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Crosses, Secrets, and Lies: A Response to J. W. Joseph's "'... All of Cross'—African Potters, Marks, and Meanings in the Folk Pottery of the Edgefield District, South Carolina"

In this response to "'All of Cross,'" I want to discuss three topics: first, the geographical and cultural differences between Joseph's subject and the more commonly known archaeological and historical studies of the South Carolina coast; second, the culture of secrecy common to the plantation South; and third, the value of scholarly imagination and evaluation, of the kind presented by Joseph, in our exploration of the African and African American contributions to American culture.

Several studies of African American culture in South Carolina have concentrated on the low country, the region of earliest European and African settlement, rice agriculture, sea island cotton, and a large, black demographic majority. Although historians and archaeologists have written numerous works on the piedmont, or up country, they are not as common or as well-known as those from the state's coastal region. This is especially true for studies of African American history and archaeology. By the late 18th century large numbers of African Americans lived throughout South Carolina, however, in hilly piedmont counties like Edgefield the white population was relatively larger and the plantations and numbers of African American slaves relatively smaller. Whereas in the low country those enslaved held some political leverage simply because of their large numbers and frequent isolation from whites, who fled hot, insect-infested plantations for months out of the year, those in bondage on piedmont farms and plantations were often under close scrutiny of white slaveholders and overseers. Such close surveillance may have played a part in more subtle expressions of African American solidarity and symbolism in the piedmont than in the low country. This is the kind of coded expression suspected and explored by Joseph.

For several decades, archaeologists, folklorists, and antiquarians have concentrated on different kinds of South Carolina pottery—folklorists and antiquities specialists on alkaline-glazed stoneware, archaeologists on colonoware. The drastically different histories of the potteries explain the different foci. Alkaline-glazed pottery—thrown on wheels, fired in kilns—was a direct descendant of European potting traditions. In many parts of the piedmont South, white settlers set up cottage industries producing stoneware and earthenware. Slaves in relatively small numbers were brought into the potteries as laborers or sometimes as artisans, like Dave (South 1999:277). The Edgefield pottery died out in the late 19th century, but in the middle 20th century numerous pieces began showing up in antique shops and private collections, and those with Dave's signature, messages, and marks began attracting special attention and bringing high prices. Folklorists entered the alkaline-glazed pottery scene because people remembered the ware, there were some written accounts of the potteries, and there were numerous extant examples.

Colonoware was quite a different kind of pottery, with quite a different mode of production and history. Primarily a low country phenomenon, with a few exceptions it is rare on archaeological sites in the up country. Colonoware was built by hand, unglazed, and baked in open fires. The manufacturing techniques were similar to those of west and central Africans as well as Native Americans, and pieces of the ware, particularly those from the early-to-middle 18th century show evidence of both these traditions. Occasionally, they also exhibit European traits. Archaeologists working on low country plantations and towns have found tens of thousands of colonoware sherds, enough to show clearly that there were many potters and that this was a common, everyday utilitarian ware. In response to Works Progress Administration interviews in the 1930s

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and early ’40s, a few aged African Americans remembered colonoware. Astonishingly, with one or two exceptions, in the 18th and early 19th centuries when colonoware must have been nearly ubiquitous, whites in the low country appear to have paid no more attention to this folk pottery than they did to women’s head ties or the walking sticks invalids and old folks used for getting around. Unlike up-country stoneware, colonoware was overlooked, then forgotten, neither found documented in archives nor for sale in antique shops. In contrast to the stoneware from white men’s kilns, enslaved potters in the low country could have emblazoned their wares with any marks they liked, and white people would likely have paid no attention, because they paid no attention to the ware itself.

Thus, colonoware was commonly produced and used by a large African American population, and alkaline-glazed stoneware was produced under white supervision, for sale to whites, in potteries that included a few African American potters. In light of these striking differences, it seems likely that African Americans in the up country might well have identified with the culture and symbols of their more populous counterparts in the lower part of the state, and that when they expressed their solidarity symbolically they did so more cryptically. This is Joseph’s argument, and given the South Carolina context and his careful consideration, it rings true.

The plantation South was a troubled, tension-filled world with a social system riddled with lies and deep secrets, especially those involving race, sex, money, and power. A middle-20th-century example originated in Edgefield County, reached the Senate chamber of the United States Congress, and certainly affected the entire country. In South Carolina, Edgefield County is best known as the home place of the late Senator Strom Thurmond, a once-powerful man and keeper of a great personal and racial secret. Former governor of South Carolina, presidential candidate of the segregationist (that is, racist) Dixiecrat Party in 1948, and the longest serving member of the United States Senate, Strom Thurmond was a true scion of Edgefield County and South Carolina. For many years local rumors held that when he was in his twenties, Thurmond fathered a child by a teenage African American servant in his family home. By my observation, the white community generally dismissed these rumors, while the African American community generally accepted them. Of course, after the old man’s death the truth was revealed. African American Essie Mae Washington-Williams testified that she was Thurmond’s daughter, that she met him when she was a teenager, and that he paid for her education at traditionally black South Carolina State College. She also reported that during the civil rights movement she tried to talk to Thurmond about race relations, and was rebuffed. To their credit, Thurmond’s family accepted Washington-Williams. In an ironic twist, Washington-Williams’s name has been added to a monument on the South Carolina State House grounds honoring the father who denied her and worked to deny her and others like her the opportunities of American citizenship. As readers consider Joseph’s argument that Dave and other African American potters may have placed coded symbols and messages on their wares, the author hopes they will reflect on this surviving example of the culture of lies and secrets endemic to the plantation system. African American slaves had to employ whatever means available to survive in a world overwhelmingly controlled by their masters. It would be a wonder if someone as knowledgeable and skilled as Dave did not covertly express solidarity and resistance through his work.

Joe Joseph originally submitted this manuscript to *Historical Archaeology* under the title “A Bakongo Cosmogram in Edgefield.” Although I positively reviewed the paper, review comments challenged his interpretations and resulted in substantial revisions and the current article. The range of comments also provided Associate Editor Charlie Ewen with the idea that this topic might serve as the basis for a forum. The alternative publication format indicates that Joseph’s original interpretation was generally considered arguable and inconclusive, and I suspect that many will find this version the same. But, how much more so than other articles appearing in the journal over the years? I do know that for almost 30 years alternative archaeological ideas and interpretations, particularly those dealing with minorities, have been hard for many to accept. Some of this reluctance has been the legacy of endemic race and gender bias; I believe, however, that most of the reluctance has come from the inertia of the commonly accepted cultural myth and the often incomplete and ambiguous nature of alternative interpretations. The

comfort of traditional stories is preferred, and it is often demanded that alternatives be completely researched, fully tested, and conclusive. Unfortunately, as neat as they are, those kinds of interpretations are often trivial. Dealing with serious and complicated issues, like the secrets of plantations and the covert symbolism of slaves, requires brainstorming, perhaps for many years, with inconclusive evidence. Archaeologists must work with ambiguity, making neither too much of limited data, nor too little—accepting that value accrues from pondering these issues even if unassailable conclusions are never reached. Of course, many of the old conclusions were, and are easily assailable; but general acceptance has given them the appearance of truth.

For centuries, the African and African American contribution to American life has been overlooked, degraded, and in some cases intentionally covered up. Very little of the underground network of resistance is known and understood, especially in the Deep South. From the issues within and surrounding Joseph's paper, it is clear the awakening is only beginning. Certainly, before announcing conclusions, hypotheses must be rigorously tested; but a wide, wide latitude to investigate the crime of plantation slavery and the various forms of resistance to that offensive oppression must be allowed. With thanks to the SHA, this forum provides some of that latitude.

References

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