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Conjuring Boundaries: Inferring Past Identities from Religious Artifacts

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A detailed examination of commonalities between folk religion beliefs and practices of African American and European American ethnic groups raises intriguing issues. Interpretations concerning the ethnic group association of conjuration artifacts uncovered at eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sites in the mid-Atlantic region must be based on a clearer articulation of the interplay of three issues: the general dynamics of ethnic group boundedness; how material culture communicates such ethnic identities; and how conjuration practices support or subvert ethnic group boundaries. A variety of protective and malevolent conjuration practices likely functioned in different ways in intergroup and intragroup settings.

KEY WORDS: Folk religion; conjuration; ethnicity; diagnostic artifacts.

INTRODUCTION

Archaeologists working on colonial and antebellum period sites in America have inferred from the recovery of protective charms and divination or conjure items that those sites were occupied in the past by persons of African American heritage. Notably, archaeologists have more frequently uncovered and identified the material remains of folk religion practices of African American ethnic groups than of European American ethnic groups. Intriguing questions arise as to the dynamics with which ethnic group identities were created, maintained, changed, or subverted over time and among shifting populations, and the role that material culture played in those processes.

By integrating evidence from material culture, documentary records, and oral histories, the methods of historical archaeology provide a powerful approach for analyzing these questions (McGuire, 1982, p. 159). Archaeological study of the material remains of religious practices provides particularly valuable data for

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evaluating possible expressions of such ethnic identities. Documentary and oral history records are often selective and incomplete, and material expressions of religious symbolism can offer significant indicators of such past identities and boundaries (Spicer, 1971, p. 798).

This article begins by examining some interpretative approaches archaeologists, folklorists, and historians have used in evaluating the character and significance of folk religion practices in relation to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sites in the mid-Atlantic region. Examples of such artifacts are drawn from excavations at the Charles Carroll house in Maryland, the Monticello plantation in Virginia, a late eighteenth-century house site in Loudoun County, Virginia, and other historic period sites. This discussion considers whether the artifacts of past folk religion practices can be interpreted as having been meaningful to members of an array of ethnic groups. In particular, much of the material culture of African American folk religion traditions was likely recognizable and meaningful within the conjuration traditions of many European Americans. The much higher frequency with which archaeologists have uncovered and interpreted artifacts as products of African American conjuration traditions, rather than of similar European traditions, is partly due to the dynamics of two lines of historical debates.

Three implications follow from a consideration of the comparable meaningfulness of conjuration artifacts to an array of ethnic groups. First, we should investigate whether such recovered artifacts were created and used by members of European American ethnic groups. Second, we should be careful in our interpretative accounts to emphasize that European Americans also possessed conjuration beliefs and practices, so we can avoid unintentional stereotypes of African American ethnic groups as the only practitioners of such conduct. Lastly, if a conjuration artifact is interpreted as having served as a marker of past ethnic boundaries, we should investigate the degree to which it communicated an ethnic identity in a manner understandable to outsiders.

To explore these implications, this article next examines the ways in which folk religion practices could have created or subverted ethnic boundaries. Prominent theories of ethnic group dynamics are outlined. The likely role of conjuration practices within such dynamics proves complex. For example, it is not clear whether ethnic boundaries would be solidified or weakened when the members of one ethnic group target their folk religion practices at members of another group, or only at one another. Some preliminary answers are provided by applying theories on the stylistic signaling of ethnic boundaries to evidence concerning the character and significance of both protective and malevolent conjuration practices.

CONJURATION PRACTICES AMONG MULTIPLE ETHNICITIES

The material culture expressed in the form and content of past lifeways "can serve as potent symbols of ethnic and historical continuity" functioning "within

the cognitive structure that relates one person to the other members of a community and one community to others with which it has contact" (Netting *et al.*, 1984, p. xxx). Analysis of possible ethnic associations of past inhabitants of archaeological sites thus holds great interest for historical archaeology (Orser, 1994, p. 34, 1991, pp. 109, 110). Sociocultural anthropologists have similarly focused on the processes through which ethnic group boundaries are created, maintained, or changed, and how ethnic, cultural, and class differences crosscut or parallel one another. Under such approaches an ethnic group is defined as a concentrated or dispersed population that shares fundamental cultural values, makes up its own field of communication and interaction, and consists of individuals who identify themselves as a cohesive, distinguishable group (see, e.g., Barth, 1998a [1969], pp. 10, 11, 1998b [1969], pp. 117–121; De Vos, 1975, pp. 9–18).

This approach to ethnic group dynamics raises a related question of archaeological interpretation. Can particular types of artifacts be viewed as diagnostic markers, which provide convincing evidence of the ethnic affiliation of the inhabitants of a site? Some archaeologists view buried caches of polished quartz stones, pierced coins, beads, or shells at historical period sites as direct indicators of past habitation by African Americans. These artifacts have been referred to variously as objects of divination and conjuration, or as charms or conjures (Morgan, 1998, p. 621; Russell, 1997, pp. 63–70; Wilkie, 1997, pp. 82–92).

It is notable that archaeologists, historians, and folklorists use terms such as divination and conjuration for such artifacts. Rather than referring to such objects as items of religious practices, analysts often imply a distinction by using other terms. One distinction is that these objects are assumed to have been used in the exercise of religious beliefs in individually focused settings, rather than in group or public rituals. Thus, they involve invocations of spiritual forces for personal protection or for malevolent curses against another person. Another implicit distinction is that these were beliefs of a folk religion, rather than the expressions of a dominant group's formal religious views and dogma. Such folk religion may have been practiced separately or in syncretism with dominant religions (Thomas, 1971, pp. 221–232; Yoder, 1965, pp. 36–39).

An implicit assumption often undergirds the interpretations of possible sources of folk religion artifacts. Inferences are made to link the observable attributes of artifacts not just to a body of past folk religion beliefs, but also to an identifiable ethnic group, which is believed to have possessed and performed those traditions. When quartz crystals, pierced coins, and cowrie shells are readily attributed to African American sources, this implies that a stable, unchanging ethnic group existed which maintained the belief systems that produced those artifacts (Posnansky, 1999, p. 22; Singleton, 1999, p. 8; Singleton and Bograd, 1995, p. 25).

In the terms of stylistic analysis, this approach is comparable to Sackett's concept of isochrestic variation (Sackett, 1977, 1985), in which it is assumed that "there are in material culture highly specific patterns . . . that are socially bounded and that therefore may be regarded as idiomatic or diagnostic of ethnicity" (Sackett,

1985, p. 157). Sackett contended that much of the stylistic shape of material culture follows such isochrestic patterns in which members of a group passively learned their group's stylistic traditions through enculturation, and passively expressed those traditions when creating and using their material culture. He derived the term isochrestic as an indication that there are many different modes and shapes with which one can create objects that are "equivalent in use" (Sackett, 1985, p. 157). However, this theory of patterning does not apply to objects that communicate iconological and instrumental messages (Sackett, 1985, pp. 154, 157; Shanks and Tilley, 1992, pp. 143, 144; Wiessner, 1990, p. 107), as do protective charms and conjure items.

Aaron Russell and Laurie Wilkie recently emphasized the need for historical archaeologists to move beyond the mere association of such artifacts with persons of African American heritage. They each suggest that analysts also ask what functions, if any, those artifacts served in the past settings in which the objects were created and used (Russell, 1997, p. 63; Wilkie, 1997, p. 81). However, two related questions are also important.

First, we should question the premise, and ask whether these artifacts could have been produced by persons possessing other ethnic identities, including European ethnic groups. In many cases the premise holds, and archaeologists' interpretations of particular artifacts as the product of African American folk religion are supported with ample corroborative and contextual evidence (Brown and Cooper, 1990, p. 18; Wilkie, 1997, p. 102). However, even in those instances, we should next ask whether the objects would have been meaningful within the religious beliefs of persons outside the ethnic group of the individual who produced those materials. Both questions raise important issues regarding the boundedness of ethnic groups and their belief systems.

The importance of examining multiple ethnic groups as possible sources should be emphasized for a number of reasons: evidence may show that a member of another ethnic group created and used the artifact; an artifact may have been created by a member of one group, and then put to a similar or different use by someone of another ethnic identity; or a process of blending or creolization may have occurred over time in facets of the belief systems and material culture of multiple groups interacting in geographic proximity (Deetz, 1996, pp. 212–214; Kapchan and Strong 1999, pp. 240, 241; Orser, 1996, pp. 122, 128, 129; Sobel, 1987, p. 5).

The excavation of a historic period site in Annapolis, Maryland, produced an interpretation of artifacts as the material culture of a past African American folk religion. Archaeologists excavating the basement level of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century house of Charles Carroll uncovered a deposit of objects, including quartz crystals, a smooth black stone, a glass bead, and pierced discs and coins. They interpreted these artifacts as the material remains of a cache of protective charms. Based on these artifacts alone, they inferred that this portion

of the residence of an Anglo-American family was inhabited by enslaved African Americans, who had practiced uniquely African forms of religious beliefs in that space (Leone and Fry, 1999, pp. 372, 373; Logan, 1995, pp. 154, 155; Russell, 1997, p. 64).

This interpretation was made by drawing an analogy between the characteristics of the artifacts and stylistic elements used in religious expressions of the Bakongo people of the Congo–Angola region of Africa (Leone and Fry, 1999, pp. 372–373; Russell, 1997, p. 64). George Logan, one of the lead archaeologists on this excavation, described this find and its interpretation as a "breakthrough" in establishing the presence and lifeways of African Americans at this location (Russell, 1997, p. 64). Historian Robert Thompson viewed this analysis as providing a template for interpreting similar artifacts at other sites (Adams, 1994, pp. 1, 2; Russell, 1997, p. 65).

Such an endeavor of uncovering and recreating the lifeways of a people who were marginalized in the past, and who are largely invisible in the historical records of colonial America, deserves high praise (Perry and Paynter, 1999, p. 301). It is particularly engaging to uncover and recognize the material remains of the past practice of significant religious beliefs (McKee, 1995, p. 41; Samford, 1996, p. 107). However, this interpretative template should be combined with additional questions.

Deetz (1996, pp. 251, 252) has cautioned strongly against a reliance on ethnic markers, because "no quantity of such objects can provide absolute proof" of the presence of a particular ethnic group without additional, corroborating evidence (see also Brown and Cooper, 1990, p. 18; Wilkie, 1997, p. 102). However, an additional concern should be raised as well: When the artifact is interpreted as an expression of divination, conjuration, or folk religion practices, the initially laudatory effort to link it to African Americans may impose unintentional stereotypes on that group as the only group one would expect to have practiced such "magic" in colonial and antebellum America. We should seek more than corroborative evidence in support of one interpretation. We should also ask whether the item could have been comparably meaningful to the other ethnic groups that may have inhabited the area.

There are two reasons why this issue should be addressed and the related evidence discussed in interpretative accounts. First, the question may be answered in the affirmative. This will yield important observations of the complexity of different ethnic identities, possessing an array of comparable belief systems, and the degree to which they may have interacted over time and space (see Singleton and Bograd, 1995, pp. 24, 25; Wilkie, 1997, pp. 83, 84). Second, even if answered in the negative, these alternative questions and analyses should be expressed in our interpretative accounts so that the potential alternative stories of the past are made known to our audiences. This is an important component of any analysis if it is to maintain and enhance the historical sensibilities of our audiences, both professional

and public (Handler and Gable, 1997, p. 224; Kelly and Kelly, 1980, p. 137). By presenting an isolated conclusion of an African American source and meaning for such artifacts, and not observing the possibility of comparable uses in European ethnic traditions, an analyst runs a strong risk of inadvertently perpetuating racial stereotypes.

Such stereotypes can also be perpetuated unintentionally by the way in which one discusses ethnic differences. Ethnic group identities may be viewed as mental constructs created by shifting populations of persons who subscribed to those identities in the past, and they are also analytic constructs applied by anthropologists in studying the dynamics of past periods (Emberling, 1997, pp. 302, 303, 324, 325; Shennan, 1989, pp. 12, 13). These emic and etic constructs are not free of the dangers of creating a focus on group differences, which can ultimately lead to a racializing discourse in the present (Emberling, 1997, p. 296; Epperson 1999; Orser, 1991, pp. 111, 112; Perry and Paynter, 1999, p. 307; Urciuoli, 1996, pp. 15–18). It is therefore important to focus on ethnic group identities as fluid and shifting constructs of persons in the past, and to avoid the reification of ethnic group constructs in the present use of those terms.

What evidence might one find when asking whether the artifacts uncovered at the Carroll house were deposited by persons who had subscribed to an Anglo-American identity and associated cultural traditions? Charles Carroll was an Anglo-American member of the Catholic faith, educated in England and France, and prominent in business and politics (Potter, 1994, pp. 85, 86, 142). Carroll, his family, and servants occupied this site in Annapolis intermittently in the period of 1765–1820 (Kryder-Reid, 1998, pp. 274, 275).

Nineteenth-century texts that describe "cunning" and healing traditions in England report the practice of keeping different types of distinctive stones on one's person or in one's house to ward off "fiends" and acts of "sorcery" (Bonser, 1963, pp. 342–344, citing Cockayne, 1864). Similar references appear in the records of seventeenth-century Scottish witch trials, with the use of curing-stones mentioned as one aspect of suspect behavior (Black, 1941, p. 341; Kunz, 1915, pp. 155, 156). An older tradition of fascination with the mystical quality of polished pieces of quartz crystal extends from the Greco-Roman period onward, with references found from locations throughout Islam, the Mediterranean, and Europe (Kunz, 1915, pp. 397–401). Such traditions strongly suggest possible Anglo-American sources for the use of such stones and crystals as protective charms.

Consider the pierced coins uncovered at the Carroll house and at a number of other archaeological sites, including Andrew Jackson's Hermitage plantation (McKee, 1995, pp. 40, 41; Orser, 1994, pp. 40, 41; Russell, 1997, p. 68). African Americans reportedly believed that tying a piece of silver with a hole in it to one's leg could create protection from malevolent forces. Pierced silver coins, including dimes, were used for this purpose, and were often worn on the ankle or as a necklace. One could also place a silver coin or penny (presumably without

piercing it) in one's stocking or shoes to achieve the same result (Genovese, 1976, p. 223; Hand, 1964, pp. 106, 107, 131, 164, 165; Hyatt, 1965, pp. 899, 900; Puckett, 1926, pp. 288, 289, 314; Steiner, 1901, p. 179).

Could such coins be interpreted as comparably meaningful to someone of an European ethnicity? The English used votive coins as charms. A person working this charm typically used a coin that was minted as currency, and bent it to convert it from usable currency into an object offered in supplication for protection or cures from a chosen saint or other spiritual force (Merrifield, 1988, pp. 90–92). A King James I farthing, which had been bent in half, was uncovered in excavations of an early pit-house structure at the seventeenth-century Flowerdew Hundred plantation in Tidewater Virginia (Deetz, personal communication). An archaeological site in Kent, England, dating to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, revealed a votive coin in the area of the dairy. Similar coins, including a dime and a five-cent piece, were found in similar contexts in historic period sites located in Kentucky and Nova Scotia. Such votive coins may have been used as charms against curses that could spoil milk or prevent butter from churning (Merrifield, 1988, pp. 161, 162).

Glass beads and cowrie shells, such as those recovered at the Carroll house in Annapolis and at a house site along Mulberry Row at Monticello, have also been interpreted as African charms to ward off malevolent spiritual forces (Leone and Fry, 1999; Logan, 1995, pp. 154, 155; Orser, 1994, p. 40; Russell, 1997, pp. 64, 68, 69; Stine *et al.*, 1996). This interpretation follows from an analogy to the stylistic elements of existing religious practices from certain regions of West and Central Africa (Thompson, 1983, pp. 11, 12, 24–27, 43, 185, 186). In addition, beads have been interpreted in accordance with African social rules for adornment (Russell, 1997, pp. 68, 69; Samford, 1996, pp. 101, 102; Stine *et al.*, 1996, pp. 64, 65).

Yet, if one were to seek out evidence of possible uses in English traditions, alternative analogies and interpretations become possible. Archaeological remains of cowrie shells from graves and house sites in England are evident. Similarly, English ethnohistoric sources indicate that beads "were worn by both sexes and seem to have been regarded as protective agents against danger in general and against witchcraft in particular" (Bonser, 1963, p. 234).

RECOVERING LOST HISTORIES AND "THE DECLINE OF MAGIC"

Given the evidence for such comparable beliefs and practices, why have archaeologists uncovered and interpreted so few remains of the folk religion practices of European ethnic groups in America (see, e.g., Becker, 1978; Merrifield, 1988; Thomas, 1994), while they have had such greater success in identifying the artifacts of African American practices (see, e.g., Brown and Cooper, 1990; Ferguson, 1999, 1992; Franklin, 1997; Leone and Fry, 1999; McKee, 1995; Patten, 1992; Samford, 1996; Stine *et al.*, 1996; Wilkie, 1997; Young, 1997, 1996)? While

it is possible that more artifacts of African American folk religion, in fact, survived, it is also possible that interpretative biases have subtly influenced these findings. Assumptions from two main debates likely fuel this trend: first, the view that African Americans retained religious beliefs from their homelands, even in the face of enslavement; and second, a view that European groups did *not* retain any folk religious practices after the impact of the Reformation and Enlightenment ideological movements.

Some historians contended that the disruptive experience of slavery wiped out African Americans' memories and knowledge of religious traditions existing in the homelands from which they were torn (e.g., Frazier, 1966a, b; Whitten, 1962). In contrast, a number of studies have argued persuasively that African Americans succeeded in retaining detailed memories of the belief systems of their original homelands, and that they passed these traditions onto later generations in America. For example, anthropologist Herskovits (1941) tracked a number of parallels in lexicons and in particular practices to demonstrate the survival of African religions in the American colonies. Recorded interviews with former slaves provide additional evidence of their belief that these traditions survived from African sources (Perdue *et al*., 1976, p. 267).

Genovese (1976, p. 210) aptly captured the heart of the matter: "The fact remains that a significant thrust in black culture emanated from the African tradition. If that thrust had European counterparts, so be it. If those counterparts reinforced or encouraged certain features of black religion, well and good" (see also Orser, 1994, pp. 34, 35; Wilkie, 1997, pp. 83, 84). The contributions of African traditions have been further established by the historical analyses of Thompson (1983) and Sobel (1987), and the archaeological analyses of Ferguson (1992, 1999) and Deetz (1996), among others.

In contrast, Thomas' influential analysis of European history in *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (Thomas, 1971) illustrates a primary intellectual basis for the tendency to assume that European settlers in the American colonies would not have practiced such conjuration or divination practices. He argues that an increasingly rationalized Christian religion fully displaced systems of folk magic in European cultures over the last few centuries. Thomas (1971, p. 223) finds that folk magic, pre-Reformation Christianity, and so-called "pagan" philosophies, all shared basic attributes:

> The universe was peopled by a hierarchy of spirits, and thought to manifest all kinds of occult influences and sympathies. The cosmos was an organic unity in which every part bore a sympathetic relationship to the rest. Even colours, letters and numbers were endowed with magical properties.

Thomas contends that folk magic and pagan philosophies, if not Catholicism, were swept away by the tides of the Reformation. This religious movement introduced a new world view of separated spiritual and physical realms, and it declared illusory an enormous panoply of intermediate spirits and intercessionary saints.

Enlightenment philosophies developed in near parallel, emphasizing for the academic and intellectual sectors of these societies a distinct separation of spirit and mind from nature, cause, and effect (Thomas, 1971, pp. 641–668).

A primary flaw in Thomas' argument is seen in the ample evidence that many members of European ethnic groups continued to practice folk religions during and after the Reformation and Enlightenment (see, e.g., Tambiah, 1990, pp. 19–23). This occurred, even though the Reformation sought to sweep away the complex cosmology of Catholicism, its legions of hierarchical spirits, intercessionary saints, and the practices of supplication to so many guardian spirits (e.g., Yoder, 1990, p. 95). Both the Reformation and Enlightenment humanism are based on the assumption that the divine is separate from the natural, physical world in which humans live out their lives. Ironically, the internal logic of those religious and intellectual movements likely facilitated the *persistence* of beliefs in folk magic.

Enlightenment humanism would draw a sharp line between the phenomena of mind and spirit as distinct from the phenomenal world of nature and the physical trappings of humankind's daily existence. Thus, invisible forces such as gravity and the invisible forces of nonpersonified spiritual power would be articulated in parallel developments (Wagner, 1986, p. 111). This parallel resulted because divine power was reconceptualized in fifteenth-century Catholicism and in the sixteenth-century Reformation as something that existed separate from the personified presence of God or Christ. One could access divine power without invoking the physical presence of a creator or Messiah. Conversely, one could seek to inflict malevolence by invoking a free-floating pool of evil power (also God's creation) without invoking the physical presence of a personified Satan.

Rather than obviate widespread practices of folk magic and conjuration in Europe, this trajectory of the Reformation and Enlightenment simply drove them underground, making them less visible to the ecclesiastical, judicial, and academic segments of those societies (Yoder, 1990, p. 95). Moreover, those new religious and intellectual ideologies did not supplant the logic of folk magic, and instead facilitated that logic with a focus on the existence of nonpersonified forces that could be accessed by any person. Religion scholar Raboteau (1980, pp. 287, 288) argues further that "Christianity, especially on the popular level, has a certain tendency to appropriate and baptize magical lore from other traditions. In an important sense, conjure and Christianity were not so much antithetical as complementary."

Nonetheless, assumptions within these debates have equipped archaeologists with the ability to identify and interpret artifacts of conjuration and divination practices with African American ethnic traditions, but have fueled the neglect of comparable analysis of European ethnic practices. For example, archaeologist Leone and folklorist Fry (1999, p. 384) support their interpretation of artifacts at the Carroll house as African American spiritual objects with the following reasoning:

> Because there are no Christian items in the caches, including those in the Catholic Carroll house, we conclude that conjure/rootwork is mostly an African tradition. This is because

> of the metonymic tie between crystals and glass which has no analogies in Protestant Christianity and, more significantly, because of the completely nontextual and nonverbal nature of conjure. Christianity has no ritual acts unaccompanied by words.

Yet, we should also examine the folk religion and conjuration practices of European Americans, and not just the dominant Christian beliefs and practices to which they may have subscribed. As Raboteau (1980, pp. 283, 287, 288) points out, both Catholic and Protestant strains of Christianity would largely tolerate parallel practices of conjuration by their congregations.

Such an emphasis on the existence of conjuration beliefs among past European American ethnic groups is not a return to the view that Europeans created such belief systems and that African Americans simply borrowed and perpetuated those practices long after Europeans came to their senses (Whitten, 1962). Rather, we should seek evidence of the degree to which European American and African American ethnic groups each possessed their own systems of conjuration beliefs and practices independent of one another. We should further seek evidence of the degree of similarities between those systems due either to analogous, independent developments within each, or due to the sharing of information between the groups over time.

Leone and Fry (1999, p. 384) emphasize the great value we should place on the discovery of evidence that African Americans practiced their folk religion within the walls of the "big houses" that were occupied by the European Americans who enslaved them. Such finds serve as "compelling reminders of hundreds of years of African and African American resistance to the slavery and racism that the houses were built to institutionalize." This point can be strengthened by examining the similarities in the folk religion practices of the oppressors and oppressed. In doing so, we can inform our public audiences of the remarkable acts of past resistance, and also that they should abandon any assumption that "folk magic" could only be the product of African traditions, and not European.

COMMONALITIES IN MALEVOLENT CONJURATION

A further example will illustrate the ambiguous character of such artifacts of conjuration and the existence of parallel beliefs and practices among African American and European American ethnic groups. Preliminary excavations at a late eighteenth-century house site in Loudoun County, Virginia, uncovered an artifact that was likely an object of malevolent conjuration. Such artifacts of "magic to harm" have rarely been found (Wilkie, 1997, p. 88). Due to their covert and secretive character, one would expect the least amount of sharing and borrowing of such traditions across ethnic boundaries. Also due to their secretive nature, such beliefs and practices are typically under-reported in the historical documentary record, and archaeological investigations provide a valuable avenue of detecting and interpreting their use and significance (Wilkie, 1997, p. 93).

Our first question is whether this artifact can be interpreted as the material expression of folk religion beliefs, or something else. Next, if an artifact of folk religion, can it be attributed to one or more ethnic groups, be they African American or European American? Similarly, would it have been meaningful only to members of one of those groups, or would it have been meaningful to members of multiple groups? If it would have been meaningful to multiple groups, what significance does that factor hold?

The artifact in question is a small clay figure of a human skull (Fig. 1). The object is 3/4 of an inch tall and was sculpted by skilled hands. It has very

Fig. 1. Conjuration artifact from a late eighteenth-century house site in Loudoun County, Virginia. This clay figure is approximately 3/4 of an inch tall.

Fig. 2. Rear view of artifact from Loudoun County site, with insignia outlined.

well-defined renderings of the eye sockets, nose socket, and teeth. On the upper back of the skull is a raised figure of a large X, which could also denote St. Andrew's cross (a "saltire," in heraldry terms), or crossed bones. The initials R, H, S, and D appear in raised clay between the arms of the X (Fig. 2). The initial H is more eroded than the others and could be an M. The skull is made of a type of red-yellow clay available from the subsoils of the area (U.S.G.S., 1960, 1996). X-rays and magnetic tests reveal that it has a small loop of iron wire as an internal core. The person who made this object likely used the wire as a base to hold the clay when sculpting the figure.

Fig. 3. South and East facades of late eighteenth-century house at Loudoun County site.

This skull was recovered six inches below the soil surface underlying the floor boards of a late eighteenth-century house (Fig. 3), approximately halfway between the north and south doorway entrances. It was located in association with hand-wrought nails, cut nails, glasswares, and ceramics dating from the period between approximately 1780 and 1860 (Nelson, 1968; Phillips, 1994; Priess, 1973). There is no compelling evidence that these associated artifacts were deposited with this object in a ritual manner.

This house site is located six miles to the south of Harpers Ferry, West Virginia. It is a relatively isolated site in a heavily wooded area halfway up the Short Hill Mountains in the Loudoun Valley, which lies immediately east of the Shenandoah Valley (Fig. 4). This house site dates to the period of approximately 1780 onward. The standing house is one and half stories tall, one room deep, two rooms wide, with a central chimney for stoves, and was constructed of thick, hand-hewn timbers interwoven in a cross-notch fashion.

Studies in architectural history indicate that the layout, floor plan, and methods of construction utilized in this house were employed primarily by German settlers in this region (Chappell, 1986, pp. 28–30; Glassie, 1978, pp. 411–413; Lay, 1982, p. 19). However, the possible ethnic identity of the persons who built the house does not necessarily inform us of potential ethnic identities of later occupants, or their

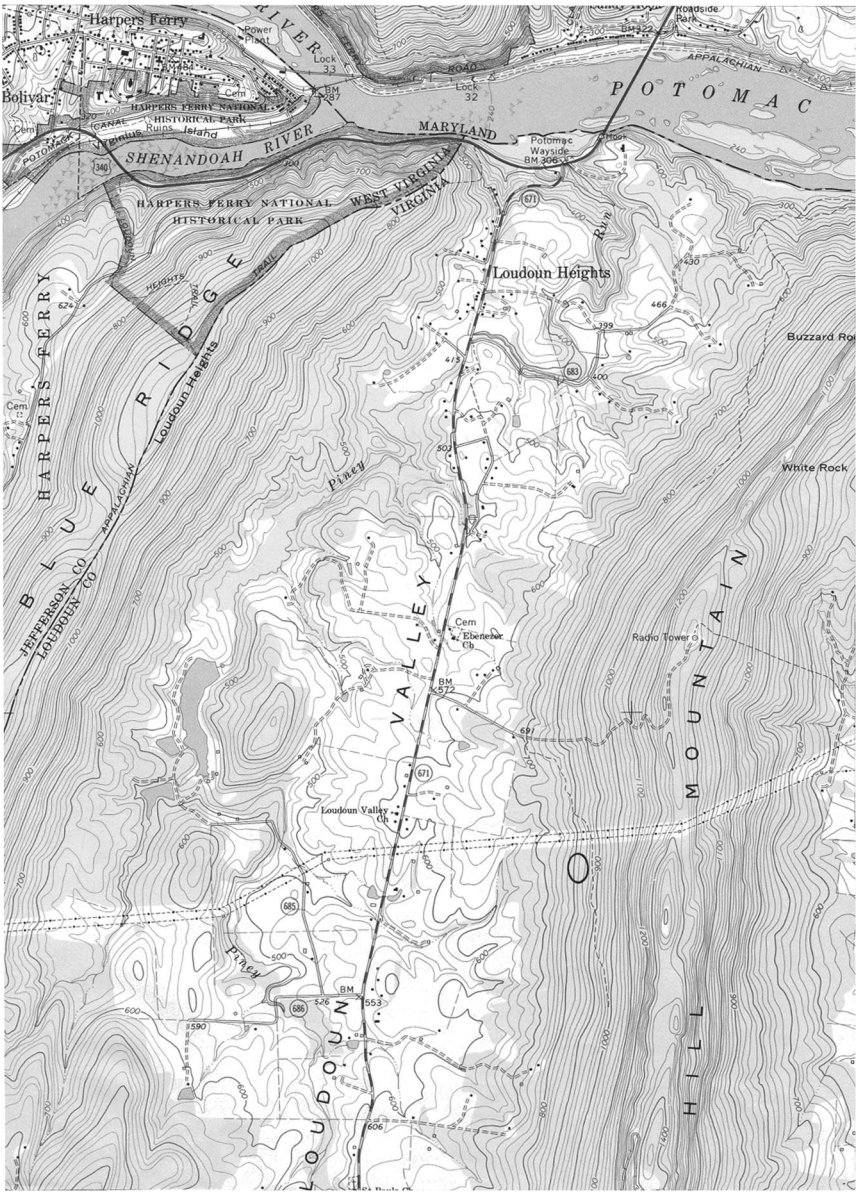

Fig. 4. Map showing location of Loudoun County site.

acquaintances, who may have created or used this artifact. Historical data provides evidence of the types of ethnic groups that inhabited this region in the relevant period. For example, a fairly large contingent of German settlers emigrated from the Pennsylvania area into the northern Virginia Piedmont in the mid-eighteenth century, as did many Irish and Scots-Irish settlers. Free and enslaved African Americans were also present, as were English settlers who moved into the region from the Tidewater area of Virginia (Poland, 1976, pp. 6, 27, 131; Wust, 1969, pp. 17–26).

The other artifacts recovered at the Loudoun County site include fairly basic mass-produced ceramics, glasswares, and iron hardware of the period. Land ownership records indicate that this property was acquired and settled by Peter Demery (also spelled Demory or Dimory) and his wife Mary in the late 1700s or early 1800s. They first held a lease, established a homestead, and then purchased the land in 1811 from the Fairfax family (Loudoun County, Virginia, Deed Books, 1800–1820, 2D, p. 331, 2N, pp. 371–373). Peter was born in 1768 and died in 1843; Mary was born in 1769 and died in 1849. Their son Mahlon was born in 1810 and died in 1870. Harry Demery, who was likely one of Mahlon's children, was born in 1840 and died in 1915. All of these individuals are buried at church cemeteries near the house site. The Demerys and all subsequent owners of the property, as recorded in deed records, appear to have been of European descent.

Our first question is whether this skull can be interpreted as something other than a conjure item. Many of the alternative explanations relevant to this skull could be explored as well when interpreting artifacts at other sites, which might be viewed as conjure items. The specific attributes of each object, the context in which it was located, and associated artifacts will be vital to each interpretation (Brown and Cooper, 1990, pp. 16–19; Stine *et al.*, 1996, pp. 64, 65).

One possibility is that this skull was a clay toy or gaming piece. Historical archaeologist Noël Hume (1969, pp. 314, 315) found a variety of remarkably well-formed toy "[f]igurines made in two-piece molds from colored clay [that] were popular in the seventeenth century" among English settlers in Virginia. However, he found no toys of this type from the eighteenth century or later (Noël Hume, 1969, p. 315). The likelihood that this handmade skull figurine was a toy is undermined by the detailed inscriptions of the X insignia and initials, for which it is difficult to posit a function on a toy form. The insignias and sculpted details on this item also do not show the degree of surface wear from handling one might expect if it were used as a toy or gaming piece (Klingelhofer, 1987, p. 116). Catalogues of toy pieces from colonial and nineteenth-century America reveal no attributes related to the form and detail of this artifact.

This skull could also be an icon of a family's "coat of arms." The skull and cross-bone figures could be features of an armorial design, and the initials R, H, S, and D correspond to a family name or motto. The cross could also be a figure of St. Andrew's cross, which typically signifies a unification of different realms, such as heavenly and earthly realms or territorial realms (Cirlot, 1962, p. 66).

This possibility was tested by examination of a collection of 112,600 coats of arms from Great Britain and Europe known to exist up through the nineteenth century (Rolland and Rolland, 1953). This collection revealed only three family crests that used a skull and cross-bones motif: a family of Dalmatia with the unfortunate name of Morte, the Motte family of Bohemia, and the Schrickel family of Gorlitz. None of these coats of arms have accompanying mottoes or other terms that would correspond with the initials R, H (or M), S, and D. Nor are these family names recorded in extensive lists of those who emigrated from the districts of Germany to the American colonies (Yoder, 1953). Catalogues of armorial mottoes were also examined, and no motto was identified that corresponds directly to these four initials.

A similar possibility is that the skull was an icon representative of a guild society or similar association, such as the Freemasons, Odd Fellows, or Knights of Pythias (Yoder, 1965, p. 52). For example, late nineteenth-century medallions and watch charms were sold at retail, which included skull and cross-bones motifs for the Knights of Pythias and the Odd Fellows (Weber, 1971, p. 629; Israel, 1968, pp. 421, 422). However, historical information on these groups and examples of their memorabilia show no corresponding use of the combined motifs and initials as on the Loudoun County artifact.

The skull could also have been a form of *memento mori*, similar to small amulets and medallions produced throughout Europe over the past few centuries. These objects typically commemorated the death of a particular individual, provided a general invocation of the inevitability of death and the wisdom of living with humility in the face of such mortality, or were worn as protective charms against epidemic diseases (e.g., Weber, 1971, pp. 2–4, 605, 606). Skeletons, grim reapers, skulls, bones, and cherubs were frequent components in the designs of these small objects. However, an examination of Frederick Weber's extensive survey of *memento mori* revealed none with design, motifs, and initials directly corresponding to the design of the Loudoun County artifact. For example, the initials R, H, S, and D do not correspond with known mottoes on such items, even if the H and D (or M and D) were taken to be the initials of the deceased.

Thus, possible interpretations other than conjuration prove unpersuasive. The next question is whether the skull was the product of a conjuration tradition associated with one or more ethnic groups in the relevant region and time period. Fairly extensive evidence is available from oral histories, slave narratives, and other studies in folklore and archaeology to support the interpretation that this skull was produced in accordance with African American traditions of folk religion.

Interviews with former slaves and free African Americans report the use of an X insignia as an invocation sign within their conjuration traditions (Franklin, 1997, p. 251; Georgia Writers' Project, 1940, p. 135; Steiner, 1901, p. 173; Young, 1997, pp. 21, 22). The X insignia might also be of similar derivation and significance as the cosmogram etchings, which Ferguson found associated with African American

Colono Ware pottery in the Carolinas and Virginia (Ferguson, 1999, 1992, pp. 111–116; Orser, 1994, pp. 38, 39).

Similarly, African American conjuration traditions included the practice of marking a conjure item with an X and identifying the targeted person by etching his or her name into the item, or writing the name on paper wrapped around the conjure. Those traditions also included a practice of placing conjure items beneath the floor or steps of a door through which the target person regularly walked, or in the soil of a pathway they used, as a way to facilitate the working of the conjure (Bacon and Herron, 1896, p. 145; Hand, 1964, pp. 105, 106; Perdue *et al.*, 1976, pp. 243, 244, 263; Steiner, 1901, p. 177). For example, to "throw off" a malevolent spell, the target of that spell places his or her own conjure item under the doorstep of the first suspected conjurer and casts the malevolent spell back on the first conjurer (Hand, 1964, pp. 105, 106; see Wilkie, 1997, pp. 88, 89).

These objects were not used as fetishes for repeated rituals of worship, but rather as individual invocations of spiritual forces to achieve a particular result (Genovese, 1976, p. 224; Leone and Fry, 1999, p. 383). In the voluminous oral histories of African American beliefs on conjuration practices, there is a notable dearth of references to specific, personified invocations of God, Christ, the Devil, or other named deities. Instead, conjurations are typically described as invoking a form of nonpersonified spiritual power.

Image magic can be worked, according to a number of African American accounts, by making an image of the target person in wax, mud, clay, beeswax, dough, or cloth, and piercing that image with pins or nails. The addition to this image, of hair, fingernail or toenail trimmings, or personal possessions of the target person would strengthen the power of the conjure item (Hand, 1964, p. 103; Puckett, 1926, p. 244). Malevolent image magic could also be achieved by drawing a picture of the target person, hanging the picture up, and shooting it or driving nails into it (Hand, 1964, p. 109; Puckett, 1926, p. 245). A variety of techniques using pictures have been recorded through folklore studies: a photograph hung upside down will kill the person depicted; bury a person's photograph in the graveyard, and that person will die when the image fades away; place a tintype photograph in water, and as the image fades, so will the person depicted (Hand, 1964, p. 109; Hyatt, 1965, pp. 807, 810; Puckett, 1926, pp. 244, 245).

One could ward off conjurers and witches by placing an X on a Bible and keeping it in the house (Hand, 1964, p. 128; Puckett, 1926, p. 568; Steiner, 1901, p. 178). The sign of the cross was also used to ward off curses (Hand, 1964, p. 164). Horseshoes, and the nails used to fasten horseshoes, were also used to ward off malevolent conjures (Hand, 1964, p. 107; Perdue *et al.*, 1976, p. 278; Puckett, 1926, pp. 291, 314). Lastly, African American folklore also has a record of items similar to the English witch-bottle. It was believed within African American traditions that one could catch a witch in a bottle that had a stopper stuck with pins (Hand, 1964, p. 131; Puckett, 1926, p. 161). Similarly, African American conjure items have

been found, which incorporated a bottle-like vessel to contain other components, and this was buried under the doorway or pathways likely traversed by the target person (Hyatt, 1965, p. 798; Samford, 1996, p. 109; Wilkie, 1997, pp. 88, 89).

These records of African American conjuration practices show that the skull uncovered in Loudoun County could be interpreted as a conjure item created in accordance with these beliefs. The shape of the figure invoked the malevolence of death, the X invoked the curse, and the initials identified the target person in some way. While the H (or M) and D could be the initials of Harry or Mahlon Demery, I have found no correlates for the initials R and S in documentary records related to the site. This skull could have been buried under the floorboards to work its magic on the target, as that person walked over the hidden item. The simple burying of a conjure item has the significance of invoking death as well. This may have been an initial curse, or a counterspell worked on a suspected witch.

In contrast, could this artifact have been produced by a member of one of the European ethnic groups known to have settled in this region during the relevant period? Little information is available in the published reports written by historical archeologists in America that would help in answering this question. However, fairly extensive evidence is available in oral histories and folklore studies, and in archeological reports primarily by anthropologists working outside the United States. The following discussion summarizes evidence on a broad array of conjuration practices, each of which will inform possible interpretations of the skull from the Loudoun County site. Moreover, this discussion further illustrates the degree of similarities among such folk religion beliefs and practices of European American and African American ethnic groups.

A number of techniques of conjuration and charms used in England and Germany in the period of the sixteenth century onward appear to have antecedents in classical Greco-Roman practices. Others appear to have developed from Anglo-Saxon or Tudor practices (Bonser, 1963, pp. 3, 4; Thomas, 1971, pp. 178, 181). Conjurers in England were typically called cunning men, wise women, conjurers, or witches, and they could provide folk medicine charms as well as benevolent or malevolent magical invocations (Thomas, 1971, p. 178). In addition, a variety of prominent persons engaged in "hazardous political enterprises" in England, from the fourteenth through seventeenth centuries, were reported to have invoked malevolent curses and preventive charms to aid them (Thomas, 1971, p. 232).

The invocation of a malevolent force by piercing a waxen or clay image of the victim with pins and nails is associated with cultures throughout the Mediterranean and northern Europe in classical and later periods (Stearne, 1648, pp. 53, 54; Summers, 1970, p. xix). If the image was made of wax, it would often be slowly melted over a fire with the belief that the victim would perish as the wax burned in the flame (Larner, 1984, pp. 9, 14–16; Summers, 1970, p. xix).

European descendants in America also described their use of image magic through the manipulation of photographs or drawn pictures of the victim. German

beliefs included the burning of a person's picture, while chanting an invocation charm, to work lethal conjuration (Hand, 1964, p. 109; Hyatt, 1965, p. 810). One could achieve the same result by driving a tack into the area of the heart in the picture (Hyatt, 1965, p. 809). German folklore also included the technique of burning the picture or photo within a small hole in the ground, and covering over the ashes when it was consumed (Hand, 1964, pp. 109, 110; Hyatt, 1965, p. 810). An Irish belief included hanging a picture on an oak tree and driving nails into it to inflict injuries (Hand, 1964, p. 109; Hyatt, 1965, p. 810), or placing a picture of the target person upside down with a pitcher of water behind it (Hyatt, 1965, p. 809).

German "powwow doctors" of the Pennsylvania region were also reported to recommend that one work a counterspell on a witch by making a wood image of the witch, piercing it with nails, and burying it. The body part into which the nail was driven would be injured on the witch, and the witch would be identified by that result and forced to desist from his or her own conjurations (Shaner, 1961a, p. 72). Similarly, German descendants in Pennsylvania used photographs or pictures of a target person, and would shoot at it or pierce it, often using this as a countercharm against a suspected witch (Yoder, 1962, pp. 31, 32; 1990, p. 251).

European charms based on early Christian referents also included images of the five wounds of Jesus, based upon the piercing of his hands, feet, and heart in some accounts of the crucifixion (Yoder, 1990, pp. 81, 100). From this source come images of a heart pierced with a sword or spear, and hands and feet, representative of the nailed extremities of Jesus on the cross (Yoder, 1990, p. 81). Such images would often receive the approval of the Catholic church as viable devotional art (Yoder, 1990, p. 81). This may be the original referent from which metal charms were mass-produced, which depicted a hand holding a wire frame with a small stone inset in that wire frame. Such charms were available as watch charms in the nineteenth century from retailers such as Sears Roebuck (Israel, 1968, p. 419). This may provide an alternative interpretation of the initial function of the small brass hand amulets discovered at the Hermitage plantation and attributed to African American conjuration (McKee, 1995; Orser, 1994, pp. 39, 40; Russell, 1997).

Small images of human anatomy were also used as votive offerings to Catholic saints. These votives often included small images of different body parts in silver or wax. The image depicted the part of the body for which a cure was sought (Merrifield, 1988, pp. 88–93). This practice is depicted in a fifteenth-century wood print of St. Anthony, and examples have been recovered from the fifteenth-century tomb of Bishop Edmund Lacey in Exeter. Such votive offerings have been used in the Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox Churches to the present (Merrifield, 1988, pp. 88–90).

Thomas (1971, pp. 513, 514, 544) found the use of such image magic to be the "most common maleficent technique" used in England. The frequent occurrence of malevolent conjuration, including the use of wax or clay images, is evident in defamation lawsuits recorded in seventeenth-century English courts, in

which allegations of malevolent magic were under dispute. Yet, this is conjuration of a largely mundane form, which does not involve persons allegedly having a union with the Devil: "These cases are the best evidence at a popular level, both for the prevalence of witch-beliefs, and for their essentially traditional nature" (Thomas, 1971, p. 446). Christina Larner's studies of witchcraft in Scotland and England led her to the same conclusion, that "[s]imple maleficium" was "the staple diet" even in most court cases, and demonic possession was less frequently alleged (Larner, 1984, p. 18). Similarly, small effigies of sticks and cloth have been recovered in seventeenth-century New England house sites, in contexts suggesting their use as image magic (St. George, 1998, pp. 186–190).

Countersorcery was also practiced in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This is a retaliatory action by a victim against the suspected witch who had already worked a curse on the victim. The victim could obtain an article of clothing or personal property of the witch and burn it in a ritual manner (Larner, 1984, p. 134). Witch-bottles were an interesting form of countersorcery utilized in England and by English settlers in the American colonies. They believed that the witch-bottle would ward off a witch who had begun working a curse on a victim. The victim would often use a stoneware bellarmine bottle for this curse, and fill it with pins or iron nails, and also parings of the victim's fingernails, toenails, and their urine. This charm was based on the logic that a witch had already created a mystical link between witch and victim, and this link could be reversed and the witch forced to break it or suffer pain or death. The victim's urine was a key component of this link, since it contained "part of the vital spirit of the Witch in it" due to the witch having worked a conjuration on the victim's physical being (Blagrave, 1671, p. 155, quoted in Merrifield, 1988, p. 170).

The victim would bury the bottle under or near the hearth of his house, and the heat of the hearth would animate the pins or iron nails and force the witch to break the link or suffer the consequences. Placement near the hearth and chimney expressed associated beliefs that witches often gained access to homes through deviant paths such as the chimney stack (Johnson, 1996, pp. 160–162; Merrifield, 1988, pp. 163–172; St. George, 1998, pp. 192–195).

Ralph Merrifield finds antecedents to this technique of using heat in the 1486 *Malleus Maleficarum*, which recommends applying heat to a pail of spoiled milk or the intestines of livestock killed by a witch's curse. The fire would burn and injure the offending witch (Merrifield, 1988, p. 173; Summers, 1970, pp. 155, 163). Another motif was to include a cloth figure of a heart in the bottle and to pierce that cloth with some of the pins and nails. Some bottles are also found to include thorns.

Dozens of witch-bottles, using bellarmine, plain stoneware, and glass bottles, have been uncovered archaeologically at sites in England dating from the seventeenth century through 1900. Some were located near hearths, others were buried in the ground near house sites. The array of contents just described has also been

demonstrated archaeologically (Merrifield, 1988, pp. 163–171, 180–182). Similar witch-bottles, using glass containers, have been recovered archaeologically from Anglo-American sites in Princess Anne County, Virginia (dating from 1700–1750) and near the Delaware River in Essington, Pennsylvania (dating from 1740–1750) (Becker, 1978, 1980; Painter, 1980).

Written charms were also used in England. While charms consisting of religious prayers could be chanted, they were also written down and worn in amulets, even by wearers who were illiterate. Such charms usually consisted of pre-Reformation prayers, such as paternosters, aves, and creeds. Another common technique was to write the charm prayer three times on a paper, then burn the paper in a ritual manner. The conjuration aspect was apparent by the fact that the target person was often illiterate (Larner, 1984, pp. 146, 147).

A magic square of "rotas" or "sator" is a prominent form of written charm practiced by English and German descendants alike. It originated in Roman sites, with two examples from Pompeii dating before AD 79 (Merrifield, 1988, pp. 142, 143). The charm is created by writing or inscribing a palindrome square of five-letter words in Latin as follows:

R O T A S
O P E R A
T E N E T
A R E P O
S A T O R

This translates roughly from Latin as "the sower Arepo holds steady the wheels" (Merrifield, 1988, p. 142). Some have speculated that this is a complex anagram, by which one can spell out A-PATER NOSTER-O, in horizontal and vertical lines uniting to create a cross with the common N at the vertex. The A and O would supposedly denote the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, used as an additional Christian invocation. This theory is weakened by the fact that the cross as a Christian symbol would not become prominent for a couple of centuries after the earliest known use of this square epigram (Merrifield, 1988, pp. 142, 143). Examples of the use of this charm have been uncovered in a third-century Roman site in Cirencester, England, where it was incised in a plaster wall surface, and in the form of writing on parchment at a late nineteenth-century site in Somerset, England (Merrifield, 1988, pp. 142–145).

A rich and well-documented tradition of using sacred Latin words exists among Germans who settled in the Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, and Ohio Valley regions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The magic square of "sator" was used by German settlers, and examples written on paper have been uncovered in dwelling houses (Shaner, 1961b; Yoder, 1990, p. 96, 1965, p. 46). Use of epigrams including the Latin initials INRI in geometric patterns are also

frequent (Shaner, 1961b, p. 63; Yoder, 1990, p. 81, 1965, p. 46). The Latin initials INRI stand for "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews," which appeared, according to Biblical accounts, on a placard nailed to the cross by those who crucified Christ. In contrast, no references have been found within these German American traditions to the use of the Greek letter *Chi*, which could be written as an initial for the name of Christ, as in "*X*mas." German settlers in the Pennsylvania region were known, however, to use an X insignia on fence posts or walls to ward off evil spirits (Smith *et al*., 1964, p. 156).

German descendants also used sacred Latin texts derived from the *Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses*, John George Hohman's 1820 *Long Lost Friend*, *Albert Magnus or the Egyptian Secrets*, and *Romanus* (Hyatt, 1965, pp. 795, 796; Shaner, 1961b, p. 63; Wust, 1969, pp. 182, 183; Yoder, 1990, pp. 90, 99). Powwow doctors would also provide cures to patients by giving them a piece of paper with a written charm, instructing the patient to carry the charm in a pocket (Yoder, 1962, p. 36, 1990, p. 264). Such written charms, whether benevolent or malevolent, typically included the target person's name (Yoder, 1966, p. 40).

These are compelling forms of expression in relation to the skull found in Loudoun. The combination of an X symbol and the initials on the Loudoun skull could have served as a lethal curse or countercharm, with the R and S on the skull figure invoking the sacred Latin text charms, and the H and D identifying the person targeted (perhaps Harry or Mahlon Demery). The symbol of the skull, and burial of the object near the target person, would have invoked the symbolism of death and fear of death.

In view of this evidence, one could interpret this artifact as a conjure item created by someone who practiced conjuration methods most closely associated with persons of German American heritage in this region and time period. The Demery surname is primarily of Anglo-American heritage. While comparable traditions of conjuration existed among the English, there is greater evidence of the use of X symbols and the geometric patterning of initials for Latin words within the German American traditions.

One could interpret the currently available evidence as indicating that the Demery family had been in some close social interaction with persons of German heritage. The Demerys may have learned the design and building techniques utilized in constructing their house from such German American neighbors. Alternatively, the Demerys may have subleased the land to a German family who in turn built the house and then moved to another home site when the Demerys took occupancy. A member of that same group may have later targeted Harry or Mahlon Demery with this conjure item due to a subsequent dispute. If so, information maintained within one group's folk religion may have been utilized across ethnic boundaries, but in a clandestine manner, which would have played no role in intergroup communication of ethnic boundedness.

Examination of the possible belief systems that may have produced the skull artifact from Loudoun County illustrates the remarkable degree of commonality

among Anglo-American, German American, and African American conjuration traditions in this region and time period. Concepts of ethnic markers thus become highly problematic. Could the material culture of past conjuration traditions have functioned to promote and mark ethnic identities? This question requires consideration of three intersecting bodies of theory concerning the character of ethnic groups, the uses of material culture to signal ethnic group identities and boundaries, and the ways in which conjuration beliefs and practices may have served to promote, subvert, or signal ethnic group identities and solidarity.

At this juncture, some analysts might argue that such conjuration practices appear to be the subject of intensive borrowing, sharing, and hybridization among past ethnic groups. Therefore, such beliefs and practices can be viewed as more "pan-cultural" and as typically serving to crosscut ethnic group boundaries, rather than help maintain them. However, such a conclusion would be premature.

First, we have yet to compile a systematic study of African American conjuration beliefs and practices in comparison with European American traditions that were operative in the same time periods and regions. This has not yet been accomplished even for African American sites alone (Leone and Fry, 1999, pp. 375–377; Samford, 1996, p. 113). Secondly, even when creolized or syncretic forms of protective charms were developed in the past (see, e.g., Franklin, 1997, pp. 227, 252, 253), they could have functioned to signal ethnic group affiliations if used and displayed by members of one group in distinctive ways meaningful to outsiders.

BOUNDARIES CREATED AND BOUNDARIES BREACHED

Fredrik Barth's analysis of ethnic groups emphasized that they should not be viewed as static. Instead, one should analyze the degree of variation in the solidity, permeability, or disappearance of ethnic boundaries in different settings and over time. Thus, when one finds evidence of different groups interacting, analysis should focus on the degree to which "the persistence of ethnic groups in contact implies not only criteria and signals for identification, but also a structuring of interaction which allows persistence of cultural differences" (Barth, 1998a [1969], p. 16; see Sider, 1986, p. 94).

Edward Spicer (1971) undertook this type of analysis and outlined the observable characteristics of a variety of ethnic groups as "persistent cultural systems." Using historical examples, he found the following features: each group experienced and outlived repeated efforts by state organizations to assimilate them through economic, political, and religious means; each developed "well-defined symbols of identity differentiating it from other peoples," including other ethnic groups and the state organization that it had opposed; and the "formation and maintenance" of each was "intimately bound up" with such "conditions of opposition" to other groups (Spicer, 1971, pp. 797, 798). Thus, ethnic identity may often be created and

reinforced in opposition to outwardly imposed pressures (Kelly and Kelly, 1980, pp. 134, 135; Pollard, 1994, pp. 79, 80).

Barth's studies of ethnic identities in the Afghanistan region revealed other remarkable dynamics of group boundedness. Rather than identify themselves by a large aggregation of beliefs and practices, members "select only certain cultural traits, and make these the unambiguous criteria for ascription to the ethnic group" (Barth, 1998b [1969], p. 119). When individuals cease living a lifestyle that permits them to satisfy those key attributes and "where there is an alternative identity within reach" the result "is a flow of personnel from one identity to another" (Barth, 1998b, p. 133). Thus, the features of the ethnic identity and its beliefs and practices may not change in some time periods, "because many [persons] change their ethnic label" (Barth, 1998b, pp. 133, 134). Where tensions exist within a group and no alternative identities are accessible, or where diverging from the key criteria is not very costly, then the "basic contents or characteristics of the identity start being modified" (Barth, 1998b, p. 134).

A number of archaeological studies have attempted to analyze the material expressions of ethnic identities by examining multiple lines of archaeological and documentary evidence. For example, in excavations of a nineteenth-century coal mining town in Somersville, California, Deetz sought to correlate differential frequencies in consumption of housewares in particular house sites with different ethnic identities known to have existed from documentary sources. He found no significant correlations (Deetz, personal communication). Similar analyses examining distributions of earthenware ceramics at other eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sites found no significant correlations with specific ethnic groups (Baugher and Venables, 1987, p. 38; Orser, 1991, p. 111; Spencer-Wood and Heberling, 1987, p. 81).

Other studies have looked at "finding distinctive culture-specific items," such as styles of architecture, clothing, household goods, ceramics, "or foodways differences, such as contrasts in patterns of butchering, utilization of meat cuts, and proportions of wild game to domestic animals" (Stewart-Abernathy and Ruff, 1989, p. 108; see Emberling, 1997, pp. 310–316; McGuire, 1982, pp. 163, 164). All of these studies emphasize the dynamic character of ethnic identities as reflected in material culture, and such identity frequently appears as an "instrumental phenomenon" in which "material culture [was] actively used in the justification and manipulation of inter-group relations" (Jones, 1997, p. 110; see Brumfiel, 1994, pp. 89, 90; Hodder, 1982, pp. 185–190; Maceachern, 1998, pp. 110–114; Shennan, 1989, pp. 12, 13).

As an expression of central beliefs of religious character, conjuration practices could be emblematic of a practitioner's cultural identity. If that belief system is one shared only with a population that has the bounded characteristics of an ethnicity, then the conjuration practices may be part of key criteria of ethnic boundedness as well (see Emberling, 1997, pp. 318, 319). Artifacts of such past folk religion beliefs

can provide one line of interpretative evidence indicating past ethnic identities. A concentrated study of the expressive elements in those artifacts can yield evidence of patterning from which possible ethnic identities of the creator or users of the artifact can be inferred.

However, a belief or practice must serve to communicate the distinctiveness of the group from others if it is to contribute to ethnic boundaries (De Vos, 1975, p. 16; Hodder, 1982, pp. 186, 187; Spicer, 1971, p. 796). Conjuration practices present a difficult case in this regard, for they are often undertaken in individualized, nonpublic settings within particular cultural contexts (Orser, 1994, pp. 36, 40; see McGuire, 1982, p. 161; Wobst, 1977, pp. 327–329). Even benevolent conjuration practices within a group can present complexities when viewed as potential emblems of group identity.

An interesting feature of conjuration practices in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America was that practitioners who specialized in the practice were often treated as possessing a separate status within their communities (Orser, 1994, p. 37; Yoder, 1990, pp. 97, 98). If a person became a known specialist in conjuration, they were likely avoided by other members of the community until their services were needed (Raboteau, 1980, p. 282). Such specialists likely lived in more remote parts of the geographic territory of the community of which they were a member (Steiner, 1901, p. 174; Yoder, 1990, p. 98). In contrast, more benign forms of charms that could be created and displayed publicly by any member of the group might serve more readily as a group identifier (see Emberling, 1997, p. 319).

One might argue from this dynamic that when conjuration practices were believed to involve greater levels of power, the only unifying aspect of the practice would be the underlying belief system, and not the actual conduct. Indeed, artifacts of conjuration conduct may be more expressive of strain and conflict within a group. rather than expressing the maintenance of continuity and harmony (Marwick, 1982a). However, practices such as those undertaken in some early African American communities likely produced effects of cohesion as well (Genovese, 1976, p. 221):

> The social significance of voodoo and conjure among the slaves lay less in some direct threat to the whites, much less in their alleged use by whites to control blacks, than in the degree of autonomy they provided the quarters. The slaves saw other slaves with great power, and by that belief alone they offered resistance to that doctrine of black impotence which the slaveholders worked incessantly to fasten on them.

This observation would be true as well for any persons in a marginalized position within their own community or in relation to another group.

In his influential article, "Stylistic Behavior and Information Exchange," Wobst (1977) asserted that stylistic expressions that served to identify a group affiliation would most likely be targeted at outside groups at a social distance from the emitters of the material expression. The stylistic shaping of the material expression would thus serve to communicate an intragroup affiliation in an intergroup

context (Wobst, 1977, pp. 323–325). He argued that it was unlikely that a person wishing to communicate a group identity would expend time and labor creating a stylistically shaped material object to communicate such a message to a fellow member of his own group. Such an intragroup message would be unnecessary, "would be known already or generally could be more easily transmitted in other communication modes" (Wobst, 1977, p. 324).

In contrast, the use of material culture would be efficient and effective for communicating such messages of identity to outside groups, with whom one interacted less frequently, but who would still be able to "decode" or "read" the message signaled in the objects (Wobst, 1977, p. 324). Material expressions that served in this capacity would typically possess a uniformity and clarity in their design and in the messages conveyed (Wiessner, 1983, p. 257; Wobst, 1977, pp. 323–334). Interestingly, Wobst (1977, p. 324) uses three examples of protective charms from American material culture to illustrate such intergroup communications: a skull and cross bones to warn away intruders, Pennsylvania Dutch hex signs to ward off evil spirits, and a crucifix as a symbol that Christ is watching over and protecting the wearer.

Under Wobst's theory, the commonalities among the conjuration beliefs and practices of African Americans and European Americans become poignant. If one group's protective charms are to be displayed and function as signals of group identity, those objects and their messages must first be understandable to outsiders who would observe them. The objects would also need to be stylistically shaped in a specific manner that was consistently associated with members of a particular group. Thus, if blue beads, for example, were consistently and openly worn as protective charms only by members of certain African American ethnic groups (see Stine *et al*., 1996), those objects could have served as ethnic markers understandable to European Americans who utilized analogous, but stylistically distinct, charms.

However, Wobst's observations likely become inapplicable when the emitter of the message is a member of a marginalized group and the message is of a more controversial character. Members of such groups would likely seek to "proclaim their traditional cultures" in a "relatively nonthreatening manner," rather than overtly communicate a challenging message to other social groups that seek to subordinate them (Orser, 1994, pp. 39, 42). Even protective charms might be displayed in a covert manner by more marginalized groups to conceal those items from oppressors who would be alarmed at open displays of a belief in such possibilities of self-determination by those persons they seek to control (Brown and Cooper, 1990, p. 9; Franklin, 1997, pp. 227, 252, 253; McKee, 1995, p. 41).

Similarly, artifacts of religious beliefs that involve the exercise of malevolent powers likely functioned as only intragroup or purely interpersonal communications. Rather than overtly communicate boundaries to outsiders, such artifacts may communicate intragroup messages of sacred, religious information intended only

for an audience of believers. This could hold true even when the sacred knowledge is targeted against outsiders for purely personal ends, such as to do them physical harm.

Conjuration practices might also be indicative of an ethnic boundedness if members of a group believed they could only work conjuration on one another. Subscription to the group would be emphasized as important not only to learning the belief system, but as to expected tangible effects of one's conduct. For example, there is some record of a belief that a person of African descent could not successfully work a conjure on a person of European descent (Genovese, 1976, p. 222; Hand, 1964, p. 100; Puckett, 1926, p. 301; Raboteau, 1980, pp. 282–284; Steiner, 1901, p. 178).

However, a number of sources provide evidence that conjuration practices, such as those performed by African Americans, crossed ethnic boundaries frequently. Genovese (1976, p. 218) summarizes a variety of evidence as follows:

> Court records identify black conjurers whose white clientele had more serious interests: here, a case in which a master fell under the power of a conjurer on his plantation; there, a small slaveholder who sought a conjurer's help in business matters. And then, too, one chap enlisted a black conjurer to help murder his wife.

Morgan's extensive review (Morgan, 1998, pp. 612–624) of colonial court records shows similar interaction, with numerous allegations of African Americans attempting to "poison" their neighbors of European ethnicity with an array of image magic and conjure items slipped into food or drink. Raboteau (1980, p. 284) summarizes African American beliefs in that period as maintaining that "Whites might be susceptible to conjure, but almost never were they conjurers."

Thus, we can divide conjuration artifacts into two analytic categories with regard to the creation or maintenance of ethnic boundaries. One category includes artifacts that communicated intergroup messages of an ethnic group's social and political boundaries. In some contexts, this category will include artifacts that openly communicated religious beliefs in essentially benevolent, benign, or protective powers. The second category includes artifacts that communicated messages of more sacred information involving the possession or exercise of power in a manner that was malevolent or otherwise threatening to others. These artifacts likely involved information that was communicated only within the group that created them, or communicated only in covert manners, and their meaning was likely not meant to be communicated to outsiders. Such artifacts may still have played a role in maintaining ethnic boundedness within the group that created them, as secrecy and shared beliefs create their own bonds.

These two categories parallel Wiessner's concepts of "emblemic" and "assertive" stylistic practices (Wiessner, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1990). Emblemic stylistic expressions are those that largely fit Wobst's category of ethnic boundary markers. In contrast, assertive stylistic expressions communicate more individual identities,

often within intragroup settings (Wiessner, 1983, pp. 257, 258). Emblemic and assertive styles will thus emerge in different contexts (Wiessner, 1990, p. 109):

> Situations that switch on group identity include fear, inter-group competition and aggression, need for cooperation to reach certain goals, and imposed political control requiring group action. Those situations that could switch on personal identity would be inter-individual competition, options for individual economic gain, and breakdown in the social order that would require individuals to seek solutions for their own problems, amongst others.

These contexts in which assertive style would likely emerge are fertile grounds for the exercise of conjuration practices to protect oneself or to harm another.

What functions of individual and assertive expression might conjuration practices have served in intragroup settings? Such folk religion beliefs and practices provided a method for explaining misfortune and evil outcomes as the result of the individual conduct and will of other members within the surrounding communities, rather than as mere happenstance or fate (Briggs, 1996, p. 61; Krige, 1982, p. 263; Marwick, 1982b, pp. 462, 463; Young, 1997, pp. 20–24). Moreover, such conjuration practices provided a means for self-initiative, resistance, and retaliation against the conduct and desires of others (Leone and Fry, 1999, p. 384; McKee, 1995, p. 41; Wilkie, 1997, pp. 83, 84).

Raboteau (1980, p. 286) describes these dual functions with observations that are equally applicable to many European Americans in the same region and time period:

> [C]onjure served as a perfect vehicle for expressing and alleviating anger, jealousy, and sheer ill will among slaves. When unable to settle disputes openly, the slaves turned to the secret system of conjure. Primarily, conjure was a method of control: first, the control which comes from knowledge—being able to explain crucial phenomena, such as illness, misfortune and evil; second, the control which comes from the capacity to act effectively . . . ; third, a means of control over the future through reading the "signs"; fourth, an aid to social control because it supplied a system whereby conflict, otherwise stifled, could be aired.

Even in situations where a targeted person discovered a conjuration object directed at them with malevolent intent, and took responsive action, the action and reaction provided a means of social ventilation of a growing interpersonal dispute (Wilkie, 1997, p. 89). These functions likely applied even when malevolent conjuration practices were targeted against persons who were members of other ethnic groups. Such conduct would not signal ethnic boundaries, but rather undercut them, as an expression of interpersonal conflict that is being addressed with a knowledge system and "common magical language" recognizable to multiple ethnic groups (Wilkie, 1997, p. 84).

CONCLUSION

There have been repeated calls for systematic, diachronic, comparative, and regional studies of African American archaeological sites in order to better

understand the dynamics of African American ethnicity in past centuries (Samford, 1996; Singleton and Bograd, 1995; Wilkie, 1997). Leone and Fry (1999) and their colleagues have undertaken an ambitious comparative study of such sites in Virginia and Maryland as an important step in this endeavor, particularly in regard to the material culture of past African American folk religions. The insights obtained through such studies would increase greatly, however, if we could compile additional comparative data concerning the conjuration practices of European American ethnic groups in the same region and time periods. Unfortunately, that type of data appears to be even more sparse and underdeveloped.

If we are to learn more about ethnicity, we also need to relate explicitly our interpretative questions about such folk religion objects to relevant theoretical frameworks concerning the formation and maintenance of ethnic identities, the signaling of identities, and the social functions of conjuration. Ethnographic studies show that an ethnic group is typically defined by a limited constellation of cultural traits selected to function as membership criteria for the group. We should attempt to assess the degree to which one or more of those criteria were communicated, in intergroup or intragroup settings, through artifacts expressing benevolent, protective, or malevolent religious practices.

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