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Leland Ferguson
University of South Carolina, lelandferguson@gmail.com

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Early African-American Pottery in South Carolina: A Complicated Plainware

By Leland Ferguson

***Abstract*: This unpublished symposium paper presents ideas on possible uses of colonoware inspired by ethnoarchaeological research in Sierra Leone in 1991 and 1993. An earlier version of this paper was presented in the Symposium *Can't We Just Throw It Away? Approaches to Plain Pottery*. 63rd Annual Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology, March 25-29, 1998, Seattle, Washington. The author is a Professor Emeritus, Department of Anthropology, University of South Carolina. [Read this article below in .html format, or in Adobe .pdf format.]**

Introduction

The goal the research outlined in this paper is to utilize archaeology -- specifically a plain, hand built pottery, termed colonoware -- to contribute to our understanding of creolization and ethnogenesis during the colonial and immediate postcolonial period in the lowcountry of South Carolina. I argue that patterns of earthenware use and survival in West and Central Africa suggest we should seriously consider plain pottery from the Carolina lowcountry as part of the non-Western medicine that served early African-Americans both physically and as a principal component of their developing ideology -- an ideology that included the construction of identity and responses to oppression.[1]

The Gullah Region

Perhaps more than any place else in North America, early African-Americans in South Carolina created a subculture with a distinctive localized identity. Today this identity is manifest in -- among other things -- songs and stories, crafts, folk medicine, and a creole language, called *Gullah* (e.g. Heyer 1981, Rosengarten 1986, and Turner 1969). The Gullah region stretches from the Waccamaw Neck on the northeastern coast of South Carolina to Daufuskie Island to the southeast. Farther to the southeast, the region of Geechee development,[2] and to the north and northwest the Gullah region is bordered by people with a more generalized African-American culture.

Historically the present-day Gullah region was the location of rice and sea island cotton plantations, where Euro-Americans dominated economically, politically, and militarily -- and African-Americans dominated demographically, and in many ways culturally. Beginning in 1670 the earliest slaves were brought from existing plantations in the West Indies; then, in the early 18th century Native Americans captured in raids on Spanish missions were added to the slave population. By 1710 there was a slave majority in Carolina, and approximately one-third of that majority was Native American. Subsequently, large numbers of people were imported from the Angolan and Congolese region of Central Africa and the rice growing region of the Windward Coast in West

Africa. Apparently using their demographic power to advantage, slaves negotiated for a distinctive work regime, the *task system*, and they established a folk economy wherein many people sold and bartered goods amongst themselves and to their "masters" (Wood 1974, Joyner 1984, Morgan 1977). In 1739 the colonial ancestors of today's Gullahs staged an armed rebellion; but for an informer, they would have staged another insurrection in 1822.[3]

Colonoware in the Gullah Region

In and around the houses of African-Americans in the Carolina lowcountry, as well as near plantation kitchens, archaeologists have been recovering thousands of sherds of plain, hand built and low-fired pottery. This ware was one component of an African American container environment that also included wooden bowls and buckets, gourd bottles and bowls, glass bottles, imported European ceramics, and iron pots.

The clay vessels are predominantly small bowls and jars measuring about two liters or less. Most had rounded bottoms, and very few had any decoration or surface treatment beyond simple smoothing. The geographical distribution generally coincides with the rice and sea island cotton plantations and the Gullah language.[4]

Archaeologists have demonstrated that the pottery comes from two sources: a minority produced in free Indian camps and villages and a majority that was crafted on plantations (Ferguson 1990, 1991, 1992). Several archaeological types have been identified (Wheaton, Friedlander and Garrow 1985, Anthony 1986, Ferguson 1990; see also Crane 1993), but because there is so much variability in the ceramics, these types have not been widely used. Although in the 19th century white planters occasionally wrote of free, itinerant Catawba Indians selling pottery, so far the only known 18th century reference linking African-Americans to low fired is an account of Charleston officials confiscating "a large quantity of Earthenware . . . from Negro Hawkers" (Morgan 1998:235). Planters appear to have ignored this ware even though at any point in time there must have been scores of these vessels on most plantations as well as in the residential areas of Charleston. A few people in the "ex-slave narratives" of the 1930s mention the pottery having been made and used by their grandparents or great grandparents, but for the most part the colonoware of South Carolina is beyond both oral and written history. The story of this pottery is principally archaeological.

The earliest archaeological interpretations of this plain earthenware were that it was a culinary ware (Ferguson 1980, 1992), and that the vessels owed their simplicity to being a "lowest common denominator" of potting in a pioneering situation (Fairbanks 1984, Ferguson 1992; see also Hill 1987, Wesler 1987, Posnansky 1999). Archaeologists also supposed that the pottery disappeared as people became "acculturated" and had greater access to cheaper and more durable European-style ceramics than available in the 18th century (Lees and Kimery-Lees 1979, Wheaton and Garrow 1985). A very small number of the pieces -- numbering no more than thirty out of tens of thousands -- were incised at the bottom with marks similar to Bakongo cosmograms of Central Africa, and these have been interpreted as probably being related to Bakongo, *minkisi*-like charms (Ferguson 1992,

1999), but this interpretation did not affect the vast quantities of pottery we believed to be culinary.

West African Ideas

As research on early African American culture continued it was obvious that American archaeologists needed improved knowledge of specific West and Central African cultures and of generalized culture from this vast region. Once initiated, these studies quickly offered radical alternatives for the South Carolina material: The research suggested that medicinal uses of the pottery may have been as important, or more important, than culinary uses, and that the pottery may have played an important and explicit role in the development of Gullah ideology.

On describing and showing pictures of South Carolina colonoware bowls and jars to students in Freetown, Sierra Leone, I was immediately informed that rather than culinary vessels, the pots looked more like those their mothers, aunts, and grandmothers used for preparing and administering traditional medicines. They directed me to Freetown's "Big Market" where I immediately found and bought two small, plain jars much like those recovered from South Carolina sites.

I soon discovered that throughout the African homeland small jars and bowls are commonly used in the preparation and administration of both prophylactic and curative medicine (Traore 1983, Barley 1994, Gosselain and Van Berg 1991-92: 106). They are also used in charms to induce spirits to affect social outcomes. In his compendium *Medecine et Magie Africanes, ou Comment Le Noir Se Soigne-t-il?*, Malian Dominique Traore thoroughly supports what the students and many others in Sierra Leone told me -- that traditional medicines must be prepared in traditional earthenware or the medicine will not work. Further research showed that in many places in West Africa, hand built earthenware survives -- in the face of iron, aluminum, plastic, and high-fired ceramics -- *because of its efficacy in traditional medicine* (Traore 1983; Sargent and Friedel 1987; Robertson 1984: 97; Gottlieb and Graham 1993; author's fieldwork: Sierra Leone).[5]

The symbolic associations of pottery in West and Central Africa are much more complex than a simple association of pottery with medicine. Eugenia Herbert, in her book *Iron Gender and Power* (1993), discusses pottery as well as iron. According to Herbert (see also Schmidt 1978:140), in the production of both iron (male associated) and pottery (female associated), the crafters effect powerful transformations that turn non-cultural, earthly substances into quintessential cultural artifacts. In turn, the men and women involved with these transformations often are seen to have the ability to facilitate other transformations such as birth, initiation, and death. The strength of these associations may be seen in the degree to which West African novelists employ iron and pottery as male and female metaphors and in the invocation of power (e.g. Achebe 1959: 59; Emecheta 1979; Nwapa 1966: 199, 274).

Pottery and Ethnogenesis in Carolina

The plantation system in South Carolina brought diverse peoples into intensive firsthand contact: A small minority of white planters and their families, backed by military might, enforced the servitude of thousands of people from the West Indies, southeastern North America and West and Central Africa. Beginning in 1670, the first slaves in South Carolina came from established plantations in the Indies, and after Indian wars in early 18th century almost one-third of the slaves in the colony were Native American, mostly women and children. Thus, Africans and Native Americans joined in becoming the demographic foundation of lowcountry African Americans. Later, in the second quarter of the century there were importations from Central Africa, and finally once rice became the well-established crop of the lowcountry, large numbers of people were brought from the rice-growing region of the Windward Coast.

Isolated in the swamps and marshes of the lowcountry, of slaves often worked plantations where there were few white managers, and these frequently abandoned the plantations for long periods during the hot, mosquito-plagued months of summer. The result of this combination of environment and demography was that African-Americans built much of their family and community life beyond the constant eye of white plantation managers.[6]

Although Christianity was introduced to Carolina's slaves in the late 18th century, it was not until the so-called second Great Awakening of the 1830s that significant numbers of people in the Gullah region began creating their version Christianity (see Creel 1988: 107-251). Thus, for a period of 160 years the non-European people of what would become the Gullah region were developing an ideology largely independent of Christianity. The raw material for this early ideological construction certainly came from the variety of religious and spiritual notions that people, both African and Native American, brought from their homelands (Creel 1988; Stuckey 1987). And, within the hurricane of plantation slavery, it must have been these religious ideas that people employed to protect and heal both their bodies and souls.

Recent comparative studies in West and Central Africa (Herbert 1993, Anderson and Kreamer 1989, Mbiti 1991, Traore 1983) aimed at identifying aspects of culture shared by various peoples over large geographical areas suggests that many of the enslaved people brought to Carolina may have shared beliefs in the following:[7] (1) a strong dichotomy between cultural and non-cultural realms that structuralists have variously posed as *village* or *civilization* versus *bush, forest, wilderness*, or *nature*; (2) the useful yet often dangerous power associated with the *wilderness*; (3) a broad concept of medicine used to effect physical and social outcomes; (4) a widespread respect and awe for individuals -- especially iron smelters and potters -- who transform earth into artifacts; and (5) an association of iron with males and pottery with females. The ideology built in Carolina likely included these notions of the African majority as well as aspects of Native American religion, and bits and pieces of Islam and Christianity -- especially aspects of these latter three religions that resonated with traditional African ideas.

Although commonly held African ideas may have been brought to the American shore, the Carolina situation must have affected how these elements were fashioned into a creolized ideology. And, this appears to have been especially true for the African emphasis on iron

smelting and blacksmithing. First, there was no ore suitable for smelting iron in the lowcountry. Slaves were employed as blacksmiths, but they did not effect the fundamental transformation of earth to iron. Second, iron and ironworking was critically important to the operation of plantations, and both iron and blacksmiths were appropriated by white plantation owners and managers; they owned both the material and the worker. Third, Native Americans, who newly arriving Africans tended to associate with the power of the wilderness, did not work iron. Perhaps all of these elements worked to diminish the importance of iron and ironworking within the African-American community.[8]

Whereas the significance of iron may have been diminished in colonial times, there does not appear to have been reason to diminish the importance of pottery: Clay was readily available in the rice fields, and potters and pottery appear to have been insignificant to, and thus ignored by, white managers. Whereas planters bought and sold blacksmiths, there is no evidence that they valued slave potters at all. Native Americans, such as the women imported to South Carolina plantations in the early 18th century, made pottery, and they also possessed knowledge of the local medicinal herbs. Thus, the pottery half of the African iron/pottery dyad was apparently free to develop in the lowcountry and was even shared with the very people who could provide knowledge of the local pharmacopeia. Together, the pottery and pharmacopeia probably formed a significant component of the developing ideology.

Today, folk medicine ranging from the domestic use of herbs to the sorcery of some root doctors is part of the identifying characteristics of Gullah culture. These practices stand beside, and often in opposition to, modern medicine and Christianity. That this duality has great time-depth may be seen in the complaints of planters that slaves preferred their own medicine to that prescribed by white plantation "doctors," and of missionaries who lamented the "superstitions of the Negroes" (see Rosengarten 1986: 180-189). Interestingly, colonoware begins to disappear in Carolina at about the same time that large numbers of slaves were being converted to Christianity in the 1830s and 1840s.

Given this reasoning, I believe we can seriously consider that the pottery of the lowcountry was probably used in preparing and administering medicines as well as food (see Marcil 1993), and that it may have been a central material symbol in the foundational development of Gullah ideology and identity. Although "invisible" to whites, the pottery must have been an everyday part of the lives of thousands of African-Americans who may have seen it not only as a container but also as a medicine itself.

If the function of this pottery were to invoke the power of transformation and reinforce group solidarity, there may have been no need for decoration. We know from West Africa that plain, often crudely fashioned vessels, are commonly used in shrines and transformation rituals. The pots themselves are evidence of the transformation, and this may also have been true in South Carolina. As for group solidarity, given the cultural context, the plain pots would have been sufficiently distinctive to serve as symbols of group identity. Most African Americans in surrounding areas did not make or use hand built pottery, and the ware contrasted sharply with imported European ceramics. The situation with Indian-style pottery is more complicated. Nevertheless, Native American traits and

associations highlight both the Native American contribution to African American culture in early Carolina and the separation of slaves and free Indians in the post-Revolutionary Ware era.

As previously mentioned, early in the development of Gullah culture, Native Americans slaves were imported from Spanish Florida, and during this period complicated stamps similar to Southeastern prehistoric pottery were applied to some of the pottery used on plantations. These decorated pieces were likely produced by first generation Native American slaves. However, by the second quarter of the 18th century these decorative elements had disappeared. Much later in the late 18th and 19th century, itinerant Catawba Indians -- people who had allied themselves with the Americans during the Revolutionary War and had served planters as slave catchers[9] -- traveled from their homes in the upcountry to the Gullah region selling hand built pottery. However, their pottery, which shows up as a small minority in Charleston and on plantations, is quite different from the vast majority of colonoware. River Burnished pottery, the type presumed to have been made by the Catawbas, is thin, highly burnished and often has painted, floral or geometric decoration. One planter bought and saved a piece of Catawba pottery fashioned in the shape of a creamware pitcher and decorated with red paint (Wheaton, Friedlander and Garrow 1983: 234, 236); another wrote that the Catawba persisted in decorating their pottery with colored sealing wax even though there was little demand for the decorated pottery.[10] Thus, whereas colonoware pottery fashioned on plantations exhibits very little similarity to European-style ceramics, the Catawba allies of the Americans appear to have been copying European designs, and thus separating themselves from the slave population.

Conclusion

The plain, round bottomed bowls and jars found on plantations in the Gullah region probably have African as well as Native American roots, but it stands in stark contrast to imported European ceramics and in more subtle, yet no less distinctive contrast to the River Burnished pottery that was probably peddled by Catawba Indians. The cumulative evidence suggests that plantation colonoware was likely employed in making and administering medicine as well as preparing and serving food, and that it served as a commonly seen and explicit recognized symbol of Gullah identity. We know little of the development of African American religion prior to the middle 19th century, but we may be certain that spirituality and medicine were closely linked and colonoware pottery appears to have been a central material feature of that phenomenon. The plain ware may have symbolized both the power of transformation and the identity of a people struggling to survive the storm of slavery.

In conclusion, I add that we have a lot of work to do. Residue analyses have not been performed. We still cannot comfortably separate all of the materials made in free Indian villages from those made on plantations. Nevertheless, the growing body of evidence demands that as we continue this pursuit we seriously consider the role pottery may have played in the development of early African-American worldview.

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Endnotes

1. The model of creolization utilized in this research is based on a linguistic/cultural model outlined in ***Uncommon Ground*** **(Ferguson 1992; see also Joyner 1984, Brathwaite 1971, and**

Mintz and Price 1992). I see creolization as a special case of ethnogenesis (Moore 1994a and b). Also, according to Gailey and Patterson (*Power Relations and State Formation*: 1987: 9), "Ethnogenesis is the creation of authentic culture, where the locus of culture creation resides with the group as a whole. In the context of state formation, this may involve forging a national identity in opposition to the state-sponsored ideologies of unity and citizenship. Ethnogenesis may occur in a particular group designated by the state as an ethnicity. It may also involve people in a range of such state-identified groups, where the basis for identity is their shared labor. Peoples who had not had a firmly focused ethnic identity in a preclass setting may come to recognize their commonality with similar groups in civil society (Fried 1975)." These conditions of ethnogenesis are similar to conditions on slaveholding plantations in early South Carolina.

The model of cultural resistance employed in this research is outlined in "Struggling with Pots in Colonial South Carolina" (Ferguson 1991); ideas about ideological power come from Michael Mann's *Sources of Social Power* (1986).

2. The Geechee region is environmentally and culturally similar to the Gullah region except that it does not have the same time depth and large degree of Native American heritage. Slavery was illegal in Georgia until 1750, when planters from South Carolina began establishing rice plantations along the Georgia coast. While slaves with Native American heritage were immigrated to Georgia, many of the slaves on these plantations were newly imported from Africa.

3. The Stono Rebellion of 1739 and the Denmark Vesey conspiracy.

4. This pottery fits within the general category of colonoware which includes all locally made, low-fired, hand built pottery from the southeastern coastal region of the United States (Ferguson 1990, 1991, 1992), but within South Carolina the pottery appears to be associated with the Gullah region (Stein, n.d.).

5. Freetown's "Big Market" has been described as "the largest pharmacy in Sierra Leone" selling medicines of local groups as well as the Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa (White 1987: 41, 76). On visits to the Big Market in 1991 and 1993 I observed two "types" and three forms of pottery being sold. One type was shell tempered, highly burnished and fired to a bright orange. This type included perforated incense burners, large water coolers -- so called "monkey jugs" -- and small jars. The other type appeared to have been tempered with sand, was fired in a reducing atmosphere and was treated with an infusion. Informant Joseph Opala told me that these latter vessels were imported from Lunsar, 50-60 kilometers east of Freetown; subsequently I learned that both "types" were from Lunsar. Both were minimally decorated with light punctations, apparently with a comb-like tool,

around the shoulder. People in the market as well as through the city all agreed that the small jars -- the most common vessel form of the first type and the only form of the second -- were sold and used exclusively for cooking medicine.

6. Morgan and Terry, 1982.

7. Generalizing comparative studies of traditional African cultures are rare and the well-known attempt by Melville Herskovits to construct such a study for Americanists has received serious criticism. However, in recent years a few scholars -- those referenced in the text -- have ventured to describe a variety of cultural practices and descriptions illustrating commonly held beliefs. Certainly Eugenia Herbert's *Iron, Gender and Power* is the most aggressive of these studies.

8. This does not mean that blacksmiths and mechanics did not have significant political power in their relationships with whites. Unquestionably they possessed skills that plantation owners and managers needed. However, the situation may well have diminished the significance attributed to iron and blacksmiths in spiritual power.

9. Historian James Merrell in his work "The Racial Education of the Catawba Indians" (1984), describes mid-18th century colonial efforts to create enmity between African American slaves and free Indians. This alienation was partially accomplished by the offer of bounty to Native Americans who captured runaway slaves.

10. Philip Porcher remembered that "their ware was decorated with colored sealing wax and was in great demand" (Gregorie 1925: 21). In an apparently unpublished memoir entitled "A Sketch of the Village of Old Manchester" Ralph Ramsey wrote in the 1920s that "Every winter a few Catawba Indians visited the town bringing with them bows and arrows, moccasins, and earthenware pots and pans of their own make, some prettily colored." Ramsey continues to say that the trade lasted at least until 1820-25 and that the Indians came to the western part of Sumter County to dig "the superior clay found there." Novelist William Gilmore Simms (1841: 122) wrote that Catawba "taste pours itself out lavishly in the peculiar decorations which he bestows upon his wares." He describes the Indians as buying vermillion, umber, and other ochres as well as green, red, blue and yellow sealing wax with which to decorate their pottery. These colors, according to Simms were applied to the "pots and pans until the eye becomes sated with a liberal distribution of flowers, leaves, vines and stars, which skirt their edges, traverse their sides, and completely illuminate their externals." He concludes his description of Catawba pottery with this patronizing remark: "This truth, however, an Indian never will learn, and so long as I can remember, he has still continued to paint his vessels, though he cannot but see that the least decorated are those which are always the first disposed of."

An example of the relationship between whites and the Catawbas comes from artist Charles Fraser who wrote sometime in the early 19th century that the Catawbas "barter[ed] clay pottery," and that "There was one who never came to town without a visit to my father, always inquiring after his family, *and addressing my mother as sister*." [emphasis added] (Fraser 1854: quoted in Crane 1993: 133).