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Crossroads and Cosmologies: Diasporas and Ethnogenesis in the New World

Christopher C. Fennell
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, cfennell@illinois.edu

Kevin M. Bartoy
The Hermitage, BartoyK@wsdot.wa.gov

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December 2008 Newsletter

Book Review

Christopher C. Fennell. *Crossroads and Cosmologies: Diasporas and Ethnogenesis in the New World*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2007, xxii + 168 pp., illus., maps, bibliography, index. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-3141-5.

Reviewed for the African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter by Kevin M. Bartoy, Director of Archaeology, The Hermitage, Nashville, Tennessee.

With reply comment by the author.

Every student of American archaeology has been taught the mantra first coined by Gordon Willey and Philip Phillips and later immortalized by Lewis Binford, “American archaeology is anthropology or it is nothing.” Although this statement is consistently heralded throughout the halls of the academy, less often are these words put into practice. Within the context of historical archaeology, the critical importance of anthropological thought is often even further devalued as practitioners increasingly draw more inspiration from history, literary criticism and social theory.

Yet, in his new volume, *Crossroads and Cosmologies: Diasporas and Ethnogenesis in the New World*, Christopher Fennell places archaeology squarely in the realm of anthropology. Fennell not only emphasizes the need for archaeology to be anthropology but he also demonstrates the important contribution that archaeology makes to anthropology. In fact, the volume appears written for an audience of archaeologists as well as anthropologists in that it coherently explains the connections between archaeology and anthropology in such a way as to pierce the bias and jargon that creates artificial distance between archaeologists and other anthropologists.

In reemphasizing the place of archaeology within anthropology, Fennell makes a strong argument for an analysis that cross cuts artificial disciplinary boundaries to more holistically study diasporas through the lens of ethnogenesis, or, as Fennell labels this process, “ethnogenic bricolage.”

Fennell should be applauded for his repositioning of archaeology and anthropology as well as his development of the idea of “ethnogenic bricolage,” which moves scholars of the African Diaspora away from more dated concepts of “creolization” and towards a concept that recognizes the key interplay between structure and agency. The author develops his theoretical concept through inspiration from the theory of practice of Pierre Bourdieu and the structuration theory of Anthony Giddens. These two social theorists offer perhaps the most powerful source of intellectual thought for the framing of the process of cultural change.

In examples drawn from Cuba, Haiti, and Brazil, Fennell is able to apply his theoretical orientation and concept of “ethnogenic bricolage” to New World religious expressions that exhibit cultural influence from a diverse array of west and west central African cultures as well as European religious traditions. The creation of unique New World cultures and cultural expressions is evidenced in discussions of Haitian Vodun, Brazilian Macumba, and Cuban Santería. These examples firmly substantiate Fennell’s arguments and theoretical position.

However, I do not believe that Fennell’s analysis goes far enough. The examples from the Levi Jordan Plantation in Texas clearly show a blending of BaKongo and Yoruban traditions that should rightly be discussed in terms of the concept of “ethnogenic bricolage.” Fennell’s argument against such a process occurring in North America also seems to disregard the possible continuity of belief systems evident in several archaeological examples drawn from North American contexts. His arguments for the use of the BaKongo cosmogram as found on a variety of artifacts in slave quarters throughout North America are strong, particularly the use of this symbol in ceramic vessels found in the rivers and springs of the South Carolina Low Country. There is little doubt that these “crosses” show a substantial continuity with BaKongo religious beliefs. Yet, in these examples, Fennell does not discuss the “genesis” of a new form of cultural expression, but rather, what seems more like a “retention,” to use a very dated term. The same is true for his discussion of the German American folk tradition of “hexerei.” These

examples are not discussed in relation to a dynamic process of ethnic creation, but in relationship to previously documented practices in west central Africa and the Palatinate in modern Germany. Fennell further emphasizes the connection to these documented practices by demonstrating the likely origins of individuals to those areas of the Old World.

When examined in light of his strong theoretical framework, Fennell's examples from North America pose more questions than answers.

Why is the expression of BaKongo cosmology the dominant, if not only, cultural expression evident in these slave quarters? Why does this cosmology show such a great degree of continuity and stasis? And, most importantly, what happens to this belief system after Emancipation and how are these beliefs integrated (if at all) into the strong Christian traditions among African Americans in the American South?

I would contend that the processes at work in North America are not "instrumental" and static as portrayed by Fennell's analysis, but rather dynamic and indeed ethnogenic. I believe that this point could have been brought out through an analysis of the intersection of BaKongo cosmology and Christianity in North America in much the same way that he developed an analysis of Yoruban belief systems and Catholicism in his studies from the Caribbean and South America. Without this type of analysis, the discussion of BaKongo cosmology in North America seems little more than a study in cultural "retentions." It is interesting that North America is the only context in which archaeology is significantly discussed as the analysis of other New World contexts primarily relied on ethnography and historical accounts. One wonders whether it is this reliance on archaeology that has led to a much more static portrayal of cultural processes. Perhaps this is one of the limits of archaeology in this case.

I must note that Fennell did attempt a more dynamic analysis in his discussion of the "fist charms" that have been recovered at sites in Maryland, Virginia, and Tennessee. He attempted to tie these artifacts first to Christian tradition and then show how they were "redefined" into BaKongo cosmology. However, Fennell oversteps in initially identifying these objects with European jewelry traditions. In almost every instance, except one unusual variant discovered at The Hermitage in Tennessee, these objects were originally used as hook-and-eye closures and were unlikely related to the jewelry traditions of Europe that Fennell discusses.

Furthermore, while these objects may be seen to exhibit a vague similarity to a BaKongo cosmogram, Fennell does not look at the context of these objects.

The issue of context is where Fennell's North American examples particularly fail. Although he emphasizes the importance of context and best explanation for interpretation, he never discusses the contexts of these objects, which are not found in ritual spaces or in association with other ritual objects. In contrast, what makes his discussion of incised ceramics in South Carolina so powerful is the fact that they are found in the context of rivers or springs, which provides a strong line of evidence for their ritual use.

Overall, *Crossroads and Cosmologies* is an important contribution to diaspora studies. The volume provides innovative theory and analysis that will help to change for the better the lens through which we view the dynamics of cultural creation. While Fennell applies his theory and analysis convincingly in the Caribbean and South America, his analysis falls flat for North America. There is no question that Fennell has laid out an important new path for analysis. It is now essential that scholars of diasporas follow through on the great promise of this new perspective.

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Reply comment by Chris Fennell

I greatly appreciate Kevin Bartoy's strong regard for the theoretical perspective I set forth in *Crossroads and Cosmologies* and for the potential applications of practice theory and concepts of ethnogenesis within African diaspora archaeology. I find particularly interesting his disagreement with my evaluation of the case studies addressed in North America, and his view that those developments were "ethnogenic" rather than instrumental. This difference in perspectives parallels a broader theoretical debate emerging within our discipline. I specifically define a process of ethnogenesis, which I refer to as "ethnogenic bricolage," as involving social group identities. By this definition, individual expressions of particular cultural beliefs for private, personal purposes, does not equate with the process of ethnogenesis as I have defined it. Practice theory provides anthropologists with a persuasive way to understand the interaction of individual agency and innovation, on one hand, with social group dynamics and group

identity formation, on the other. However, some theorists today tend to omit a focus on “culture” as a shared set of beliefs, practices, and dispositions embedded within a social group dynamic, and instead focus predominantly on a concept of every individual as a “hybrid” creator of her own cultural repertoire. I view this hyper-constructivist tendency as lamentable and deficient, and I address such debates at greater length in the concluding chapter of *Crossroads and Cosmologies*. Hopefully, we will see this type of debate addressed in further detail in future issues of this Newsletter.

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