colony. Dutch settlers in New Amsterdam insisted on their right to import slave labor rather than indentured servants from the beginning of their settlement in 1626 for one reason – "economics." Slaves and their descendants were chattel (Thornton, 1998). Through hard and difficult labor, this first group of enslaved Africans put in place the infrastructure that the Dutch West India Company needed for a permanent settlement called "New Netherlands" (Moore, 2005).

The first eleven slaves imported into the Dutch colony arrived in 1626. Many of these slaves spent time in the Atlantic as either free or enslaved men and probably "understood something about the languages, religions, legal codes, and trading protocols of the larger Atlantic world" (Moore, 2005: 35). The names of the eleven men do suggest familiarity with the larger Atlantic world: Paulo Angola, Groot (Big) Manuel, Cleyn (Little) Manues, Manuel de Gerrit de Reus, Simon Congo, Anthony Portugis, Gracia, Peter Santome, Jan Francisco, Cleny Antony, and Jan Fort Orange. A few years later several enslaved black women arrived. "The company, not individuals, owned these slaves, who provided labor for the building and upkeep of the colony's infrastructure" (Harris, 2003: 14). At first, slaves lived in barracks and worked under an overseer.

During Dutch rule, enslaved Africans were put to work building the fort, docks, roads, houses, barns, and water pumps, as well as clearing land and working as farmers. By July 1625, the small number of slaves working for the company had cleared enough land so that a Dutch

West India “Company boat, carrying sheep, hogs, wagons, ploughs and all other implements of husbandry could deposit its cargo on the island of Manhattan” (Moore, 2005: 31). Within a short time, many slaves secured the right to live on their own in return for a set amount of labor and an annual tribute (Berlin, 1998).

By 1628, the Dutch were not only interested in the fur trade but also in the harvesting of the abundant timber in New Netherland, an invaluable resource for shipbuilding that facilitated the Dutch maritime economy, which included their slaves in Africa and the Americas. Slaves built sawmills, harvested wood, worked the mills, and helped in the export of timber.

In 1629, in the attempt to increase European immigration, the West India Company created large incentives to potential colonists, offering to establish for them vast estates or manors in the Hudson Valley. In return for these estates, the new colonists were expected to bring in roughly fifty white settlers, and the Company, as a further incentive, pledged to “use their endeavors to supply the colonists with as many Blacks as they conveniently can” (Moore, 2005: 37). Two years later, there were approximately three hundred white settlers and approximately sixty black slaves living in the lower Hudson Valley, including the borough of Manhattan.

While the number of slaves arriving in the colony in the seventeenth century continued to grow, their legal status remained ambiguous as the Company failed to define chattel bondage and the basis for their captivity. “The seeds of resistance to slavery were sown during these years” (Hansen & McGowan, 1998: 23). In Holland at this time, slavery was not recognized. Black people in New Amsterdam took advantage of this situation and advocated for their freedom. Seizing every opportunity to improve their circumstances, five black Company workers in 1635 petitioned the Company headquarters in The Hague for equal pay to that of white workers, and their request was granted (Berlin, 1998). Despite the physical improvements, the Dutch West India Company kept both its black and white slaves in bondage, and white servants continued to fare better.

By the early 1640s, New Amsterdam had extended from Fort Amsterdam to as far north as today’s “Wall Street.” As the colony grew, conflict followed between Dutch and Native Americans living on the island and resulted in a series of wars with Native Americans. In an effort to defend the settlement, Company officials turned to their black slaves for manpower, arming them with axes and half-pikes and rewarding them with freedom and grants of land for

their military service. These plots of granted land lay north of New Amsterdam in the dangerous frontier, and were designed to create a buffer zone between the colonists and their attackers.

Black freedom came with two conditions: their children, born or unborn, were not free, and each man was obliged to pay the government yearly twenty-two and a half bushels of maize, wheat, peas, or beans and one fat hog (Hodges, 1999). Freedom for these black farmers did not signal an end to slavery, as their labor was continually needed in public works projects. Black people saw Dutch freedom as “half-freedom” and not freedom at all. And, perhaps more importantly, they saw it as benefiting slave owners and not themselves. In 1653, Governor Peter Stuyvesant ordered the Dutch West India Company slaves to build a barrier across Manhattan Island from river to river -- known as the “wall” or “Wall Street”, to provide additional protection to the colony.

Besides military service, religion provided an avenue to freedom and liberty for slaves. The first blacks in the colony sought membership in the Dutch Reform Church, the official church of the colony. The colony wanted all residents to accept Christ and felt obligated to convert slaves. Annually from 1639-1655, between one and three black children were baptized into the church, but by 1655, the church had stopped converting slaves to Christianity, believing that slaves were not interested in the church’s teaching but in emancipation or a possibly lighter workload (Harris, 2003; Thornton, 1998). Slaves’ souls were the responsibility of the family patriarch (slave owner), and with the threat to losing his property through baptism and emancipation, owners resisted their slaves’ participation in any church activities. However, “a cornerstone of the black community was the negro burial ground, established in the late 1630s at the corner of Broadway and Chambers streets . . . providing the black population of the city with a sacred center” (Hodge, 1999: 15), a place away from white hegemony. Slaves’ participation in religious affairs became limited to annual public rituals, in particular the Protestant Dutch observance of Pentecost, also known as Pinkster. “Pinkster was a time of interracial celebration when African and Dutch music and dance intertwined and wine and ale flowed freely” (Hodges, 1999: 25). Slaves were free to gather and enjoy each other’s company only during this time, and on Sundays.

Slaves in the city were living mostly in isolation because of small slave holdings. Taverns provided great gathering places for both free and enslaved blacks, offering them the opportunity to forget for a short time their misery and isolation. In 1641, a black man was killed

in a tavern, eight men were arrested and convicted of the murder but only one was chosen to be hanged. After attempting to hang the accused, the rope broke and he was set free. As Hodge (1999) notes: the choosing of only one of the convicted to be hanged was a sign of the value of slave labor in the colony at the time.

During the period between 1644 and 1664, the population of persons of African descent residing in New Amsterdam more than tripled, growing from 120 to 375. At the end of Dutch rule in 1664, there were approximately 1,500 European settlers in the colony, with African slaves making up twenty-five percent of the colony's population. Approximately 70 percent of blacks possessed the surname "Angola," suggesting ethnic ties generally to the region of West Central Africa. According to Harris (2003), African slaves were the most stable element of New Amsterdam working class labor and population. This may be attributable to a tendency for slavery to be somewhat milder in New Netherlands than in other European American colonies (Blakely, 1993: 24), therefore creating less resistance. Dutch prominence remained in the region for the next century and a half, but what was less visible was the number of free black people, as fewer slaves secured their freedom under British rule.

The Dutch brand of slavery allowed the enslaved to work for themselves when they were not needed by the company. This allowed them to earn money that could later be used to buy land, livestock, and other property, as well as to get married. Land ownership cemented the Black community together in New Amsterdam. By the end of the Dutch period, New Amsterdam's West Central Africans had established a community that served as a foundation for the varied African groups that would follow. With the arrival of British rule in 1664 came strict slave codes governing black emancipation and freedom to move about. Under mounting resistance from increasingly harsh regulations, more slaves stole cash, clothing and food, ran away more frequently and openly defied white authority (Harris, 2003).

### **Life under British Slavery: 1664-1783**

In 1664, the British took possession of New Amsterdam from the Dutch and renamed it New York. Roughly twenty-five percent of the fifteen hundred people living in the colony at this time were of African origin. Slavery was well entrenched in the colony by then. The Articles of Capitulation specified and allowed "British authorities [to] both recognize the legitimacy of Dutch ownership of slaves and, in 1665, affirm slavery's legality" (Lepore, 2005:

60). Now under British control, New York and its ports were seen as ideal for the creation of a profitable slave trade using slaves as a secure labor pool. Chattel slavery was established as the dominant labor force by the British. With the advent of British rule came stricter slave codes, and a diminished opportunity to earn freedom. The British outlawed the enslavement of Native Americans and restricted white servitude, leading to an increased reliance on African labor. Free blacks maintained their status long after the end of Dutch rule, yet few additional blacks gained freedom under British rule. Within forty years of British occupation, all privileges and opportunities afforded people of color in New York had diminished (Wilson, 1994).

Slaves arrived in New York in small groups, with between twenty and twenty-five percent remaining in the city. By 1750, over ten thousand enslaved persons lived within fifty miles of Manhattan Island (Hodges et. al., 1994). As the enslaved population grew so too did the rules governing their legal and social status.

Most if not all of the West and Central Africans who arrived in New York during the slave trade had witnessed and endured extraordinary suffering. During the Middle Passage, the enslaved formed bonds with fellow captives that led to revolts on many ships whilst creating new political alliances and social ties. These ties proved invaluable to their resistance to enslavement once they reached the New World. In the New World they faced catastrophic mortality, isolation, and separation from family and community; under such horrid conditions, they forged new bonds that drew on cultural and linguistic similarities (Lepore, 2005). Those arriving in New York were fortunate in that approximately a quarter of the ship's occupants remained in New York, allowing the enslaved to continue the shared experience of the Middle Passage and the bonds formed during the long voyage from Africa.

### **Landscape of Resistance**

The landscape in the colony of New York was one of human misery, resistance, surveillance, and domination, crippled by fear of slave revolts, where a master's control over his enslaved laborer was in most instances hazardous with possible outcomes of violent resistance and death for the master and his family. Overt resistance to enslavement incurred severe punishment. All slaves over the age of fourteen had a curfew. Moving about without permission "New York made a misdemeanor, punishable by flogging . . . to ensure enforcement, every town was required to have a 'Negro whipper' to punish offenders" (McManus, 2001: 73). Legally

slaves were chattel of their master; they were dangerous property, and the law held the slave master responsible for the conduct of his property.

Slave family life in New York was defined by the low population density, unbalanced sex ratio, small slave holdings, and life in the master house, where slaves slept in the kitchen, attic, cellar, or an outbuilding. Urban slaves had little privacy and weak family ties, in comparison to laborers on plantations, because of their close proximity to their master. The average New York slave master owned one or two slaves. Because of the small slaveholdings, most bondsmen had to go outside the premises of their master to create friendships and family attachments (McManus, 1973: 87). Because family members were generally owned by separate owners and spread out over the landscape, family life was an ever-changing network of long distance relationships. The weakness of the family often encouraged shorter-term relationships rather than permanent bonds (McManus, 1973). However, many slave families maintained and preserved familial ties over many years. Additionally, slaves living in households of one or two slaves in New York were denied the shared black culture, social life, and religion enjoyed in populous slave quarters on plantations.

Moreover, the fear of family separation was a traumatic never-ending thought pressing on the minds of adult slaves. Married slaves were sometimes sold to separate owners, thereby separating husband, wife, and children. Many were denied the opportunity to visit each other and their children. Some slaves -- mostly men -- disobeyed and were severely beaten when caught. Frequently mothers and children lived together, but often women were sold if they were unable to control their reproduction, a burden for an owner who saw sterility as an asset. Families were under constant threat of being separated, a tactic slave owners used as a form of punishment. Venture Smith, for example, "was sold away from his wife and child as punishment for running away" (Hodges, 1999: 76). Medford's view (2004) is that through all the hardship, enslaved people maintained their own values and fashioned a worldview independent of their owners, and it was the constant infusion of people from Africa that kept these cultural traditions alive.

Under British rule, when slaves became old and less productive or their master did not need their labor, slaves were hired out to help relieve the owner of the cost of caring for them. In 1711, the municipal government in New York established the "Meal Market" at the Mansion House for the sale or rental of slave labor. Here locals and farmers from the hinterland and artisans trafficked in the rental of slaves. Before 1711, newly arrived slaves were generally sold



at the city's wharves. Some masters imported slaves for the purpose of speculating in the hiring market. Men occasionally left slaves as legacies to be hired out to provide revenue for their widows and children. States executors and widows also hired out slaves to receive the income from their wages. According to Hodge (1999), the Meal Market was also advantageous for many slaves as they negotiated with their masters for wages, leading to the purchase of their freedom or, money for personal use.

The image of blacks as passive, child-like, submissive, easily intimidated, and savage people incapable of plotting revenge has not been borne out by history. The chronicles are replete with instances wherein blacks were assertive, freethinking, determined people, fighting back and resisting from the moment of capture, through the Middle Passage, and later while enslaved in the colony. Court records and correspondences between slave owner and agents reveal that daily resistance to enslavement and dehumanizing conditions was constant on the streets of colonial New York. Hodge (1999) notes that religion, slave culture, and resistance were at the heart of the African's experience in the colony. In Massachusetts, slaves petitioned the courts for liberty, pointing out their unfortunate condition: "We have no Property! We have no Wives! No children! We have no city! We have no Country" but "in common with all other men we have a natural right to our freedom" (Berlin, 1998: 193). Equating themselves with their British white masters was a major threat to the stability of the colony, which was driven by an economy reliant upon slave labor, obedience, and social stratification.

Many colonists were ambivalent about the colonies' reliance on slave labor, while recognizing that it was the most economical option available. Enslaved Africans and their labor as coopers, tailors, bakers, tanners, goldsmiths, naval carpenters, candle-makers, weavers, bolsters, sail-makers, millers, masons, domestics, dockworkers, porters, teamsters, and craftsmen were a major force in the building of New York City and the colony. Many bondsmen had skills comparable to whites, the only difference being that they received no compensation for their labor. Slaves were treated as a commodity and only seen as individuals and human when advertised and read about in runaway slave advertisements and in punishments inflicted for committing severe crimes such as setting fires or murdering white slave masters and their families. Englishmen tended to associate blackness with savagery, heathenism, and, in general nonconforming to the British standard of "civilized."

Day and night, slaves had a secret life that gave them some control over their own destiny. Male slaves walked about the city landscape conducting errands and picking up and spreading bits of news as they went. Female slaves were more confined to the house as domestics and, therefore, to a life of solitude. They found little opportunity to escape into the streets to connect with friends and socialize. Some men traveled over great distances on errands for their masters. Each slave was bringing the news from those whom he had met along his journey, creating a major web of information. Talking may well have been a survival mechanism used to cover hurt and despair while maintaining a sense of power and control. Africans had strong convictions about their situation being inhumane and not conducive to human nature. Hodge and Brown note that New York City was the center of slave culture in the region. It was here in the markets, public squares, taverns, at the homes of free blacks, and on the wharves, that blacks congregated on weekends and holidays to plot insurrections, or, more routinely, their own escape. These gatherings also provided opportunities for the continuing development of African traditions (1999: xxi).

Whites feared that slaves would revolt because they believed they had little to lose and would be better dead than to live the way they were. Masters and their families were in constant fear of being murdered in their sleep. In response to this fear, whites became more violent towards blacks. Up until the early eighteenth century, blacks were free on Sundays to pursue their own desires in promoting their heritage in particular African cultures and traditions, dancing, drinking, singing and playing musical instruments with their friends (Medford, 2004; Wilson, 1994). In response to white fears of revolts, laws were passed restricting blacks from buying liquor in taverns, assembling on Sundays, and holding funerals after sun-down. They allowed no more than twelve mourners in attendance at a funeral, prohibited the use or possession of weapons, and prosecuted the purchase of stolen goods. The institution of such laws is indicative of consistent acts of black resistance to a life in bondage. In an unending river of courageous opposition, blacks fought back with revolts and individual acts of defiance (Hodges et. al., 1994).

Slaves wanted and demanded freedom and the opportunity to bond with their own people and to practice African cultures, and could not be corralled by their masters into forced servitude. Knowing that “freedom had to be earned by years of labor, [and] for enslaved people that could mean a lifetime of toil . . . [and because] terms, treatment, and emancipation were all

contentious terrains” (Hodge, 1999: 3), they often refused to wait. Also, whites did not want to live amongst free blacks; they were enjoying the benefits of their labor and did not have to compete with them for resources. According to Goodfriend (1992), whites’ aversion to the acculturation of blacks into mainstream society and the resistance of blacks to compromise their fundamental values kept the city segregated. The exclusion of Africans from the mainstream in the eighteenth century resulted in the creation of a parallel society in which people of African heritage established and operated their own businesses, churches, schools, associations and organizations.

### **1712 Revolt and 1741 Plot**

On April 6, 1712, a group of Akan-speaking, fearless “Coromantees” “whose involvement guaranteed that the outcome would be deadly” (McManus, 1973: 127) formed a plot to destroy New York City and set fire to a house on Madison Avenue. Nine whites were killed and six wounded. Seventy blacks, free and enslaved, were arrested, twenty-three were convicted, of whom twenty were hanged and three were burned at the stake. African ethnicities and cosmologies were of great importance in the rebellion. The conspirators “used magic to protect themselves . . . tying themselves to secrecy sucking the blood of each other’s hands” (Hodges, 1999: 65). Shortly thereafter the provincial assembly passed “An Act of preventing Suppressing and punishing the Conspiracy and Insurrection of Negroes and other Slaves. . . [Allowing] slave owners to punish their slaves for their Crimes” (Lepore, 2005: 58), and mandating death for any slave found guilty of murder, rape, arson or assault.

In 1741, a second attempt at revolt sent terror waves across the city of New York. In March, Fort George burned to the ground and was followed by several days of fires in the city paralyzing its white citizens and reminding them of the 1712 Revolt. As Lepore (2005) notes, the reaction of New York colonialists was to blame blacks, claiming that it was their attempt to burn the city, murder its inhabitants, and free themselves from slavery. Thirteen blacks were burned at the stake, while seventeen more were hanged, and seventy were sold to slaveholders in the Caribbean. Four whites, believed to be the ringleaders, were hanged. “Before the trial ended, critics accused New Yorkers of imagining a plot that never existed” (Lepore, 2005: 85). After this uprising “slaves were broken on the wheel, burnt alive or gibbeted” (Hodge et. al., 1994: xx; McManus, 1973). This plot did not stop the flow of black slaves into New York. In

the next decade the number of enslaved laborers in New York doubled. Following each of these revolts, a series of laws were enacted in New York, further limiting the freedom of slaves as a way to prevent the possibility of collaboratively plotting resistance. A major change that resulted from this insurrection was the decision by the British to no longer import slaves from the Caribbean but to bring them directly from Africa, anticipating that slaves from Africa would be more obedient and unable to communicate with blacks in New York (Lepore, 2005a; McManus, 1973). The institution of slavery with all its exploitations, degradations, oppressions, brutality, and inhumanity, was unable to create a population willing to be enslaved without resistance and rebellion (Hodges, 1994; Berlin, 1998; Berlin et. al., 2005; Harris, 2003; Scott, 1990; Johnson, 1999). Many historians believe that it was the harsh conditions of British slavery that resulted in the violent conspiracies of 1712 and 1741 and the perpetual terrorization of the white population.

### **American Revolution**

Two thousand dollars reward. Ran away . . . a Negro man named Joe, about 30 years of age . . . back is much scarified and in lumps by whipping. Also a handsome Negro wench, 28 years of age . . . went off with one Slight, a soldier belonging to the 2nd Pennsylvania Regiment and they stole and took . . . two horses (Hodges, 1994: 240).

Slaves were on neither side of the American Revolutionary War. They were loyal to neither the British nor to the Americans; they were on the side that promised them emancipation. Blacks initially were not recruited to fight in the Revolutionary War because recruiting them would deprive a master of his chattel. Also, there was fear of putting guns in the hands of slaves.

The American Revolution needed soldiers on both sides to fight the war. This provided an opportunity for blacks to gain their freedom. Lord Dunmore, the governor of Virginia in 1775, proclaimed that “I do hereby . . . declare all indented [sic] servants, Negroes, or others, free, that are able and willing to bear arms, they joining His Majesty’s Troops as soon” as possible (Quarles, 1961: 19). Slaves flocked to join the army. In New York that meant that when sent on errands blacks could easily escape by taking a short walk to freedom. The Treaty of Paris (signed by U.S. and British Representatives on September 3, 1783, ending the War of the American Revolution) guaranteed that American slaveholders could reclaim their slave holdings at the end of the war. This possibility caused anguish for the bondsmen, “the dreadful rumor filled us all with inexpressible anguish and horror. . . . For some days we lost our appetite

for food and sleep from our eyes” (Berlin, 2005: 15). Runaway slave advertisements show that the number of slaves running away was at its highest during the war, and the majority of runaways were between 15 and 25 years of age. Freedom in exchange for joining the army was never a guarantee, just a ploy.

### **Flight**

Hodges (1999) claims that slaves were ambivalent and unclear as to their legal status in the New World. In Africa, slaves held different statuses and their position was equal to that of a domestic servant, whereas in New York they found that their status was lower than the status of white indentured servants, who gained their freedom after seven years of servitude, something black slaves regarded as a slim possibility for themselves. Based on African social and economic norms, they also saw their status as revenue producing agents of their masters. It was some of these culturally specific understandings of slavery on the part of the Africans that brought them into conflict with the new master because terms, treatments, and emancipation were not defined and confirmed.

Africans came from societies in which slavery was a fluid institution. In African legal systems, enslaved people were revenue-producing property. Africans accepted that their labor might be captured in a war or could be used as demonstrations of loyalty to a ruler. At the same time, slaves in Africa could hold a variety of statuses. In Angola, in particular, slaves were torn from their own kin groups who lacked land and made dependents of landowners and corporate authorities (Hodges, 1999: 3).

Black resistance to bondage undermined economic efficiency and created mistrust between slave and owner. The enslaved codes of the colony of New York forbid slaves from disobeying their master or running away. For the enslaved, this was not a deterrent; they were constantly looking for opportunities to escape to freedom. Hodge’s (1994) compilation of 662 advertisements culled from the newspapers of colonial and revolutionary New York and New Jersey between 1716 and 1783 are evidence to this. Harsh laws provided little chance for emancipation, so abdication offered some chance of freedom that was worth the risk of being captured and punished.

No man who has ever been placed in such a situation can comprehend the thousand obstacles thrown in the way of the flying slave. Every white man’s hand is raised against him -- the

patrollers are watching for him -- the hounds are ready to follow on his track (Eakin, 2007: 240).

The fear and terror of being captured and returned to bondage and the brutal punishment to follow was seldom a deterrent to resistance and running away.

The runaway advertisements provide a vast amount of insight into slave resistance and abuse. Masters wrote the advertisements, and in describing their slaves they included scars and disabilities, stoops, lost teeth, and arthritis. One had no toes on either foot, another had a wooden leg; others were left-handed, branded, or wearing irons. “Ralph, who fled from a sloop in New York harbor, had many dents in the top of his head” (Hodges, 1996: xxxi). The description of the slaves’ clothing indicated that the materials used were rough fabrics, coarse and long wearing. Some of their personalities were described as cunning, artful, handy, active, and violent when drunk. James Hutchings describes his runaway slave as a rascal who is an “artful, cunning, plausible villain, and will make use of every specious and fair tale to induce belief of his being a free man; he is a rather thin visage, and perhaps one of the blackest Negroes in the world” (Hodge, 1994: 222). To be successful, runaways were equipped to change their appearance by changing their clothes; they also changed their names. These were simple and effective changes that helped those who made it to freedom. Faking a New York accent and pretending to be free worked for some slaves but was not an option for many, since most were born in Africa or outside of the region. Many of the notices listed the slaves’ trades and talents. Because “in Africa, professional musicians toured up and down the west coast, taking inspiration from polycultural sources” (Hodge, 1994: xxii) it is unsurprising to note that in the slave notices in New York between 1716 and 1783, forty-two percent of those with skills, listed the skill as “musicians” (Hodges, 1994).

Runaway slaves presented themselves to the free world as free men. They changed their name and their clothes, never dared to mention their master’s name and the place they came from, acted as though they were free, and dressed in fancy clothes, not the kind of clothes slaves wore. Some had forged free papers, or free passes, claiming that they were on an errand for their employer. Names were of most concern for the owners who knew that their slaves probably would change their name more than once. Owners often included information on the slave’s former owners, thus providing a clue about the slave’s motivation to run away – possibly back to family members.

“Every successful escape set off tremors that undermined discipline and encouraged others to defect” (McManus, 2001: 20). The runaway notices instilled the belief among the white population that slaves can be cunning, artful, keen, shrewd, intelligent, and defiant. To aid in their recapture readers were asked to pay special attention to all the details of the slave’s personal appearance including disabilities, complexion, height, and weight. “Blacks who made the break for freedom tended to be young and aggressive, predominately male; and mostly under the age of forty” (McManus, 2001: 111). Women ran in far fewer numbers than men. The notices reveal desperate human situations, like that of Caesar, a slave living in New Jersey who ran away from his master twice in one year despite having a pair of pothooks around his neck with a chain attached that went to his feet (Hodges, 1994). Passes were the best means to freedom, and a sizable number of slaves in New York could read and write, so if they could forge their own note they could likely deceive potential captors and future employers. “One slave faked his own death . . . [and another] left his clothes by the shore of the Hackensack River . . . to deceive his master and prevent a search” (Hodge, 1994: xxvii). Deception was not an uncommon practice, and the slave masters were aware of this.

The runaway notices attest to the prevalence of the practice of running away. They reveal the master’s desperate attempt to get his slave back as well as the many languages and ethnic groups within the African population living in New York at the time. The notices also provided a window into the slave’s personality when they describe his or her dress, religious beliefs, vocal intonations, and physical disabilities, if he or she had any. Because slaves had no public voice, running away gave them a voice in the newspapers (Hodges, 1994). The best chance at success came by going to sea and working on a ship, running to Indian territories, or the Revolutionary War, a time when slave flight peaked.

“A negro lad named MATTIS . . . about 22 years of age but appears rather younger, his master is persuaded he did not mean to stay away, but has been seduced and is still secreted by someone” (Hodges, 1994: 254). Mattis’ resisted enslavement and escaped to freedom; however, his master was surprised to find his bondsman gone, never considering Mattis’ revulsion to slavery. To remain a fugitive for an extended period of time required both luck and ingenuity. Runaway notices were only posted after a physical search had proven futile; by then the bondsman had traveled long distances. The owner of a runaway probably gave as honest and precise a description of his slave as possible, on the faith that the more forthright the description,

the greater the possibility of recovering his property. “For this reason, advertisements . . . when collected, analyzed and synthesized, afford an otherwise unobtainable picture of the slave personality” (Greene, 1998: 123), not to mention an invaluable look into how whites perceived their chattel, as in the case of Mattis.

Slaves “begged and lied and hid and ran away and killed themselves and conspired and revolted” (Johnson, 2004: 6). Running away gave power to the slave and hurt his owner economically, as flight was an effective means of destroying the masters’ property because the slaves were worth less financially once recaptured based on the high likelihood they would run away again. “Fugitives also sabotaged property by destroying and stealing animals, equipment and crops. Above all, flight was the most effective individual means of struggle against slavery” (Hodges, 1994: xiv). Slaves usually ran away when the weather was good and wild fruits and nuts were available, and the chance of success was greatest. This was also a time when they were most needed for farming.

### **Resistance in Death**

The African Burial Ground in Manhattan was another place where Africans took control and resisted enslavement. Here they buried their dead with care and respect according to a variety of African customs. Records from archaeological excavation at the Burial Ground, including the New York African Burial Ground Archaeology Final Report prepared by Perry et. al. (2006) demonstrate that Africans in New York followed West and West Central African burial customs when interring the deceased with buttons, beads, shells, smoking pipes, pendants, cufflinks, rings and other items of importance, as these objects were cultural message carriers and byproducts of the lifeways of those deceased. Taking these items out of circulation and placing them in the coffin can be considered a form of resistance and control, as can their insistence on honoring their traditional customs.

### **III. History of the African Burial Ground and African American Religious Practices in Colonial New York**

New York’s African Burial Ground came into existence in the seventeenth century as a direct result of the cultural practices and beliefs of Trinity Church, supported by the British colonizers who ruled at that time. These European-based beliefs and practices characterized



Africans and their cultures as backward, hedonist, uncivilized, and highly inferior to European culture; therefore, it was believed they must be physically separated from white Europeans. Until late in the sixteen hundreds, there was no special or separate burial ground for people of African descent; they were buried along with all the other people in the colony on land belonging to the West India Company, or in the common burial ground at Bowling Green, the city's first public cemetery. Originally, the burial ground was known as the Negro Burial Ground; not until 1993 did it become known as the African Burial Ground. Archaeologists and historians claim that the burial ground may have contained the remains of between ten and twenty thousand graves. It is the oldest and largest African descendant cemetery excavated in North America to date.

Unfortunately, there are no records informing us of the mortuary practices of the people buried in the graveyard, but based on what has been uncovered in the excavation, as well as what we can know indirectly from scholarly writings on regional African burial practices, it is evident that a variety of African traditions and customs were of great importance.

### **Segregation within the Landscape**

In 1697, Trinity Church ruled that no Negro, free or enslaved, or people of African descent, be allowed buried in its graveyard. The ban stipulated that no Negroes be buried within the bounds & Limits of the church yard of Trinity Church, that is to say, in the rear of the present burying place & that no person or Negro whatsoever, do presume . . . to break up the ground for the burying of his Negro, as they will answer it at their peril (Stokes, 1697: 403).

Shut out of churchyards and all burial grounds within the city limit, blacks had no choice but to develop a burial ground to inter their dead. This special separation highlights the severity of the relationship between slave owners and their chattel laborers. Despite also valuing burial rituals, white Christians denied African humanity and refused to taint their cemeteries with African dead. Members of a number of African cultures saw burying their dead as their natural rite of passage, and for the living as an important farewell to those they cherished and most likely, if they had a choice, they did not want their loved ones buried in a graveyard with those that held them in bondage.

The land available to blacks to establish a graveyard was just north of the city wall and the palisades, southwest of the spring-fed Little Collect and Collect Pond. “It was a tapestry of marshes, ponds, streams, meadows, and hills . . . The ponds and streams teemed with shellfish, eel, shad, and possibly salmon” (Hansen et. al., 1998: 15). Yet, it was a deserted land, with no value or interest to whites, situated near plots of land owned by a few free blacks. Despite being the fruit of an act of exclusion on the part of whites, the Burial Ground was, in many ways, an ideal site for the black community. The Burial Ground not only provided privacy, but its location near water was in keeping with a common association between cemeteries and bodies of water within a number of African cultures. It is possible that Africans welcomed a separate burial ground in a remote area to mourn, “for surely they reflected not only upon their individual plights but also upon the circumstances visited upon them collectively” (Gomez, 1998: 277).

The remoteness of the graveyard allowed ethnically diverse Africans a final resting place away from the glaring suspicions of colonial masters and afforded their survivors within the community the opportunity to share and explore customs, culled from the similarities of their diverse African traditions, as well as adapted from common practices of white Christians and even Native Americans. This freedom of cultural expression, impossible within view of the white population, was invaluable, as it allowed African slaves to create a new worldview and adapt to life in the colony. Singleton and Bograd note that “one of the consequences of slavery was the creation of a distinct black culture by Africans in the Americas . . . [where] certain beliefs, customs, practices, and behavioral patterns were unique to enslaved communities” (1995: 8). Black culture was created from African, Native American and Europeans cultures, and without this new culture slaves would not have survived (Singleton & Bograd, 1995). For Africans as for all humans, rituals handed down from generation to generation create and maintain important cultural and community bonds. The inability to import material culture from their homelands, together with prohibitions on many African cultural practices, created great obstacles to continuing traditional burial practices in particular, and indigenous African religions in general. Yet African Americans retained and continued to develop certain African traditions, and some of these can be seen in the New York City African Burial Ground. Burrell insists “that slave deaths helped to unite the slave community with symbols, communal rituals, and a perceived connection to Africa” (1997: 3). The burial ground was actively used by enslaved and freed Africans and people of African descent from the late 1600s until its closing by the city

municipality in 1796. The burial ground served as an important focus for the African American community. As Hansen et. al. suggest, it was a place meant for outcasts, but to the Africans and African Americans it was a sacred place. They cared little of what white people thought; “their strength and power would come from how they viewed themselves” (1998: 38).

Around 1643, due to constant conflicts with Native Americans as the colony grew, Dutch settlers deserted their farms north of the fort, creating a desolate no man’s land. This deserted land left New Amsterdam open to attack. Under the pretence of good will, the Dutch decided to protect themselves by granting Africans “half-freedoms” and small parcels of farmland outside the city walls in return for their military service, essentially creating a buffer zone between themselves and Native Americans. Since the African Burial Ground is located in this area, Africans may have begun burying their dead there soon thereafter, although there is no conclusive documentary evidence of this. It is possible that the African community used this opportunity to strengthen their sense of place, to carve out an existence for themselves that minimized the demeaning status slavery thrust upon them. David Valentine, a nineteenth century New York City clerk described the colonial attitude and setting thus:

Beyond the Commons lay what in the earliest settlement of the town had been appropriated as the *burial place for the Negroes, slaves and free*. It was a desolate, unappropriated spot, descending with a gentle declivity towards a ravine which let to the Kalkhook pond. The negroes in this city were, both in the Dutch and English colonial times, a proscribed and detested race, having nothing in common with the whites. Many of them were native Africans, imported hither in slave ships, and retaining their native superstitions and burial customs, among which was that of burying by night, with various mummeries and outcries . . . So little seems to have been thought of the race that not even a dedication of their burial-place was made by church authorities, or any other who might reasonably be supposed to have an interest in such a matter. The lands were unappropriated, and thought within convenient distance from the city, the locality was unattractive and desolate, so that by permission the slave population were allowed to inter their dead there (1865: 567).

In 1673, this plot of land that was to become a site of great significance to the slave community was granted to Cornelius Van Borsum for his wife Sara Roelof Van Borsum, a Dutch woman, to compensate her for her service as a translator between the Dutch West India Company and Esopus Indians (Berlin et. al. 2005; Cantwell & diZerega Wall, 2001). The land

appears to have been then gifted by Sara Roelof Kierstede Van Borsum to the African American community; however, the African community never held title to the land. According to Cantwell et. al. (2001), after Sara's death in 1693, her eight children inherited the land jointly. Shortly thereafter, a dispute began between her heirs and city officials, when the city claimed that it was public land and therefore belonged to the city.

During Dutch rule, the land was used to graze cattle, and later, during British rule, it served as a site for executions and public events, as well as a dumping ground for a tannery and a pottery works. Originally the land was remote and had no commercial value, but as the city was spreading north at the end of the eighteenth century, the land increased significantly in value. A century after her death, Sara's family settled their disagreement, and in 1795 the African Burial Ground land was subdivided into housing lots. Prior to the land subdivision it was leveled, filling in its deep ravines, marshes, ponds, streams, hills, and meadows. The ravines were filled with up to thirty feet of soil, preserving the graves that were in these deep abysses; the site was then built over by Dutch-Americans, who dug cisterns and privies through the graves (Blakey, 1998).

### **Slave Funeral Practices in Colonial New York**

Most of the people buried in the graveyard during British rule were born in Africa. Death came at a young age for Africans in the colony. "Their towering mortality rate -- well above that of white New Yorkers -- bespoke the realities of slavery in eighteenth-century New York" (Berlin et. al., 2005: 11). Slaves worked from sun up to sun down performing under duress -- hard physical labor, with scarcely sufficient food, clothing, and rest to sustain them to work again the next day to generate revenue for the master. Females, and in particular young females, were highly desired to work in the city as domestics. Their mortality was high, with many dying in their early thirties from either childbirth or disease. Having children reduced their value and perturbed their masters. "Some [women] were simply driven mad . . . Infant mortality was high, and infanticide not uncommon, although it is unclear who was committing infanticide -- mothers or masters" (Berlin et. al., 2005: 64).

After death, the responsibility probably fell on African women to wash and prepare the dead for burial as was the custom in many colonial communities at the time; however, in Islamic traditions, men washed and covered men, and women washed and covered women. Gomez

(1998) notes that the Muslim influence in Africa transcended across all cultures; thus, in the New World, Muslim slaves were present in the many African ethnic slave groups, which allowed them to continue to practice their religion openly and with ease.

Unlike in the runaway slave advertisements where the slave was defined as the absconded property of his owner, in death the body took back its humanity, its culture, and its custom. Stripped of all worldly possessions, including the long-wearing coarse-fabric clothing provided by the slave master, the enslaved African regained humanity. The dead were then washed and dressed in something nicer (probably stolen from the master's closet) and wrapped in a long winding sheet or shroud, fastened with a straight pin placed at the head. According to Medford (2004), accounts in many West and Central African cultures in the 1700s refer to the practice of wrapping the body in a clean white sheet. The body was, in most instances, placed in a coffin that was usually supplied by the slave's owner, as "the deaths of persons legally defined as property placed the responsibility for 'disposal' of the remains on the owners" (Medford, 2004: 174). The coffins were of the simplest and roughest construction. If the slave owner refused or there was no owner to supply the coffin, the deceased's family and friends collected funds to buy a coffin (Howson et. al., 2006). In 1730, David Humphreys reported for the missionary wing of the Church of England that New York Africans:

were buried by those of their own country or Complexion in the common field, without any Christian office; perhaps some ridiculous Heathen rites were performed at the grave by some of their own people . . . they had no souls and perished as the Beast (1768: 7).

In the American colony, according to Puckett (1968), the belief was prevalent that blacks were merely beasts, thus the justification for enslavement and the attendant attitude that slaves deserved nothing more than that fitting of an animal in both life and death.

Coffin use was widespread. Evidence from the New York African Burial Ground Archaeological Final Report in 2006 reveals that that, when possible, traditional practices were followed in laying deceased kin and loved ones to rest. The burials are remarkably uniform: ninety-eight percent are buried in coffins, wrapped in a shroud fastened with a straight pin, laid in the supine position in the coffin and buried facing east, so that on "Judgment Day," a Christian belief, when they rose from the dead they were facing "Jerusalem and Africa" (Hansen et. al., 1998: 36). Most were buried in individual coffins, and many coffins contained beads, shells,

coins, and pipes. The continuation of African customs can be observed in the presence of beads, which are an important African spiritual symbol associated with life and death ceremonies, as well as shells, which are an important metaphor for water and the sea:

The shells stand for the sea. The sea brought us, the sea shall take us back. So the shells upon our graves stand for water, the means of glory and the land of demise (Thompson, 1983: 135).

Excavated human remains in the African Burial Ground excavation were numbered as a means of identity. Burial #340 was a fifty-two year old woman with a string of 112 glass beads and cowrie shells around her hips, and a bracelet of beads around her wrist. She had hourglass-shaped filed incisors. The beads had likely adorned her in life, and now both the beads and her filed teeth remained to define her culturally. In her coffin was also found a smoking pipe that had never been used. Medford (2004) suggests that the pipe may have been made for her coffin. In Africa, a Fon burial custom is to place a pipe and tobacco in the grave at the time of burial (Porringer, 1961: 109). Burial #101 was a male, buried in a simple coffin with a heart shaped designed made from brass tacks on the lid. “A black man in British military uniform dating back to the American Revolution [was] buried in the manner accorded a soldier. Yet his body, when found, was facing east, a burial custom of many African decent” (Hansen et. al., 1998: 12). The existence of African cultural practices in the African Burial Ground can no longer be denied.

In the African Burial Ground several coffins were found empty. Perry et al. suggest two possibilities, either: “the deceased were removed from their coffin after internment, or empty coffins were interred intentionally . . . alluding to . . . deception and stealth . . . a sham burial, to mark a death that did not occur” (2006: 178). Empty coffins are also attributed to the regular practice of medical students at New York hospitals stealing fresh corpses from the African Burial Ground for use in their studies. A few years after the American Revolution, “grave-robbing medical students seeking ‘material’ on which to practice their skills desecrated the site” (Medford, 2004: 7). However, the discovery of empty coffins speaks more to resistance than to grave-robbars. It informs us of the ingenious way that enslaved Africans with the means to secure a coffin presented themselves as deceased, ensuring their escape; if the master believed that the slave was dead, he would not go on a search. What the excavated graves reveal to us is that slaves maintained a significant degree of control of their body in life and in death, and that they continually sought new ways to resist enslavement. Moreover, they were able to hold on to

African cultural traditions while incorporating some European traditions into their lives (Harris, 2003), thus contributing to the development of a distinct African American culture. The African Burial Ground not only served as an important focus for the African American community, but also served as a mode of resistance.

### **White Fear of Slave Funerals Leading to Revolts**

The most frightening threat to whites was the possibility of slave revolts. Whites saw slave funerals as cover-ups -- nothing more than a gathering opportunity for slaves to plot revolt. Slaves gathered at the end of the day once their work was done to escort the body to the graveyard and bury their dead (Harris, 2003). Whites generally did not participate in slave funerals other than to provide for the coffin. Only during funerals were Africans permitted outside after sunset and allowed to gather in unsupervised groups larger than three persons. By the 1720s, whites began reporting hearing mummeries, cries, and drumming coming from the graveyard late into the night, and feared that gatherings at funerals were being used as a cover-up for mischief and the hatching of conspiracies for insurrections. Furthermore, “slave sent to New York were often known as ‘refuse’ slaves, a term denoting troublesome slaves prone to flight and rebellion” (Hodges et. al., 1994: xvii). James C Scott (1990) argues that oppressed groups challenge the dominant order by constructing and utilizing what he terms a ‘hidden transcript,’ a mask worn by the oppressed who were frustrated and angry at not being able to publicly strike back. Using a hidden transcript, the slaves’ desires can be substantially satisfied as the oppressor can rarely fully monitor such covert undertakings.

In 1722, the Common Council of New York City ruled that funerals had to occur before sunset, forbidding slaves from burying their dead at night and limiting the number of mourners who could attend a funeral to twelve, plus pallbearers and gravediggers (Harris, 2003: 41). The law not only forbade the use of pawl-bearers at the funerals of enslaved people, but also forbid the use of “pawls” themselves (the cloth used to cover a casket during the funeral and procession to the grave site), because they suspected that the cloth might be used to hide objects employed for insurrectionary purposes. Thus, slaves’ conformity to European customs largely marks their attempt to retain the privilege of burying their dead at all. To give the departed a proper burial bears enormous significance within African traditions, where life and death in many religions was seen as cyclical, and the dead ever present in the lives of the living. Genovese notes that:

In one way or another . . . whites missed the point. The significance of proper funerals for slaves lay, not in the peripheral if real danger of conspiracy, but in the extent to which they allow the participants to feel themselves a human community unto themselves. To that extent the slaves decisively negated the mythical foundation of the slaveholders' world (1976: 195).

### **17th and 18th Century Religious Practices in Africa and Colonial New York**

Religious practices vary throughout the regions of West and Central Africa, so people who became commodities in the slave trade would have followed varying faiths. Many Africans had been exposed to Portuguese religious practices in Africa, and as a consequence, had embraced Catholicism in the New World. Genovese explains that in the New World, "Afro-American religion arose from a conjecture of many streams -- African, European, Classic Judeo-Christian faith both black and white" (1774: 209).

Among the Central Africans transported to New Amsterdam and ultimately interred in the burial ground were those who retained their own indigenous rituals . . . . When they arrived in New Amsterdam, these Central Africans -- be they practicing Catholics of sorts or traditional African worshipers -- encountered a religious faith, if not foreign, then certainly somewhat different from that to which they had been exposed (Medford, 2004: 44-45).

Europeans used slaves' religious beliefs and their access to Christianity to develop negative racial stereotypes and justify the enslavement of Africans. Initially, Europeans justified slavery as a means to bring heathens to Christianity, and once Africans accepted Christianity there was no supposed need for slaves. Yet the Europeans needed slave labor as an economic means to higher profits. Ultimately, the demand for slave labor trumped religious beliefs (Harris, 2003).

The Dutch Reformed Church felt obliged to convert slaves, and slaves converted, married, and baptized their children in the Dutch Reformed Church between 1639 and 1655 in the hopes of gaining their freedom. Initially the Church supported and welcomed the Africans, but was careful not to equate conversion with freedom. However, by 1655 the church stopped converting slaves to Christianity because the church saw that slaves were not converting for piety but for the ultimate reason of freeing themselves and their children from the chains of slavery. Quakers did not welcome slaves into their churches, and in the Anglican Church slaves were considered second-class citizens. British slave masters were not very religious and saw little



value in themselves or their slaves going to church. Gomez (1998) claims that slave owners were either uninterested in or opposed to religious indoctrination of their slaves, thus most slaves may never have experienced pressure to convert. Slaves were aware of church teaching that claimed that every soul was equal in the eyes of God and used this teaching to ask for freedom. A law of 1706 stated explicitly that converting slaves to Christianity would not lead to freedom.

### **Change Over Time**

Archaeology has the benefit of viewing change over a long period, and Dr. Michael Blakey's scientific team was able to do this in the graveyard. The report (Perry et. al., 2006) covered the one hundred plus years that the graveyard was in use. They reported on the age, gender, and the physical conditions of the more than 400 people excavated from the African Burial Ground in 1991. They reveal the number of men, women, and children buried in the graveyard, the number with filed teeth, the number with bone fractures, and, through DNA analysis, they were able to show the possible genetic background of the population and their place of origin, the majority being born outside of New York. It showed that childhood growth and development was poor, while men and children in particular showed signs of stress in their bones due to carrying heavy loads, and many had signs of traumatic fractures near the time of death. Burial #25 is of a small 5-foot tall twenty-two-year-old woman found with a musket ball near her fractured ribs, and she had multiple blunt force fractures of her lower face. Her lower right arm has evidence of a spiral fracture due to it being twisted. None of the fractures had healed and were doubtless related to the cause of her death.

More important to this investigation is its report on the signs that point to how enslaved Africans, through all the suffering, continued to express and assert facets of their African cultures through burial rituals. The string of 111 glass beads and cowrie shells around the waist of one woman suggest that she belonged to an Akan-speaking society in which such beads are buried with their owner. One symbol, the heart-shaped design on a coffin lid using tacks is believed to be a "Sankofa," an Akan symbol, for the connections between the living and their past, present, and future ancestors. Following African traditions, coins, shells, glass, buttons, beads, clay pipes, pieces of coral, and quartz crystal were found in some of the coffins. Women were sometimes buried in the same coffin as their newborn children, a touching human act performed by family or friends. A child was found buried with a solid silver ear-bob or pendant,

an object of rare economic value for these impoverished people, which apparently had greater value to them as a gesture of care for the deceased child than had it been kept in the possession of the living.

While enslavement and all the horror and abuse it entailed caused a rupture in the African cosmology, it also led to the creation of an autonomous African American culture. What was a way of life informed by cultural practices in Africa was no longer pure, and this is nowhere more conspicuous than in their burial rituals. Even as European practices imposed themselves, or were purposefully adopted, traditional African customs continued to shape burial practices of African American slaves.

### **The Closing of the New York City African Burial Ground**

Perry et. al. (2006) claims that following the defeat of the British in New York at the end of 1783, the city returned to peace. With peace, a boom in real-estate development followed that led to the demise of the African Burial Ground. The city had grown, and the burial ground was no longer on the outskirts of the city but on prime real-estate land. In 1787 and again in 1795 the Barclay and Kip families, both patent holders on the land, proposed subdivision and development of the property.

“The experience of war and efforts to improve the conditions of free blacks in the postwar era fostered black agency in the final decades of the eighteenth century” (Medford, 2004: 212). Those that became literate became politically active and spoke out about the concerns of their community. In 1788, the black community filed a petition protesting the desecration of their most sacred place, as the graveyard was plundered repeatedly by medical students seeking cadavers. During the night, medical students were robbing the graves of corpses, “carrying them away, and without respect for age or sex, [would] mangle their flesh out of a Wanton curiosity and then expose it to the Beasts and Birds” (Unfiled Papers of the Common Council, February 4, 1788. New York Municipal Archives; cited in Medford, 2004: 212). Their protests got the attention of the newspapers, and medical students responded by ridiculing the protesters and claiming that they should care more for the living than the dead. However, medical students continued their nocturnal endeavors, ultimately forcing the black community to find an alternative graveyard.

The black community found a new private graveyard on land owned by Mr. Scipio Gray, but the medical students followed, even forcing Mr. Gray to remain indoors as they robbed the grave of the body of a child (Perry et. al., 2006). The community continued their protests and petitioned the city, finally winning public support for another cemetery. A Common Council committee was put in charge of finding a site for the new African graveyard. They found a site on Chrystie Street and recommended that the city retain the title to the land and manage the graveyard. The black community opposed this recommendation. Issac Fortune and other free men of color requested legal standing to manage the graveyard including making improvements and collecting fees. Their request was granted. In 1794, New York officials declared that the African Burial Ground was fully occupied and close its gates. The opening of the Chrystie Street cemetery coincided with the closing of the African Burial Ground.

Soon after the graveyard was closed, the land was filled in and the community was probably restrained from visiting the site. Inexpensive housing was built over and around the graveyard. These houses were mostly occupied by blacks, who were now moving out of white households as wage labor was introduced and who objected to living in areas where slavery was still entrenched, such as the Dock and East wards (White, 1991: 173). In some West African societies, families buried their loved ones under the house; now in New York City Africans were once again living over their loved ones, a situation most non Africans might object to. However, Africans may have been pleased with this situation, which offered them the opportunity to surreptitiously protect their lost loved ones and prevent the desecration of their graves by medical students and colonial developers.

Perry et. al. (2006) suggests that the redevelopment of the graveyard may have taken place incrementally and lasted as long as a decade. It is suggested further that those with ties to the graveyard may have struggled constantly to maintain the sacredness of the graves. It is not known how long Africans and African Americans remained connected to the graveyard, nor when their apparent ties to it disintegrated.

#### **IV. Cosmologies, World Views, and Burial Practices in 17th and 18th Century: Britain, Holland, and West and West Central African Akan, Igbo, Yoruba and Fon/Ewe Cultures**

The horror of death, the fear of the ghost, and the love of the deceased are all powerful emotions and are tied up in the preparation of the body for burial, the burial itself, related ceremonies, and the giving of offerings. Religion and culture are intertwined in people's cosmology, and people understood the world around them through their cosmology. "Among many primitive people death was taken to be an ill faith that befalls humanity, creating the belief in immortality and the existence of a spiritual world" (Adjel, 1943: 85). In antiquity, all humans the world over believed in and followed the "rule" of God. People were close to nature, living and working on the land. Each culture had its own idea of what God's rules were. People feared death, the corpse, and the unknown. The terror of death is in every human being. It is one of the most motivating thoughts that move a person to conform to a moral life. "The corpse is feared because, until its reconstruction in the beyond is complete, part of its spiritual essence remains behind, where it menaces the living with the threat of further death" (Metcalf & Huntington, 1991: 81). "The history of dealing with the dead and the dying in our period is one of ancient continuities, breaks, diversification and synthesis" (Binski, 1996: 29). We cannot avoid death; it is in our future.

Funeral rituals involve powerful emotions that call on life experiences. They are embedded in the culture, practiced over and over again, and they preserve ways of doing things, with particular focus on the individual. Funeral rites fulfill different purposes in different cultures. The most important purpose of funerary rites has been to secure the peace and happiness of the departed, and, as Houlbrooke claims, to "prevent their return to earth to haunt the living" (1989:1). While Gittings regards the function of the funeral as the provision of comfort both for the dying individual and for their family (1984: 24), Geary understands that there is a paradoxical need for the living to both push the dead away so that they can get back to their normal activities, as well as to keep them alive in spirit. This paradox is at the core of a system of exchange that includes tangible and intangible gifts where ceremonies and prayers are viewed as spiritual gifts. These gifts threaten the receiver if reciprocity is not received as well as ensure a bond between the living and the dead. "A donor keeps eternal rights in the gift and hence in the recipient" (Geary, 1994: 78). Balance between both parties is necessary to achieve

harmony between the living and the dead. Respect for the dead demands the attention of family and community.

### **Cosmologies, World Views, and Burial Practices in 17th and 18th Century England**

Many scholars have explored death rituals and traditions employed during the seventeenth and eighteenth century in England. Much information can be found in diaries, wills (Furnivall, 1964), journals, and folklore, together with village and church records dating from this time period. In *Death, Burial and the Individual in Early Modern England*, Gittings (1984) gives an account of the development and progression of English funerary practices extending from the medieval period into the nineteenth century. What can be gathered from these resources is an insight into attitudes and actions surrounding death in both Medieval and Post-Medieval Britain that do not leave their print in the graveyard because they are not architectural in nature. Prior to the 1990s, there were little intentional investigations of English graveyards (Rugg, 1998). This lack of research leaves little material resources necessary to conduct a complete analysis of British burial practices in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. Instead, insights into burial practices are gleaned from written articles, wills, diaries, paintings, and journals beginning in the seventeenth century.

Houlbrooke notes that English men and women feared death knowing that it could strike at any time, and prepared themselves in advance for the inevitable event. According to Ariès, the fear of death has to do with person's attitude towards death and awareness of self. When one is old, death is expected, "but a sudden death was a vile and ugly death; it was frightening; it seemed a strange and monstrous thing that nobody dared talk about" (1983: 11). The fear of death in England was attributed to a twofold cause: large populations were dying from plagues, and parents were dying before they had raised their children. Life expectancy in the 1600s was 32, with more than a quarter of all children born not reaching adulthood and many dying in the first year. "Parents seem to have felt that a particular lesson was intended when God took their children from them" (Laurence, 1989: 69). Death changed everything for the living. They viewed death in two ways, a "good death" and a "bad death". A "good death was pious and prepared. A bad death was unregenerate and . . . unprepared" (1989: 61). Concerns focused on dying in a state of mortal or venial sin and the fear of eternal damnation disappeared after the reformation in Holland. In England the concept of mortal sin dissipated too, but venial sin, the

sin that leads to a term in Purgatory, remained. The rich counted on contributions to the “dole,” a form of charity to the poor in England, as a guaranteed avoidance of purgatory. I will discuss the concept of the “dole” below.

### *The English Funeral in the 17th and 18th Century*

The English funeral served both a religious and social function. In the late sixteenth century, Britain had a new social middleclass -- people with sufficient resources to fund a substantial funeral. The simple funeral was no longer enough, now those with resources wanted what Litten calls pageantry, like that of great baronial performed by the College of Arms, a posh burial guild (1991: 13, 173). By the end of the seventeenth century, funerals in Britain were becoming a public display of wealth. “Foreign visitors to England, from Mission in the late seventeenth century onwards, described English funerals solely in terms of their pageantry and show, omitting virtually all reference to the religious aspect of the ritual” (Gittings, 1984: 57). In the eighteenth century, religious elements of the funeral ritual dwindled and the social aspects including the importance of the individual took on greater importance.

Bells known as “soul-bells” were rung in early modern England to notify the community of a death: “9 were rung for a man, 6 for a woman and 3 for a child” (Gittings, 1984: 133). To prepare for the wake and the funeral, the coffin maker orchestrated the laying-out of the body with the help of local women. The corpse was washed, and then “wrapt up with flowers and herbs in a fair sheet, and this we call winding a corpse” (Tate, 1771: 217). Sprigs of rosemary, thyme, or bay were woven into the winding sheet to mask the smell of the decaying corpse. This practice may have carried over into today’s tradition of flowers as an important feature at funerals. When winding the sheet, accommodations were made to allow the face to be open for viewing and then covered for burial. It was customary that people be laid out at home for a few days before the burial. Watching the body from the time of death until buried was a longstanding tradition. The “wake” or “viewing” was held to allow family and friends to have the last look at the dead body to say goodbye.

My uncle’s corpse in a coffin standing upon joynt stools in the chimney in the hall; but it began to smell, so I caused it to be set forth in the yard all night, and wached by two men. My aunt I find in bedd in a most nasty ugly pickle, made me sick to see it. . . . I greedy to see the will but did not aske to see it till tomorrow (Samuel Pepys 1661-1703, 1985: 144).

Not all bodies were buried in coffins in the seventeenth century, but they were all wrapped in a shroud. The shroud was a large sheet that was laid out flat on the bed, then the corpse was placed on top and the sheet folded over the corpse to the left and the right and gathered at both the head and the feet and tied into a knot and, sometimes fastened by pins. The middleclass and the poor almost certainly used a bed sheet, most likely the one the deceased died on. They went to the grave either palled on a bier or using the parish coffin. When using the parish coffin, the body was removed from the coffin for burial, returning the coffin to the parish for future use (Litten, 1991).

In 1660 an Act was decreed disallowing the burial of the dead in material other than wool.

For this year which decreed stating that all persons had to be buried in shifts, shrouds, and winding-sheets made of woollen material, rather than linen, and free from 'Flax, Hemp, Silk, Hair, Gold or Silver, or other than that is make of Sheeps Wooll only' (Litten, 1991: 73-74).

The demand that people use woolen shrouds was implemented to give a boost to the English woolen industry. The wealthy were concerned with status; and for the viewing of the body the corpse had to not only look good but also had to be well dressed. To exert their power and status, the rich paid a £5 fine rather than be buried in wool, the fabric of the lower class. Young children were buried in their chrisom clothes "turned up at the bottom and fastened by swaddling bands. A royal child's grave-clothes [may have been] elaborate. The body was often embalmed and beautifully dressed" (Cunningham and Lucas, 1972: 271).

Many brides-to-be included grave-clothes for themselves, their future husbands and future children in their trousseaus, either making them themselves or buying them ready made. "It was rare for a corpse to be committed to the grave wearing day-clothes, items of personal jewelry or any other keepsake" (Litten, 1991: 72). However, "it was the custom in Derbyshire for people to preserve their teeth in jars until their deaths, after which the teeth were put into their coffins and buried with them" (Addy, 1895: 124). By 1700, grave clothes changed from the winding sheet to a shift made with an open back and long sleeve and drawstrings at the wrists and neck. These were manufactured in London and widely available. By the end of the 1700s the winding-sheet had virtually disappeared. Cunningham and Lucas suggest that the pall used

to cover the coffin may have originated from a cloak that was used to cover the body before coffin use (1972: 134). By the end of the eighteenth century, English manufacturers were supplying ready-made coffins.

The funeral cortège started when the corpse was removed from the house. It first went to the church, where the body was taken in with the feet facing east, and at the appropriate time the coffin was removed again and taken to the cemetery. Coffins were carried to the cemetery if the distance was short, and if not, the coffin was rolled on a brier.

Paupers were always given a proper burial and buried at the expense of the church. Some were given a coffin, while others used the parish coffin; and all in attendance were supplied with food and drink (Gittings, 1984). Children's deaths were given the same funeral accoutrements as adults even though their lives were short. "Even after the burial of a pauper child, a small 'drinking' was often provided by the parish" (Gittings, 1984: 80). Orienting the body with the feet towards the east is known to predate Christianity (Richardson, 1987:6) and was practiced in England. Gittings' view (1984) was that the uneducated, in particular the Christians, took literally the resurrection of the dead, "making the correct burial of the bodies a matter of vital importance and necessary to helping the soul make the passage to the next life.

### *Nocturnal Funerals*

In the early seventeenth century, the practice of night funerals began in England and lasted through the middle of the eighteenth century. These burials were the result of the lesser nobility refusing and possibly being unable to afford the expenses of a lavish funeral associated with the College of Arms. The nocturnal funerals allowed the nobility to take matters into their own hands and negotiate privately with a funeral furnisher of their own choice, reflecting an individualistic response to death. Dorothy Beckford left instructions in her will "that I be carried to my vault after twelve of the clock at night by as many men as may be necessary for that purpose . . . I desire to be attended by my servants and as many lights used as are necessary" (Stuart Ashtead 1603-1714, cited in Smith, 1977: 77). The nocturnal funeral by torchlight offered more privacy to the family.

It was the aristocrats that initiated the night burials, and Gittings notes that "aristocratic women seem to have been especially instrumental in bringing about this revolution in the funeral rites of the elite" (1984: 189). One reason for the development of the nocturnal funeral was



aristocratic women's concern for modesty, as they refused to be embalmed and preferred to be buried soon after death to avoid this invasion on their bodies. If not embalmed, bodies had to be buried close to the place of death and could not be transported over long distances. Night funerals were cheaper, another means of saving money: "5s at 9 pm, 10s an hour later, and £1 at midnight" (Smith, 1977:77). At night, embalming was not needed, feasting was not appropriate, and the giving of charity was greatly curtailed. All of the ostentation of the day funerals was avoided and attention turned status to grief. "The concealment provided by darkness, at night funerals, dramatized the sorrow of the bereaved, while the flickering torches acted as constant reminders, in a society adept in the language of symbols, of the frailty of human life" (Gittings, 1984: 192). Night funerals were small and people were not required to attend, thus emphasizing frugality and simplicity.

### ***Purgatory***

Beginning in the "thirteenth century there was a widely held belief within the Church [in England] that masses said on behalf of the dead would shorten the length of time a soul spent in purgatory" (Litten, 1991: 6). Masses were sung on the third, seventh, and thirtieth days following the burial, and on the first anniversary. So important to the soul were the masses that many people left money to the church for masses to be said in perpetuity. Litten notes that some endowments were so large that masses continued until the time that no family members were present at the masses, just the priest and the "alter server to chant the responses" (1991: 6). Wills speak volumes about what people with resources were thinking at the time. "But the most surprising and regrettable thing [recorded in] wills is the amount of money shown to have been wasted in vain prayers, or orders of them . . . I only hope some sensible executors handed over the money to the testators' wives and children, or the poor" (Furnivall, xii). The poor did not have the resources to pay for masses to shorten their time in purgatory, this need created "guilds, secular organizations . . . whose member's contributions were pooled to endow masses to be sung for the souls of the poor" (Litten, 1991: 7). The concept of purgatory tied the living and the dead together, in that the living must pay to have masses said to shorten the deceased's time in purgatory. Geary (1994) posits that masses are spiritual gifts to the dead that tie the living and the dead together forever. Religious beliefs changed by the seventeenth century, but funeral practice and the saying of prayers and masses for the dead were not affected by these changes.

A funeral dole provided benefits similar to those of masses, and was an important element in rich English folk's funerals from the sixteenth through the eighteenth century. Arriving at the Gates of Heaven in a state of "grace" (a soul without sin) was necessary to gaining entry into heaven according to Christian belief. Gittings suggests that the function of funeral dole "was status enhancing" (1984: 163) because it brought a large crowd to a funeral. At the time of death, by giving food, drink, clothes, and money to the poor in the form of dole, the rich were asking the poor to eat their sins. Giving dole to the poor, the rich were hoping to shorten their time in purgatory, a place of torment. "A deep concern with death and the survival of the soul is central to all religions" (Deetz, 1996: 92). Gittings (1984) suggests that this practice was a trend amongst rich English folk whereby the poor actually became a scapegoat for the deceased by taking on the sins of the dead person when they accepted the dole.

Once the Corps was brought-out of the house and layd on the Biere, a Loafe of bread was brought out and delivered to the Sinner-eater over the corpse, as also . . . beer . . . and sixpence in money, in consideration whereof he took upon him all the Sinnes of the Defunct and freed him [or her] from Walking after they were dead (Aubrey, 1972: 179).

Gittings (1984) suggests that the poor were more concerned with getting food, beer and money, and spent little if any time thinking about actually absorbing the sins of the dead person. The funeral custom of the nobility to give food, drink, and dole to large numbers of poor in return for prayers for their souls can only be seen as serving both the rich and the poor. Dole was a form of charity given to the poor at the time of a wealthy man's death – seldom is it mentioned that it was given at the time of a woman's death.

### *Cemetery Location and Tombstones*

Until the early nineteenth century, the British aristocracy's chosen place of burial was under the church floor, and those that could not afford the cost were buried in the church graveyards, land that was attached to and owned by the church. By the nineteenth century internment was happening in municipal graveyards at the edges of town and away from the control of the Church. The burial ground moved away from town, a populated area, due to an increase in sanitary knowledge and the new view that the decaying body was a source of disease (Rugg, 1998). Tombstones marked the place of internment, be it church floor or graveyard. Seventeenth and eighteenth century English tombstones reflected people's understanding of

death and the afterlife. In the mid to late seventeenth century, tombstones had winged death's-heads with blank eyes, symbolizing physical death and decay; by the end of the century they were replaced with winged cherubs, symbolizing resurrection and heaven; and towards the end of the eighteenth century they were replaced with willow trees overhanging an urn, symbolizing commemoration. The sequence of mortuary art over time reflects the change in people's attitude towards death, and provides insight into what was occurring in both Britain and New England at the same time (Dethlefsen & Deetz, 1966; Deetz, 1996).

### **Cosmologies, World Views, and Burial practices in 17th and 18th Century Holland**

During most of the seventeenth century the Dutch dominated the world economy and its economy at home boomed, reaching its "peak in wealth and power, in arts and intellectual life" (Mook, 1977: 1). The Dutch were also revered in science, and artists like Rembrandt and Vermeer were household names. It was this prosperity that led to the creation of the Dutch West India Company (Prak, 2010: 97). This period is known as the "Golden Age." Wealth and power created a tiered social class that benefited the wealthiest section of society over the poorest. Social class was determined by the urban rich, who, according to Van Gelder

could be classified, although not segregated, in three subgroups: (a) the rich great merchants, the industrialists, advocates, doctors etc; (b) the shopkeepers and tradesmen; (c) the labourers in industry and commerce, the mariners and the domestics" (3). It was the merchants who ended up with the most power both politically and socially, and gained the greatest wealth, forming "a pseudo-aristocracy" (1965, cited in Mook, 1977: 3).

### ***Religious Freedom***

Mijnhardt tells us that "freedom of [religious] conscious was enshrined in Dutch law, [this] resulted in an influx of refugees of all possible religious backgrounds" (1977: 109). Immigration into Holland between 1560 and 1732 grew exponentially from decade to decade, with immigrants from the Spanish Netherlands, Jews from Portugal, Spain, and Central Europe, Huguenots from France, and Scandinavians and Germans (Prak, 2010: 101). Article 13 of the Union of Utrecht of 1579 "explicitly states that in the Dutch provinces 'each person shall remain free in his religion and that no one shall be investigated or persecuted because of his religion'" (Mijnhardt, 2010: 109). "The Dutch Republic gained a reputation for tolerance, because it managed to create a society in which people of different persuasions lived peacefully side by

side” (Prak, 2010: 104). However, by the end of the seventeenth century tolerance was a way of life, rather than a principal (Prak, 2010; Mijnhardt, 2010).

The Christian churches teaching across Europe in Medieval times was instrumental in setting the patterns, practices, and the mindset of people and their relationship with god, the saints, death and the afterlife. Thus, the Dutch worldview was the one taught by the Dutch Christian church and the bible (Mook, 1977). The Reformed Church was the official church of the majority of Dutch people following the Reformation. “Dutch life was penetrated by religion . . . Twice every Sunday everyone gathered in the church to listen for hours to the sermon . . . the bible was seen as the only source and guide for everyone” (Mook, 1977: 3). This narrow and controlling view of religion caused many by the late seventeenth century to separate and form their own church, “consequently a great variety of religious directions developed” (Mook, 1977: 4).

Protestant Calvinism gained a monopoly on religious traditions and politics in Holland at this time. Exclusive rights were given to members of the Calvinist Church to profess their faith openly. However, the Calvinist church was never granted the position of true state church (Blakey, 1993; Mook, 1997). The contrast between Catholic and Calvinist doctrine became very visible especially in their attitudes towards the dead. Calvinists eliminated purgatory, denying the living the opportunity to intercede with masses and prayers in the salvation of the souls of the dead. With Calvinists in control, “all existing Catholic church buildings were either handed over to the Calvinists, or confiscated by the local authorities and converted into hospitals, university lecture halls, or simply left to decay” (Prak, 2010: 104). Until then, these churches were multifunctional buildings, catering to the living and the dead. To paraphrase Prak (2010), the Calvinist church and public authorities were one and the same, public officials were church members who financed the church with public funds from the beginning. However, the Calvinists never succeeded as the dominant religion. Catholics began going to masses in private houses called “hidden churches.” “Their semi-clandestine existence was well known to all – the police . . . pocketed bribes to leave the Catholics alone” (Prak, 2010: 105).

People of Judaic faith were also able to negotiate significant liberties; they built huge synagogues in Amsterdam (Prak, 2010: 105). Religious tolerance was greater in the cities than in the countryside. Peace was maintained because religious groups like Catholics and Jews were inconspicuous, practicing behind closed doors. The Calvinist church was elitist, and its members

were not anxious to attract the common people into their midst. “They applied strict rules of admission and laid a heavy emphasis on church discipline with expulsion as the ultimate penalty, a penalty that was frequently invoked” (Mijnhardt, 2010: 111).

### ***The Dutch Funeral in the 17th and 18th Century***

Very little research has been done on Dutch burial customs from the seventeenth and eighteenth century and published in English. The fact that I cannot read Dutch limits my access to scholarly research recorded in the Dutch language. Paul Binski (1996) devotes an entire book “*Medieval Death: Ritual and Representation*” to the European worldview on death and dying in Medieval Europe, illustrating the European mindset in great detail. This body of work shows that what was happening in mainland Europe was also happening simultaneously in England; therefore, I presume that what was happening in Holland after the medieval period was similar to what was happening in England around death and funeral rituals.

Alice Morse Earle (1896) devotes one chapter in her book “*Colonial Days in Old New York*” to Dutch funeral and burial practices in both Holland and New York in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. She provides detailed accounts of the mortuary practices followed by the Dutch.

Immediately following a death, the community was notified by the “slow ringing or tolling of church-bells, there went forth solemnly from his house the *aanspreecker*, or funeral inviter . . . attired in gloomy black, with hat fluttering with streamers of crape” (Earle, 1896: 293). The *aanspreecker* was hired and paid a fee for his service. His role was to notify the relatives and friends and invite them to the funeral, which was a matter of rigid Dutch etiquette (Earle, 1896; Hanken-Parker, 1898). Without an invitation to a funeral one would not attend.

Mevrouw Hanken-Parker (1898) observed that:

An old Dutch custom is still practiced in Holland today, that is the announcement card notifying of a mans death. The card is white and bordered in black and carried the name of the deceased and all his surviving relatives in order of their age. Two men in elegant attire deliver the cards to houses notifying them of the death and the funeral arrangements. Their suits are of fine black broad cloth, with swallow-tailed coats ornamented with large silver buttons and black-knotted cords. At the knees of their breeches are costly buckles of silver, studded with stones. . . their shoes are adorned with buckles . . . On their heads . . . are black silk cocked hats, with ornaments of silver and black rosettes, while from the extreme tip

of the hat floats a black crape ‘weeper,’ about four inches wide and two yards long. . . The hearse is a marvel to behold. It is covered with plaited black cloth, with deaths’ heads in silver grinning from each of the four corners. . . On the top [of the hearse], very high up, sits the driver, wearing a black cocked hat with a ‘weeper’ and a long black cloak, with two holes in the front for the reins to go through. The cloak reaches down to the wheels and has a heavy black fringe. It is spread from the neck of the driver over the two sides of the seat and over the dashboard, coming down to the horses’ tails. On the horses are coverings of black with holes for their eyes. . . At the grave a clergyman is seldom seen. All is silent till the earth is thrown in . . . In every city or town in Holland you will find a Rosemary street. In olden days only undertakers lived in them, the rosemary being in the language of flowers specially dedicated to the dead.

“In Holland the *aanspreecker* was an official appointed by the government, and authorized to invite for the funeral of persons of all faiths and denominations who chanced to die in his parish” (Earle, 1896: 295). Jacobs (2005) notes that the gravedigger and the *aanspreecker* were often combined with the sexton and “precenter” [sic], and appointed by the local court; he had to look after the palls and to the bell tolling. “The hire of palls was, in the Dutch Republic, one of the sources of income for the poor relief fund” (Jacobs, 2005: 442), also known as *Kamer*. “There was also a ruling in Delft that on dying everyone was obliged to offer his best *opperstekleed* or best garment to the poor” (Wiel, 1996: 60). Later the garment was sold and the proceeds were donated to the poor relief fund. Earle (1896) observed that the *aanspreecker* is still a familiar form in Holland “he rushes with haste through the streets of Dutch towns. Still clad in dingy black of ancient fashion, kneebreeches, buckled shoes, long cloak, cocked hat with long streamers of crape, he seems the somber ghost of ole time manners” (1896: 296).

In Dutch society, straw was seen as having special spiritual protective powers both for the dead and the living. To paraphrase Sullivan, in Holland, the custom was to lay the dead on straw, believing that the straw provided protection for the family from malignant influences and sorcery. After a death, straw bushels were tied into three crosses: one was laid out identifying the route of the funeral, one at the door of the deceased’s home, and one at the crossroads en route to the church. In West Flanders, a cross of straw was laid in front of the house of the deceased to prevent the spirits from reentering. If a child died, small crosses were hung on the doors and windows. The laying of straw became law in 1472 (2004: 109). Browne (1623, cited

in van Strien, 1993: 216) wrote in his travel journal on the significance of straw in a Dutch funeral:

a bunch of straw with some bricks upon it [were placed] in front of the door of a house in which somebody had just died, on the right . . . if it was a man, and on the left if a woman.” Burials, if one could afford the cost, were inside churches. “Finding a place where there have been none buried before [they] made the grave as deep as possible and buried one upon another (Brown, 1623, cited in van Strien, 1993: 216).

Dutch houses had a room with a separate door entering from the outside reserved for funerals and weddings. These rooms were known as *kamer*. It was here that the body lay during the wake. It was customary for family or friends to stay and watch the body during the night. According to Earle, those that stayed to watch over the body were “liberally supplied with variously bodily comforts, such as abundant strong drink, plentiful tobacco and pipes, and newly baked cakes” (1986: 296). At English and Dutch funerals ‘dead-cakes’ were served; sometimes they had the deceased’s initials marked on them. “Sometimes two of these *doed-koecks* were sent with a bottle of wine and a pair of gloves as a summons to the funeral” (Earle, 1896: 306).

For the funeral procession the body went to the grave on a wooden brier followed by men only, while the women remained in the house and ate and drank Madeira wine (Earle, 1986). For the Dutch aristocracy, just like in England and across Europe, the preferential place to be buried and a great honor was under the church floor, allowing the deceased to be closer to the saints and the altar, a tradition steeped in Medieval Christian beliefs (Binski, 1996: 12). Those that did not fall within the paradigm of aristocracy were buried in graveyards outside of town. “Burial gave a good indication of social relations [and] anyone who wanted to be buried in the church had to pay a minimum of three guilders to the poor relief fund” (Wiel, 1996: 59). Bequests of funeral rings were common in Dutch and English society during the medieval period and were given as gifts to the dead, a practice that continued to as late as 1865 (Cunningham et. al., 1972: 128). Both Shakespeare and George Washington bequeathed money in their will for mourning rings for those they cared for most (Jones, 1877: 359 & 363).

Jasper Despoting M.D. (1648), wills and appoints’ ten rings of gold to be made of the value of twenty shillings a piece sterling, with a deaths head upon some of them, within one monath after my departure, and to be disposed of amongst my friends as my ececutrices shall thinke meet (Jones, 1877: 357).

### **Cosmologies, World Views, and Burial practices in 17th and 18th Century: Akan, Igbo, Yoruba and Fon/Ewe Cultures**

Of the wall art he saw in Zimbabwe, Balcomb writes that it

did not need an expert in rock art to realize that the people who made these pictures were not only extraordinarily gifted from a technical and artistic point of view, but that they understood the world around them in a way quiet differently from the way I understood the world . . . what I was witnessing was not only art but also cosmology . . . . Figures resembled human beings looming in the background suggested that the entire scene was presented with spiritual beings that could not be seen but were clearly there, in other words the blurring of boundaries, between the seen and the unseen (2009: 78).

Religions in Africa fall into three groups: traditional, Islam, and Christian. Diouf (2000: 4) writes that Islam came to North Africa as early as 660 CE and spread south of the Sahara by the eighth century through contact with merchants and traders, and by the fourteenth century it was well established in West Africa. Tolerance of the retention of “[s]ome fundamental features of traditional religions and customs, such as the ritual immolation of animals, circumcision, polygamy, communal prayers, divination, and amulet making . . . [were carried over and are] present in Islam” (Diouf, 1998: 4). Because of the acceptance of intermixing traditional religions and Islam, Diouf observes that Africans understood Islam to be an African religion. Portuguese Catholic missionaries brought Christianity to the African continent in the late fifteenth century and installed mission posts along the West Central African coast, regions under the control of the Portuguese. With Islam and Christianity well entrenched in West and Central Africa by the time of the African slave trade, Africans enslaved and sent to the New World were familiar with and many influenced not only by Africa’s traditional religions but also by Islam and Christianity.

Traditional African religions were preliterate; they have no ancient texts and no literature to impart what it was that people believed about the world around them or what was important to them. Oral traditions pass along myths and beliefs. Information that is passed along orally can and probably does change over time; its reliability depends on the story being told and interpreted the same way over hundreds if not thousands of years. According to Parrinder (1969) the histories of African traditional religions are unknown making them very difficult to study.



Also, there is a great diversity of people in Africa and a lack of a single central tradition. With this understanding, this inquiry will select beliefs and understandings shared by most, and then narrow down for further research the main cultural groups that were represented amongst the enslaved population who were abducted and transported to the Americas.

There are as many as twenty different small cultural groups within larger, major African cultural groups. This plurality, along with the multiplication of gods, cults, and myths within each small cultural group, makes it impossible to construct a satisfactory claim that any one belief or practice is “African.” The four ethnic groups included in this inquiry are the Ibo, Yoruba, Ewe/Fon and the Akan (a cultural group within the Ashanti ethnic group), coming from Dahomey, Nigeria, Ghana, and the Ivory Coast region of West Africa, regions that most likely represent the majority of enslaved Africans in New York City in the seventeenth and eighteenth century.

### ***Supreme Being***

Central to beliefs in a number of African religions is the multiplicity of spirits in the universe. African cosmology is divided into two distinguishable parts, the world of spirits and the world of humans. There is the Supreme Being who created the universe and manifests its power through a pantheon of gods; below these gods are the ever present spirits of the ancestors who bring the world of the spirits very close to the land of the living. Below the spirits of the ancestors is the celestial sphere and the spirits of animals and plants. Humankind is in the middle and must live in harmony with all the powers that affect their lives, families, and works.

The Supreme Being lives in the sky. He has the greatest power and controls all things in his strictly ordered universe. Within some African religions the Supreme Being is viewed as a constant participant in the affairs of human beings and keeps a constant eye on them. God is the foundation of life, so nothing happens without God’s command. Morality is bound up with religion and receives its sanction for the Supreme Being. African cosmologies often do not allow for ‘faith,’ as everything is believed to be predetermined. People often believe that they have no control over their destiny, but rather God has. African myths about God seek to explain the origins of the world, humankind, and the activities of celestial beings. African cosmological thought can be summarized as follows: there is widespread belief in one god, who is known by various local names. He is a Supreme Spirit, for this reason there are no images or visible

representations of him. He is recognized as the creator of the world and all things there in. He is the source of all power. He is the keeper of life and death.

### *Ancestral Spirits*

The ancestral spirits are treated with reverence and awe. They are the souls of the deceased and the guardians of traditions and history. Their presence is felt everywhere: watching over the household, directly concerned in the everyday affairs of the family, and giving abundant harvest and fertility. They also punish descendants for not honoring them and/or their fellow kinsmen on earth. According to Parrinder (1960), many Africans feel their ancestors are constantly near, and some share their food and drink with their ancestors before they themselves eat or drink. Ancestors are viewed as closer to God since they are dead. Thus the departed occupy an important position in African religions. One of the most important duties of family members of the deceased, therefore, is to give them a proper burial. A proper send-off makes the spirit happy and assures the descendants that they can solicit the spirit in time of need for help.

According to Paris (1995: 52; Parrinder, 1969; Talbot, 1969), in the worldview of many Africans there is no death in the sense of radical separation from either family or the community. Many Africans believe that life is an eternal cyclical process where the departure from physical life marks a transition from the state of mortality to that of ancestral immortality. Death is seen as a temporary absence from this world. “Who knows if this life be not death, and death be not accounted life in the world below” (Talbot, 1969: 468). Ancestors retained their normal human passions and appetites, which have to be gratified in death as in life. Awolalu says that many Africans understand the ancestors to be “the guardians of family affairs, traditions, ethics and activities . . . They are regarded as presiding spiritually over the welfare of the family” (1979: 61). They must never be offended. The ancestors feel hunger and thirst. They became angry or happy depending on the behavior of their descendants, and are vindictive if neglected, but act favorably if shown respect. According to a number of African traditional religions, ancestors serve as intermediaries between their families and the divinities. Also, “animals and plants are said to have played a crucial role in the survival of the forebears . . . Thus, a sacred relationship is formed between these objects.” (Opoku, 1978: 10). This sacred bond is not to be confused with worship.

The Akan, Igbo, Yoruba, and the Ewe/Fon's traditional belief systems are informed and rooted in the same categories of beliefs: the Supreme Being, the lesser gods, the ancestors, animals and plants, and the celestial sphere, with the Supreme Being residing in heaven, far from humans (Parrinder, 1969; Chukwuezi, 2006). It is left for humans to manipulate and harness the spiritual forces on earth, above and below to fashion a well deserving society in the eyes of the ancestors, who will then respond positively to their requests for help. The Yoruba believe that all actions on earth have to be accounted for in Heaven (Parrinder, 1969: 45). If a person dies old then there is no sadness but rather cause to rejoice as he is buried with honor by his relatives.

“Give to death that which belongs to death,  
That he may go away” (McClelland, 1982: 82).

There is little worship focused directly on the Supreme Being in most African traditional religions. People do not pray to God for help, but to the lesser gods and the spirits of the ancestors.

### ***Burial Practices***

There were variations within the burial practices of the Ibo, Yoruba, Ewe/Fon and the Akan, an ethnic Ashanti group. These will be discussed here in present-tense descriptions derived from historical studies. Through conquests and wars, the Ashanti brought into their midst slaves, captives, and immigrants from different tribes and adopted their beliefs and gods. They believed that these additional beliefs and gods would bestow on them more power and protection against the spirits of the world, all the while holding closely their ancestral beliefs and practices (Busia, 1999: 191). What appears to be unique to Akan cosmology is that God the “Great Creator” is seen as the “Great Ancestor.” This belief fosters the idea that the soul never becomes extinct but, after death, is joined by the great ancestor “God.” Parrinder finds that this view “gives a unity of God, the ancestors and men, in which the continuing blood of the community is the greatest factor of existence” (1970: 82). Because death is inevitable, and the belief in life after death exists, the Ibo, Yoruba, Ewe/Fon and the Akan have developed elaborate rituals to ease the pain of separation and to help guide the soul to the spirit world.

Akan funerals and burials are elaborate and expensive events and sometimes involve a second burial. The Supreme Being is the pillar of Akan religion followed by the spirits of the ancestors. Sarpong (1990) notes that just before death the dying are given a drink of water, and

after death food is placed next to the body; both the food and the water are intended to help the soul reach the next life. In the orchestration of a funeral there are usually five phases: the preparation of the body for burial, the mourning and wake before the internment, the internment itself, mourning after internment and mourning again at different periods (Parrinder, 1961). Akan funerals involve dance, music, drumming, and wailing. Wailing is a sign of respect to the dead and acknowledges their importance on earth. Now they will be missed. After the death of an old person, rum is poured down his or her throat, and the body washed and dressed in its finest clothes and “money tied to the wrists for the journey to the next world and across the river of death” (Parrinder, 1961:107). It is Bono custom (an ethnic Akan group), that elderly females have handmade beads on a brass pan placed in front of them for the funeral. Later the beads are buried in the grave, due to the belief “that a spirit woman called Amokye will not allow women without beads to pass into the ancestral realm” (Warren, 1975: 39). Before the body is removed from the house, a hole is made in the wall and the body removed through the hole because it is believed that to remove the body through the door is unlucky (Parrinder, 1961). At the cemetery the ground is knocked three times, and libation is given to the earth spirit asking for permission to dig. The dead are buried away from the village. Some northern tribes bury the men facing east and the women facing west (Parrinder, 1961). The Akan used L-shaped pits, with a ledge on which the body was laid forming the horizontal part of the L (Posnansky, 1999).

“The Fon . . . of Dahomey had the greatest kingdom and most highly organized religion of the loosely related Ewe people” (Parrinder, 1961: 3). Their worldview included specialized cult groups, each of which was devoted to a group of great gods and practiced their own special rituals. The cult played an important role at the time of a clan member’s death. Mercier (1999) notes that at the time of death, the clan replaces the deceased member of the cult with a living member of the clan; here life and death are viewed as cyclical, facilitating the perpetual movement of the soul. Mercier (1999) also understood the Fon to have an abundance of religious and cosmological ideas that were full of divergences, contradictions, and double versions of myths making it difficult to fully understand their system of beliefs.

Following death, the body is washed, and the nails and hair are cut and buried in a bundle beside the corpse. “Till this is done no tear can be shed. The corpse is dressed in its best, with a bottle of drink, a cowrie shell, tobacco, and a pipe” (Parrinder, 1961: 109). To help the spirit along its journey to the underworld, food and money is placed with the body for the spirit’s use

fearing that the ancestors might refuse him food and he would become a wondering ghost. Like the Akan, libation is poured on the earth asking the spirits for permission to dig. Most people are buried under their house wrapped in a mat. Great care was given to assure that no earth fell on the corpse. Gold rings are buried with the dead. The burial takes place seven to ten days after the death, allowing family members from far away to arrive. At the burial, gifts of cloth are brought by each visiting family, a third of which is buried with the corpse.

Following the death of a Yoruba, the burial takes place one to three days later. “The two big toes are tied together and the hands placed on the chest, while the mouth and nostrils are filled with cotton” (Talbot, 1969: 475). The nails and hair that have been cut from the corpse are wrapped in a white cloth, with chalk, salt, and cowrie shells and a white feather stuck in the bundle; a goat is killed over this bundle, which represents the corpse, and it is buried to the accompaniment of dirges. If the person was thought to have died from witchcraft or in danger of evil spirits, or the family is believed to be in danger, the Ifa oracle is consulted and “a scapegoat or sheep is sacrificed and its body taken to the crossroads, while the house and mourners are sprinkled with purificatory water” (Talbot, 1969). “The body is wrapped in black and white cloth or dressed in fine clothes with gold rings” (Parrinder, 1961: 110). The sons of the deceased dig the grave. The body is wrapped in a mat and buried under the house. When the body is lowered into the ground a kid goat is slaughtered and its blood poured into the grave. The sons throw food of maize pap onto the coffin (Parrington, 1961; Talbot, 1969). After the grave is filled in a wake is held with drumming, dancing, and funeral dirges. Among the Yoruba, food and ten heads of cowries are usually buried with the corpse, “in order to pay the guardian of the gates of the ghost realm” (Talbot, 1969: 475). After seven days, a post is stuck upright at a shrine dedicated to the dead person in their house (Parrinder, 1961: 112).

McClelland (1982) notes that Iku, or death, and the possibility of total extinction is a constant source of fear for the Yoruba. To help in lessening this terror, the Yoruba seek the help of Ifa, the wisest of all deities, and, by following the will of Ifa, may obtain assistance in living again. Ifa priests have the responsibility of identifying which ancestor is reborn in a newborn and which deity the child must serve.

The ultimate goal and a prerequisite for a successful rebirth in Igbo cosmology is that one must live and die well and receive a proper burial in one’s ancestral homeland. If the deceased is not buried in their ancestral homeland, the Igbo, who believe that the soul is indestructible, will

not reincarnate but roam the earth as a bad spirit (Jell-Bahlsen, 2008). The Igbo define a good death as dying in old age, having children and grandchildren who are all doing well, leaving the resources necessary to pay for a proper funeral, and dying at a convenient time for the community to perform a proper funeral (Opata, 1998: 175). Elaborate and proper funerals always include the invitation of the ancestors. A bad burial follows a bad death and is given to those that are considered evil in life. A bad burial is when the body is discarded into the forest with no one to mourn their departure from this life.

The Igbo have a strong belief in the mother water goddess who lives at the crossroads and plays an important position guiding the soul across the water from life to death and back for rebirth. The color white is used to mark the transition from one stage of life to another: birth, initiation, death, and rebirth. “The idea of the watery transitions between life, death, and rebirth are tied to a circular concept of time and eternity” (Jell-Bahlsen, 2008: 196). White lime was used at the crossroads to mark the spot of transition and was considered mysterious because it is fragile and found under water.

In Igbo mortuary practices, after death the body is washed and the hair is cut or shaven, then the body is laid out on plantain leaves and smeared in red calm-wood or yellow or black dye, white circles are made around the eyes and the body is dressed in its best clothes and waked sitting up (Talbot, 1969). Before burial, the body is wrapped in a mat and is then buried under the house or compound. At Igbo funerals gifts are given and some of them are buried with the dead to show respect and sympathy (Lloanusi, 1984). The majority of Igbo groups bury the married dead under the house, and the unmarried outside and close to the house. The funerals last about three days, with a second burial taking place on average between one month and two years later (Talbot, 1969).

### **The Similarities and Differences in Anglo-European and African Funeral Practices**

There are many parallels between the traditional burial customs of the Anglo-European and the West and West Central Africans cultures in this enquiry. All buried their dead with great care and respect. Funerals were first and foremost an occasion for the families to affirm their prestige. Each culture spent lavishly on its funerals, and even the poor received nice burials with all the necessary accoutrements. The thought of a poor funeral would have been an unbearable disgrace for any one of them. Funerals differed according to a person’s status. In

each culture the spirit of the dead depended on the help and cooperation of the survivors to provide them with a proper burial.

The funeral practices of the English, Dutch, Akan, Igbo, Yoruba, and Fon/Ewe began with announcing the death to family and neighbors. The English and Dutch usually performed this duty by bell-ringing. The number of rings depended on the gender and age of the deceased. The Akan, Igbo, Yoruba, and Fon/Ewe typically announced a death to the community by drumming and wailing. Relatives and friends were obliged to come from near and far; the neighbors also joined in. In the orchestration of a funeral these cultures follow a similar five phase pattern beginning with the preparation of the body for burial, the mourning and wake before the internment, the internment itself, mourning after internment and mourning again at different periods sometimes referred to as the second burial.

After the announcing of death, the ritual washing of the corpse began (this was most often performed by local women), then the hair and nails were cut, and men were shaven. Each of these cultures held a “wake” for the deceased. The English and Dutch provided specially made funeral-cakes, beer, and other refreshments, while the African traditions focused on music, dancing, drumming and singing. All groups feared dying at a young age, being unprepared, and or simply facing the “unknown.” These practices demonstrate that these cultures have similar notions of how death should be handled. Their actions inform us that they all believe in the immortality of the soul, that the soul lives on in some different fashion in another place, and that how the living handle the disposal of the body is important. This is where the shared cultural similarities end. The English and the Dutch followed funeral practices that pattern the Christian mindset, focusing on God and Heaven, and viewing death as final. The West and West Central African cultures focused on transition, ancestors, the journey, a peaceful and happy spirit, and reincarnation.

The English and Dutch dressed their corpse in a funeral shroud that was followed by wrapping the corpse in a winding sheet leaving the face exposed for the wake, and before the burial the face was covered. By 1660, the English who could afford it, paid a £5 fine and buried their dead in gowns made from linen, flax, hemp, or silk, with gold or silver threads. Royal children were buried in very elaborate clothes. The Akan, Igbo, Yoruba, and Fon/Ewe dressed the deceased in their best clothes, and covered the corpse in a mat just before burial. The special

dressing was done to ensure the deceased arrived looking their very best at the world of the ancestors.

The English and the Dutch followed Christian doctrine, focusing on the soul arriving at the Gates of Heaven to face judgment. Arriving in a state of grace was their ultimate goal. The English offered “dole” to the poor and had masses said for the departed soul hoping to amend any transgression they may have committed in life. The Dutch, on the other hand, gave to the “poor relief fund” but with no strings attached, as they were less concerned with sin, especially after the Reformation. The English and the Dutch provided the souls with no gifts or personal items to take along on this journey. They saw death as real and this journey as final; the soul was not coming back, it needed no tangible items, its contact with the living was over, and it was not concerned with its descendants. The next time the living expected to see the deceased was after their own death.

The Akan, Igbo, Yoruba, and Fon/Ewe typically provided the deceased with gifts of food, beads, shells, money, cloth, gold rings, and smoking pipes amongst other things to help them along the journey to the land of the ancestors. These items were to nourish the soul and to pay the guardians at the gate of the ancestral homeland. Gifts were very important, and were chosen depending on the status, gender, and age of the deceased. For the Akan, Igbo, Yoruba, and Fon/Ewe death was not final but seen as perpetual movement of the soul. The departed was now a direct link between the living and God. The departed soul was going to remain an integral part of the living family, their presence was felt everywhere, and they were included in all decisions of the family. They were not gone but in a new and different state of being.

In these African cultures, the deceased person’s family often received gifts of cloth from relatives, of which they put one-third into the grave as a show of respect. The English and the Dutch focused on the soul getting into Heaven, while Africans focused on the deceased’s spirit feeling the love and devotion of their descendants.

The English and the Dutch preferred to be buried under the church floor. Here they felt closer to God and the saints and most likely felt that this special place of burial gave them the extra push through the gates of Heaven. Many Africans preferred to be buried under the house or compound where they were living while on earth. The living were more concerned with the deceased remaining close to them, the dead were not gone but residing as a spirit amongst the living, protecting them and ensuring adherence to family and cultural values.



The English prepared for death during life. Brides-to-be made or bought funeral clothes for their trousseaus. People with money made arrangements in their will for masses in perpetuity, for fees for church burials, and for dole money to amend their wayward ways on earth. The English and the Dutch set aside money for funeral rings, which were made as gifts for chosen individuals with the expectation that they wear the ring and not forget the soul of the deceased – a non-verbal request for prayers. Many Africans saved money during their lifetime for their funeral to ensure a good death, and a funeral that would not be a hardship to their families.

The crossroads were an important spiritual place in both Dutch and Fon/Ewe funerals. The Dutch believed in the special protection offered by straw to both the living and the dead. Going to the crossroads ahead of the funeral cortège and laying of straw as a spirit protector was an important funeral practice in Holland. Amongst the Fon, the crossroads served as an important place of transition during funerals; it was here that the soul was guided from the living world into the world of the ancestors. In Christian British and Dutch burials, the body was laid in the grave in a supine position facing east. Africans were placed in the ground in many positions including sitting-up; recorded African burial practices do not refer to a required placement of the body in the ground facing in any one particular direction.

Amongst the African cultures discussed here, pouring libation on the earth and asking the spirit earth for permission to dig a grave was an important cultural practice. The English and the Dutch never asked God or the spirit world for permission to dig a grave; they asked the church priest or the community officials. Digging a grave was not a spiritual practice but one done out of necessity.

All cultural groups in this investigation see death as the beginning of a new state of being, either in the ancestral realm or heaven. Depending on their cosmology, each was buried close to their place of residence, with reverence and respect. The living took on the responsibility of dressing the corpse to look its best, arranging the funeral and all its accoutrements to help the soul reach its destination without suffering. All are concerned with the soul's suffering after death, and promise not to forget them, either by wearing funeral rings, saying prayers, or offering food. These mortuary practices are unique to human beings and remind us of our humanity.

## V. Conclusion

To say that African peoples have no systems of thought, explicit or assumed, would be to deny their humanity (Parrinder, 1969: 25).

They were shackled together in the coffles, packed into dank factory dungeons, squeezed together between the decks of stinking ships, separated often from kinsmen, tribesmen, or even speakers of the same language, left bewildered about their present and their future, stripped of all prerogatives of status or rank (at least as far as the masters were concerned) and homogenized by a dehumanizing system that viewed them as faceless and largely interchangeable. Yet we know that even in such utterly abject circumstances, these people were not simply passive victims (Mintz & Price, 1992: 42).

The goal of my thesis has been to account for the colonial slaves' new cosmology as they transitioned from African to African-America identities and developed a new African American autonomous culture. I have also worked to demonstrate that Africans and African Americans buried in the African Burial Ground in New York City during the seventeenth and eighteenth century were not stripped clean of their African cultures. However, the evidence also indicates that what we see in the African Burial Ground is a syncretism of African and European cultural practices. What we see is not a continuation of African ways, nor a continuation of European customs and cultures, but the development of a new culture and a new worldview of the people buried in the graveyard.

I define cosmology as the way a people see the world around them, and how through ritual and religion they understand and express their place in it. Rituals can be identified as acts of human display; they can be religious or secular, and they bind a community and a culture. Symbolism associated with ritual may be carried over into the grave and thus preserved archaeologically. Such symbols may include direction of the body in the grave, adornments of the corpse or items placed with the deceased at the time of burial.

Religion on the other hand is abstract, consisting of myths, beliefs and doctrines. Onions (1973), in *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, defines religions as: "Action or conduct indicating a belief in, or reverence for, and desire to please, a divine ruling power . . . . Recognition on the part of man of some higher unseen power as having control of his destiny, and as being entitled to obedience, reverence and worship." It has been argued that a dialectic

exists between religion and ritual. All religions have rituals but not all rituals are religious. People constantly choose to remember, forget, or recreate elements of their religion through ritual practices (Connerton, 1989; Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). Onions (1973) defines ritual as a “prescribed order of performing religious or other devotional service.”

### **Fitting Burial**

Each African culture has its unique burial rites but with one thing in common: ‘a fitting burial’ to guide the soul into the world of the ancestors (Lloanusi, 1984). I define a “culture” as a community’s beliefs and ways of behavior in a given society – those elements that make the world meaningful. The British and the Dutch were also concerned with their dead having a fitting funeral. The British, Dutch, and African cultural groups in this inquiry all viewed mortuary rituals as constructing passages between life and death. They are specifically concerned with human burial. Through these ritual events, the dead are treated with honor and respect, allowing them to have a good farewell and entry to the next life, and those that remain behind are provided the opportunity to help in the soul’s departure.

Bones and tissue provide a testament to people’s past lives: how long they lived, what sex they were, what illness or disease they suffered, how tall they grew, what genetic ancestry they had, what sort of food they ate, what injuries they sustained, how well built they were, and whether they were deliberately deformed, bound, tattooed, body painted or sacrificed” (Parker Pearson, 2000: 3).

But bones and tissue do not offer clues about their cosmology.

So much of what this inquiry revealed cannot be observed in the archaeological record, because British, Dutch, and African mortuary rituals included funeral etiquette, food, drink, and music; while many Africans funerals also included chanting, dancing, animal sacrifice, and offerings of libations to the gods for permission to dig the grave -- these are all intangible and therefore leave no physical evidence observable in the ground. The British and the Dutch did not provide the departed with tangible gifts associated with their cosmology, like the beads, shells, and money African cultures did; therefore, they left little material evidence to the continuation of European ways that might be incorporated into the new African American world view and observable in the African Burial Ground in New York City. By the end of the seventeenth century in both Britain and Holland, religion had become less important in the lives of the people, and nowhere was this more obvious than in mortuary practices. Funeral etiquette,

requiring the dead be buried with reverence and respect, was practiced rigidly, while the social aspect of the funeral took center stage. Jacobs highlights this shift in worldview when he notes the absence of God in Jeronimus Eddingh's record of the death of his daughter. The father "did not quote from the Bible . . . [he] did not include the phrase that she 'passed away quietly from this world in God,' as he had done a few years earlier on the death of his daughter Francyna" (2005: 440). In Europe, religion no longer ruled how people lived under God's law, yet burial practices and the saying of masses for the souls of the departed did not disappear.

### **Burial Ground Location**

In the African cultures considered here, the corpse was typically wrapped in a mat and buried under the house or under a dwelling next to the house. Only the Akan buried their deceased relative away from the village. Burying the dead under the house can be understood in the same way as Suzanne Preston Blier writes on the Batammaliba house, as it

served to define the family -- past, present, and future. . . . Without the living, the dead would be forgotten . . . . At the same time, in a circular fashion, it is the deceased elders who are necessary for the lives . . . of the present and future family members (1987: 156).

It was believed that the ancestors were closer to the gods; therefore the living had to take care of the dead as their personal connection to the gods.

In New York City, Africans did not have the opportunity to bury their dead under their place of residence; they had to bury them outside of the city on land designated by the colonial rulers. Following an order from Trinity Church in 1697 specifying that Africans could no longer be buried on church property, the African Burial Ground was founded. It is not unreasonable to assume that the forced separation of Africans from their deceased loved ones must have been very difficult. After all, Africans and their ancestors relied on each other constantly. This brings me back to Talbot's quote: "who knows if this life be not death, and death be not accounted life in the world below" (1969: 468). On the other hand, Africans and African Americans may have viewed their own cemetery on isolated land away from the city as ideal because now they could practice their African burial rituals away from the spying eyes of the colonizers. What may have been considered ideal is that on this land was a pond, known as Collect Pond. In African cosmology water is the place of transition between the world of the living and the world of the ancestors; water was needed to help in this transition.

### **Preparing the Dead**

The British and the Dutch dressed their dead in the seventeenth century in simple shrouds that were covered in a winding sheet; and by the end of the eighteenth century they were using burial gowns with frills and strings depending on their social standing, age and gender. Older women in the community were hired to wash and dress the dead.

In West African cultures the dead were typically buried in their best and finest clothes. Some wore clothes specially prepared for their burial. It was very important that the dead arrive at the land of the ancestors looking their best. In the New World, Africans did not have fine clothes or specially selected clothing for their funeral dress. In the African Burial Ground, all the bodies were wrapped in a winding sheet. This is evident through copper pin fragments recovered in the archaeological excavation (Perry et. al., 2006). There is no evidence suggesting what kinds of clothes the deceased was buried in underneath the winding sheet. Following African traditions, they were most likely buried in the nicest clothes they had. As Parker Pearson writes “The dead do not bury themselves but are treated and disposed of by the living” (2003: 3).

What is evident in the African Burial Ground is that great care went into preparing and burying the deceased. The slaves, it appears in the evidence, were left alone to bury their dead. Africans were using a mat to wrap the body before burial in Africa, however in the African Burial Ground they were following the European custom of using coffins. Of the four hundred plus burials excavated, twenty five burials were individuals buried coffin-less. Perry (2006) attributes this high number of coffin-less individuals to the British occupation of New York during the Revolution. A few coffins were found empty. Howson and Bianchi (2006) suggest that possibly the coffins were placed in the ground empty. It is well document that many slaves ran away, some to freedom and others to a short span of freedom before running right into the arms of their captors. A few choose what appears to be an ingenious escape, and that was to buy a coffin, and plan and execute their own funeral – presenting themselves as ‘dead.’

### **Gifts for the Journey**

West and West Central African cultures placed gifts of spiritual significance with their loved ones in the grave to assist the souls reach and enter the land of the ancestors. Items such as cowrie shells, beads, rings, tobacco, pipes, drink, food, and money were amongst the objects placed in the coffins. The type of object depended on the age and gender of the departed -- items

that the deceased might need for the journey to the next world and or to pay the guardians at the gate. Akan females in particular needed beads to pass a spirit woman called Amokye, because without beads women could not pass into the ancestral realm (Warren, 1975: 39).

In the New York African Burial Ground, seven internments contained beads, out of 416 individual graves excavated. Perry et. al. suggests that “Poverty can account for the limited presence of items with the deceased” (2006: 133). Of the burials that contained beads, three were women, two were infants and the sex of the remainder was unknown. Fifty eight percent of the beads found were blue or turquoise. One child wore a strand of beads around its waist, and the other child had a strand around its neck. One of the women had a strand of 112 mostly glass beads of various colors including one amber bead and seven cowrie shells around her waist. This woman also had her teeth filed into hourglass and peg shapes, a traditional African custom “that spans thousands of years and is geographically widespread in Africa” (Blakey & Rankin-Hill, 2004: 239). Beads in a number of African cultures denote social meaning – protection from harm and illness and influence the spirit world. Another woman had three rings about her throat, symbols associated with Yoruba and Fon burial customs. She also had red ochre on her head, ribs, and scapulae, consistent with an Igbo mortuary practice. The symbols observed in burial number 377 included expressions consistent with Yoruba, Fon and Igbo cosmologies. The potential presence of three different cultural practices in one single grave informs us that slaves incorporated into their new worldview that which was most meaningful to them.

The presence of material culture like beads, shells, rings, coins, buttons, and pins do indicate the presence of an active system of beliefs among Africans and African Americans buried in the African Burial Ground and a continuation of African ways. Beads played an important role in many African female rites of passage, including death rites, and were included in many females’ graves.

One child buried in the African Burial Ground had an ear-ring, a sign of the parents’ care, love, and devotion for the child and the offering of this precious gift to their child to help it along its journey to meet the ancestors. “The burial of possessions took them out of circulation and fixed them to the deceased, symbolically defying a system that denied property to, and defined as property, an entire people” (Perry et. al., 2006: 155). Slaves had few if any personal possessions. The placing of objects by the living in the grave of the deceased speaks to the relationship of the

deceased with family and community. Here in death, the corpse kept its few possessions, leaving no trace of their existence in the colony.

Nowhere amongst the scholarly writings on West and West Central African cultures did I find a reference to the Akan “Sankofa” symbol. This symbol was found on the coffin lid of burial number 101 in the New York African Burial Ground, and has received a lot of attention. Perry et. al. (2006) notes that the design may have evoked the same meaning for both Africans and Europeans, but it could also speak to the Akan symbol referring the need to remember one’s ancestors. The design is heart shaped using iron tacks. In 1881, Arthur Dowe reports on the excavation of Col. Wainwright’s tomb in Ipswich, Massachusetts: “In the tomb are the remains of perhaps 10 bodies . . . There were several fragments of lids upon which were hearts formed with iron nails, and initials and dates with brass nails.” The dates on the lids ranged from 1731-1798. The African Burial Ground and the Ipswich graveyard, two separate graveyards located over a hundred miles apart and from the same time period, suggest that the heart shape design on the coffin lid is not a purely African symbol. I propose that the heart shape design on the coffin lids was an Anglo-American symbol, because Anglo-Americans were not amenable to adopting any symbol that might suggest “heathen Africans.” Also, Europeans made no mention of designs on coffin lids, and in Africa, the dead were buried using mats and not coffins until the nineteenth century. Perry et. al. advises keeping in mind that “the excavated sample might represent only an ethnically or religious distinct segment of the African population” (2006: 133) and not be truly representative of the African cultural practices in the graveyard.

### **Body Direction and Cosmology**

The basic structure of the African American burial was almost the same as that of the colonizer. In ninety-eight percent of the burials, the remains were facing east. Africans, like the Europeans, were burying their dead facing east in preparation for the day of resurrection, ready and facing Jesus. In the burial practices in west and west central African, nowhere does it mention burials on the east/west axis, with one exception, the Akan. Burying the corpse facing east suggests a European Christian influence that Africans and African Americans incorporated into their new cosmology, that is, the European belief in the “Resurrection.” The Akan incorporated the gods of their captives in Africa, believing that doing so increased their influence in the spirit world; what we seen in the African Burial Ground may be a continuation of this

belief. It is also possible that Africans and African Americans rejected Christianity and were following the Muslim tradition of burying the deceased facing Mecca, as many slaves were Muslim. Another possibility considers that in the African worldview, life is cyclical, and water is the place of transition from this world to the next. By facing east they were facing water (the Atlantic Ocean), the land of the ancestors, and Africa. Facing in this direction would assist in their journey to join their African ancestors in the next cycle of life and avoid the possibility of returning to the New World as slaves. Also, the Igbo understood that for the spirit to be at peace and not roam the earth, the dead had to be buried in their homeland – facing Africa was the best available option for these people. Water was important to guiding the soul from life to death and rebirth. The idea of the watery transitions between life, death, and rebirth are tied to a circular concept of time and eternity” (Jell-Bahlsen, 2008: 196). Facing water, in this case the Atlantic Ocean, may have been understood by slaves as the opportunity for their departed loved to transition out of their new hell and back to their African homeland.

All the bodies were buried in the supine position in the graveyard. This can be attributed to the use of coffins. Africans adopted the practice of using a coffin in the New World, and why they did this we do not know. We can speculate that they saw the coffin as protecting their loved one from the soil, keeping them clean, something the Fon in Africa practiced with great care. Another possibility is that they were protecting the corpse in the hopes that one day they would be removed and taken back to Africa, the homeland for reburial. They may have understood this burial to be temporary. Goodfriend claims that the custom of blacks burying the dead “at night is evidently a carryover from Africa” (1991: 122). I found no reference to African cultures burying their dead at night, however, and English aristocracy were practicing nocturnal funerals to avoid bodily invasion needed for embalming and a costly funeral.

### **A New Cosmology**

The enslaved Africans had an unconscious, deeply structured cultural pattern within them that the Middle Passage could not and did not destroy. Elements of both African and European cultural practices are evident in the New York African Burial Ground. There was no inferred model of mortuary behavior in the New World. Europeans and Africans practiced separate burial practices in separate burial grounds. This separation helped the enslaved to see the graveyard as a place of spirituality and memory, where they could openly enjoy a shared



remembrance in cultural practices. Africans did not dare to bury their dead without all the cultural elements that they understood to be most important to the departing soul and its new status as an ancestor. At the funeral, their native culture was recalled -- they were buried with beads, shells, coins, glass, buttons, and jewelry.

Slaves experienced a rupture in their cosmology and cultural practices and had to create a new worldview that included mortuary practices. This new development by the enslaved was one that only they adhered to. The white community was only going to ignore that which did not alarm them and allowed them to continue to feel in full control over both the slaves' labor and his ways of life.

Therefore, since in the New World they were not free in large part to practice their African mortuary customs because of the fear these practices brought to the white community, they choose those elements that were in line with European burial customs. Other elements were either practiced in secret or disappeared from the new African American burial customs. Mintz and Price argue that it is not possible for one to retain their culture intact outside of their environment no matter how favorable the conditions, and suggest that we be skeptical towards claiming that what we see in African ways today are "direct continuities from the African homeland" (1992: 52). Iyo posits that "there was and still is a group that can be truly classified as 'marginalized' Africans, unwilling to break with the familiar past, the known, the familiar African world rich in traditions, religion, music, dance, and culture" (2006: 39). Thus, African cultural practices remained strong well into the eighteenth century in New York City. Slaves continued to come from Africa, which, in turn, continued to feed the African way of life. The Middle Passage and the experience of slavery were not capable of eroding African customs, cultures, and traditions. Since only a small minority of individuals was actually buried with preserved artifacts, it may be that some individuals, those with beads, coins, shells, rings, buttons, and other items, may have clung more faithfully to, or adhered more strictly to, African customs than others, and that the living community as a whole may have been active in dialogue about the meaning of their African heritage. African cultures had medicine people (native doctors) and spiritualists, people who were versed in the ways of harnessing the spirits, and who, by the very nature of their identities, were either allowed or expected to be more African than others. The isolation of the African Burial Ground and the freedom to bury their dead their way,

allowed Africans and African Americans to engage in a dialogue that constituted the culture-making process.

Europeans arrived free in the New World; they had the power, and their culture groups were more homogeneous. Most Africans came as captives, they were not free, their cultures were more diverse, and they had no power. The African religious systems of their homeland did not survive intact and unchanged in the New World. However, despite their capture and the abuse they endured before leaving Africa, during the Middle Passage and then on the street of New York where they were beaten (physically and emotionally) into submission, they did not forget their culture and their commitment to their ancestors and each other – survival became their mode of defense. A new cosmology emerged that was neither African nor European but one that helped those souls live on.

### **Note**

\* This article is an edited version of Mary Shia's thesis in the fields of anthropology and archaeology for the degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies, Harvard University, November 2010.

### **Acknowledgements**

To Christopher (Chris) N. Matthews and Suzanne Preston Blier, my thesis directors, I cannot thank you enough for your understanding and help throughout this process. You inspired me to do my best. I had the very good fortune at the Harvard University Extension School to take classes with two outstanding and engaging professors, Chris Matthews and Suzanne Blier. Chris' extensive knowledge in African American Archaeology and his energy and enthusiasm in the classroom inspired me to write my thesis focusing on the African and African American experience in New York City during slavery. He has guided me in what scholarly works to read, research libraries to visit, and lectures to attend. His guidance and words of encouragement were instrumental in helping me complete this thesis. In Suzanne's class "Art and Exposition: World Fairs," her enthusiasm for the subject matter, and her encouragement to look deep into all aspect of a world's fair, energized me and my fellow students to push far beyond where we thought we could go. With her guidance I saw how something as grand as a "World's Fair" could still objectify the "other." I am also deeply indebted to Suzanne, my co-thesis director for been supportive in allowing me to work with Chris on my thesis. You are among the most inspiring people I have ever met along my life's journey.

I am grateful to Dante Spetter for her support and availability throughout this process, and to all my professors in the Anthropology Department at the University of Massachusetts Boston who inspired me to study in the fields of anthropology and archaeology: Stephen Mrozowski, Ping-Ann Addo, Tim Sieber, Barbara Worley, Judith Zeitlin, Alan Waters, Patrick Clarkin, and Claire Gold.

Last but not least, no words could describe my gratitude for the support and love my family, especially my husband Wei-Lee, has given me. To Tony and Sheila for all the great dinners; and to Eric, Wyatt, and Madison for making me laugh.

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