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Literate Inversions and Cultural Metaphors in Edgefield Stoneware

In his lead article in this forum, J. W. Joseph presents an engaging and systematic analysis of the potential meanings of certain inscriptions on the 19th-century pottery produced by an enslaved African American potter in Edgefield, South Carolina. This artisan communicated his name firsthand by inscribing “Dave” on many of his stoneware vessels, along with other marks for the identification of the production location, the volume capacities of the pots, and etchings of short verses. Dave most likely attained literacy while working for one of his succession of owners, Abner Landrum, who operated local newspapers in the 1830s and 1840s (Vlach 1990a:77; Steen 1994:14–15). The open display of this literacy was audacious, as such capability by an enslaved laborer was illegal at the time (Manguel 1996:279–280; De Groft 1998:254).

Joseph demonstrates in logical steps of analysis the character of Dave’s pottery production, the types of inscriptions he placed on his vessels, and the fact that many instances of his signature on those goods are also accompanied by cross-mark inscriptions. As a result, the cross marks were likely not meant to function as the identifying mark of the individual artisan, as they were unnecessary for that purpose on a vessel that already presented his signature. The cross-mark inscriptions also appear on vessels in other contexts that indicate they were not used in a routinized way to identify a particular pottery production center in which the vessels were created. With such alternative explanations of the cross-mark purpose proving untenable, Joseph analyzes the ways in which such cross marks may have served to express a social group identity to which Dave subscribed.

Surveying a number of potential social group affiliations that could inspire an individual in 19th-century Edgefield to utilize such cross-mark

symbols as a communicative act etched into material culture, Joseph focuses principally on the possible influences of BaKongo culture and Christian symbolism. While ostensibly this may sound like a theme that has been thoroughly explored in African diaspora studies to date, the subject matter and analysis in this Edgefield case are new and fascinating. Whereas other analysts have examined contexts in which cross marks were etched into material culture for ritual and sacred uses (Thompson 1983, 1990; Fennell 2003, 2007), here Joseph explores the use of such symbols on manufactured goods in the secular context of a marketplace for utilitarian storage vessels. Participants in that marketplace included the European American purchasers of such storage vessels who owned and operated plantations in the region surrounding the Edgefield potteries, and the enslaved African Americans who worked on those plantations. The artisan named Dave was most likely aware that Anglo-American slave owners would fund the purchase of the vessels he made as an enslaved potter. He was also very likely aware that other African Americans in bondage on neighboring plantations would no doubt be the individuals who would most frequently handle those vessels in their work of placing food products into storage (De Groft 1998:255). An inscription in clay could become a communicative act disseminated in a secular context to an audience of other African Americans.

Joseph contends that Dave’s use of cross-mark inscriptions on these ceramic goods served to communicate a newly forming social group identity of African Americans that had roots both in particular African cultural heritage and in Christian symbolism. He focuses principally on the BaKongo culture of the Kingdom of Kongo as the likely African cultural influence among enslaved laborers in this region of South Carolina in the 1800s. Evangelical Christianity provides another potential influence in that time and region. In the following discussion, this author reviews historical evidence and related steps in interpretation that supplement and support Joseph’s analysis. An additional, potential

explanation for Dave's use of these cross marks is also raised—like his inscribed verses, this utterance may have reflected a personal, subversive statement of protest against his status in bondage. This alternative explanation is based in part on parallel developments of the use of cross marks for secular purposes in the BaKongo and Anglo-American cultures.

BaKongo Influence in the South Carolina Backcountry

The Kingdom of Kongo encompassed up to three million people at the start of the transatlantic slave trade (Fennell 2007:53). Members of that society are referred to by historians as BaKongo or Kongolese, and they shared the BaKongo culture and the KiKongo language (MacGaffey 2000:35–36). Joseph follows an extensive body of historical and archaeological studies to observe that the BaKongo culture included a core symbol, called the *dikenga dia Kongo* or *tendwa kia nza-n'Kongo* in the KiKongo language, for which crossed lines were a central, idiographic motif (Janzen and MacGaffey 1974:3; Fennell 2007:31–33). More elaborate and embellished expressions of the *dikenga* included crossed axes overlaying a circle and axis terminal elements, representing the structure and cycling of the cosmos, the living, dead, and spiritual forces (Thompson and Cornet 1981:43). A number of archaeological studies have proposed that a more abbreviated, instrumental version of *dikenga*, consisting of the intersecting axis lines, has been identified on material culture compositions of African Americans and utilized in ritual, sacred contexts at 18th- and 19th-century sites (Fennell 2003:19–25, 2007:31–33). The people of the BaKongo culture were among the primary targets of the transatlantic slave trade from the 15th through the late 19th centuries, with millions of captives transported to locations throughout the Americas over several centuries (Ferreira 2008).

To contend that Dave's use of cross-mark motifs had at least partial roots in BaKongo cultural heritage requires one to first demonstrate that captive Kongolese were present in the relevant region and time period. Joseph notes that captive members of the BaKongo culture comprised up to 70% of the enslaved Africans shipped into Charleston, South Carolina, in the

period from 1735 to 1740. Such supporting evidence would be stronger, however, if it were related more closely in time to the events under analysis in Edgefield in the mid-1800s. Indeed, the Stono Rebellion in coastal South Carolina in 1739 involved 90 enslaved combatants led by a number of BaKongo laborers, and area plantation owners in the following decades worked to avoid the further importation of captives from the Kongo region (Creel 1988:31–35; Thornton 1991; Hall 2005:90–94, 159–160). The international importation of enslaved Africans was outlawed in the United States in 1808. Such events might lead one to question the extent of the enduring impacts of BaKongo culture in South Carolina into the 19th century.

Extensive evidence exists to support Joseph's proposition of an important presence of African Americans of BaKongo cultural heritage in South Carolina throughout the 19th century, however. Individuals of BaKongo heritage in that time period included those newly captive, as well as their descendants and close social affiliates on plantations. The strategic reaction to the Stono Rebellion did not persist for long, as the overarching demand for enslaved laborers outweighed such selectiveness among plantation operators (Vlach 1990b:27). The 1808 ban on international importation of newly captive Africans was largely ignored, and tens of thousands of newly enslaved persons were brought into the South Carolina area after that date. The updated Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database (Eltis and Halbert 2009) lists an estimated 66,777 enslaved Africans imported into the area of the Carolinas and Georgia in the period of 1801–1825, in defiance of the 1808 law. Throughout the periods of the transatlantic slave trade, which lasted into the late 19th century, captive Kongolese often comprised one-third of all enslaved Africans brought to the Americas. During the mid-19th century, captives from the Kongo area accounted for nearly one-half of all enslaved laborers in the transatlantic trade (Ferreira 2008:313). More specific census calculations show that the proportion of enslaved persons imported into South Carolina from the relevant region of west central Africa was approximately 52% in 1804–1807 (Holloway 1990:7).

In addition, numerous lines of specific evidence demonstrate the presence and influence of members of the BaKongo culture in

South Carolina in the 1800s (Brown 2004). For example, Edmund Ruffin was a plantation owner, who in 1843 traveled through the South Carolina coastal area in search of calcinated rock deposits. He was interested in developing methods for agrarian reform utilizing such resources as potential ingredients for fertilizers (Ruffin 1992:xi–xiii). In a diary of his 1843 survey activities, Ruffin observed that enslaved African Americans in South Carolina coastal plantations used KiKongo words for particular types of spirits which they believed to inhabit springs, pools, and other local bodies of water (Ruffin 1992:166). Other 19th-century authors recorded similar beliefs and use of related words from the KiKongo language in South Carolina (Thompson 1998:61; Adams 2007).

Newly captive Kongolese were brought into the area of Edgefield as late as 1858, when the slave ship *Wanderer* unloaded its human cargo along the nearby coast (Baldwin 1993:82–83). Sponsored by the so-called “fire eaters” of South Carolina, who sought to defy federal laws against slavery openly, the *Wanderer*’s voyage records indicate that its crew picked up hundreds of captives at Benguela on the Congo River (Wells 1967; Burton 2007:117). Of those, approximately 407 survived the transatlantic crossing and were delivered to Jekyll Island, Georgia, and 170 of those captives were thereafter transported up the Savannah River to the Edgefield area. Survivors of the *Wanderer* were interviewed decades later in Edgefield and found to use a number of KiKongo words in their speech (Montgomery 1908; Wells 1967). Based on such specific lines of evidence, as well as broader bodies of census data concerning enslaved African Americans, one is entirely justified in assuming that BaKongo cultural influences were present among the African Americans of Edgefield in the time period in which Dave the potter was operating (Vlach 1990b:34–35).

Veiled Subversions

Joseph proposes that an abbreviated, instrumental version of the *dikenga dia Kongo*, as a symbol of BaKongo spiritual beliefs and practices, may have inspired Dave to create an analogous inscription as an expression of a newly developing social group identity for African Americans in his region. Similarly, the

cross-mark correlation with Christian symbolism may have served as an additional cultural influence for Dave. If so, symbols from sacred belief contexts and emblems of social group affiliations were being used in new and innovative ways within a context of secular manufacture of ceramic goods for the marketplace.

The author proposes an alternative interpretation of Dave’s cross marks. He may have based them more on the secular uses of such renderings, which have independent roots in both BaKongo culture and Anglo-American society. In doing so, he may have intended a subversive expression, juxtaposing his full signature with the secular inscription used in his day by illiterate individuals when “making their mark” to identify themselves on legal documents. Joseph observes that Dave combined the inscription of a cross mark, or “X,” with his signed name on a number of vessels. He may have intended to express that the freedom, fortitude, and literacy which he should have been able to embrace openly, were constantly opposed by bondage and treatment as an oppressed laborer to whom literacy would more typically be denied. Such complex and subversive expressions would be consistent with the inscribed verses he also included on a number of vessels.

As relatively secular expressions, cross marks were used in both BaKongo and Anglo-American cultures as expressions of an individual’s oath of truthfulness. Within BaKongo culture, the cross marks at times served as a designation of righteous intent and truthful testimony. Among the BaKongo people, the cross marks were the “simplest form” of the *dikenga* and were also used when individuals took oaths in secular proceedings. Crossed lines were typically drawn upon the ground in the space of a gathering, and a person would stand at the intersection of those axes when swearing an oath (MacGaffey 1986:118). In a separate development within European cultures, signatures were accompanied by simple drawings of a cross to add solemnity to an oath of truthful account (Rawle 1914:2,094–2,095; Bauml 1980:240–241). Over time the combination of the signature and cross mark were no longer used, and the cross mark instead served within Anglo-American culture as the oath mark for a person who was illiterate or too feeble to sign his name (Rawle 1914:2,094–2,095; Reay 1991:89–93; Murray 1997:413–416).

An early inspiration for Dave's juxtaposition of a cross mark with his own signature on a vessel may have been as a defiant expression of his literate position using a common symbol of the illiteracy that Anglo-Americans sought to impose on enslaved African Americans. At the same time, the fact that Dave could only sign with a first name and not a lineal surname further expressed the expropriation of his status as a free man with a personal heritage (Chaney 2008:205,208). More complex patterns of multiple cross-mark inscriptions on other vessels may represent departures from this simpler, subversive composition.

The short verses that Dave inscribed on a number of vessels often appear to have consisted of similarly veiled, subversive statements (Burton 1985:152; Vlach 1990a:78–79; Baldwin 1993:195). A vessel by Dave dated 3 May 1862 bears an inscription sounding a theme of the need for sinners to repent: "I—made this Jar all of cross / If you don't repent, you'll be lost" (Baldwin 1993:195). Grey Gundaker (1998:97) suggests that Dave's reference to a cross in this verse could connote cross marks of African-diaspora heritage, as well as Christian symbolism. Dave's focus on a reckoning against the sinful appears as well on a vessel dated 7 August 1860, with the following verse: "I saw a leopard & a lions face / then I felt, a need of grace" (Koverman 1998:87). This inscription was drawn directly from the book of Revelation, and speaks of events within the Apocalypse and coming day of judgment for all sinners (Koverman 1998:87).

Dave appears to employ indirection and veiled irony when identifying the sin of slaveholding as a principal transgression against God's will. A 14 April 1859 vessel declares: "When Noble Dr. Landrum is dead / May Guardian angels visit his bed" (Miller 1998:58). This could be read as an obeisant statement by a docile laborer wishing his owner well. It could as easily be read, however, as an ironic invocation of the desperate condition and need of aid that Dr. Landrum, as a slave owner, would experience upon meeting his Maker. Similarly, Dave etched into a large jar, dated 31 July 1840, the following: "Dave belongs to Mr. Miles / wher the oven bakes & the pot biles" (Baldwin 1993:195). While some might interpret the location reference within this verse as playfully

connoting a kitchen area in which vessels were utilized, or the fire of the pottery kiln itself, it may instead have been intended as a veiled invocation of the fire of perdition to which a slave owner like Miles should be fated.

The coded, indirect, and veiled aspects of these statements were typical characteristics of protest and subversion by enslaved African Americans using "double-voiced" communications (Miller 1998:58). Subversive statements were often expressed in verse communicated in spiritual songs and folk stories, for example, that sounded to Anglo-American audiences as unthreatening vernacular or innocuous recitations of biblical sentiments (Chaney 2008:195–206). Dave also likely succeeded in further diffusing the obtrusiveness of his subversive statements by accompanying them with his signature, thus adding to a sense of idiosyncratic expression (De Groft 1998:255; Chaney 2008:197). If Dave's use of a cross mark and signature were part of a pattern of subversive statements against slavery and his owners' expropriations, who comprised the intended audience of such statements? These vessels were created as market goods and shipped out for distribution through the hands of Anglo-Americans and African Americans alike. As in the singing of veiled messages within spirituals, the messages were intended for receptive audience members of any ethnic heritage within his region (Vlach 1990b:33; De Groft 1998:255; Chaney 2008:200–201). That audience included African American laborers who could read the verses or have them read aloud by coworkers, and Anglo-Americans with abolitionist sentiments.

Why would Dave's owners and Anglo-American supervisors in the pottery works permit him to continue this practice of signing his vessels? They may have been readily willing to overlook such ornament due to the fact that Dave was a skilled and industrious potter, who produced a high number of valuable commodities for those owners (Thompson 1969:133–134; Burton 1985:181–182; Vlach 1990a:80, 1991:33). In turn, they may have viewed his signing of those numerous commodities as his acceptance of his role as a cog in their productive machinery. As Michael Chaney (2008:202–203) observes, such actions within the chain of production represented Dave as "both maker of commodities and as a commodity himself."

Prosaic Lines and Multivalence

Some analysts might propose that Dave's use of cross-mark inscriptions involved an expression based primarily in Christian faith, and that he did so as a fairly direct invocation of the cross as a sacred symbol within that religious tradition. If so, one should not view such conduct as that of a docile subscriber to a dominant religion. In the mid-1800s in South Carolina, African Americans openly invoked Christian symbolism and moral reckoning at their peril. In 1822, a free African American artisan named Denmark Vesey had led a violent rebellion in coastal South Carolina. Witnesses at his subsequent trial testified that he inspired others to rebellion by quoting particular biblical verses, such as Exodus 21:16, which declared that "he that stealeth a man, and selleth him ... shall surely be put to death." These events inspired South Carolina officials not only to outlaw literacy for enslaved laborers, but to look with great suspicion on African Americans' embrace of evangelical Christianity in the following decades (Robertson 1999; Todd 2008:48).

The use of a Christian symbol also would not necessarily mean that the African Americans deploying that expression in the 19th century subscribed only to a Christian corpus of beliefs and practices. For example, Sterling Stuckey (1987:34–35) argues persuasively that persons learned in the BaKongo culture would have viewed the Christian cross, as it was used in group worship in the antebellum period in the United States, as a symbol consistent with the *dikenga*. Engaging in cultural practices "under cover of Christianity, vital aspects of Africinity, which some considered eccentric in movement, sound, and symbolism, could more easily be practiced openly" (Stuckey 1987:35). Through such social dynamics and constraints, many African Americans continued to practice African cultural beliefs in private, while shaping evangelical Christianity into new forms for public observances and promotion of their group interests and solidarity (Genovese 1976:211; Raboteau 1980:64; Gomez 1998:4).

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