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Low-Fired Earthenwares in the African Diaspora: Problems and Prospects

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Abstract

Local earthenware associated with enslaved African populations in the Americas, variously called “Colono-Ware,” “Afro-CaribbeanWare,” “Yabbas,” and “Criollo ware,” has received considerable attention from researchers. What unifies this disparate group of ceramics is not method of manufacture, design and decoration, or even form and function but the association or potential association with African diaspora populations. The ceramics incorporate some skills and techniques possibly brought by African potters to the Americas, as well as skills reflecting European and Native American traditions, and local adaptations in form, function, and manufacture. Analogies linking African ceramic traditions to American industries have at times been employed uncritically and have relied on generalized characteristics to infer overly specific meanings. With particular reference to low-fired earthenwares from Jamaica, this paper examines the historical and cultural context of these ceramics and the methodological and theoretical problems faced in their interpretation.

Keywords: low-fired earthenwares; Caribbean ceramics; cultural continuity and change

Introduction

The significance of African beliefs and traditions that enslaved Africans brought with them to the Americas and the role they played in shaping American cultural traditions cannot be overstated. The Atlantic slave trade, beginning in the sixteenth century, paralleled the expansion of Western Europe. It began as a means of replacing indigenous labor decimated by disease, and it became the foundation for the emerging plantation economies of the Americas. As a result of the Atlantic [end of page 67] trade, 12–15 million Africans were taken to the Americas (see references and discussions in Anstey, 1975; Craton, 1997; Eltis, 2000; Eltis and Richardson, 1997; Hair, 1989; Inikori, 1982; Lovejoy, 1989; Manning, 1990; Thornton, 1992). The origins, destinations, and specifics of these individuals’ enslavement varied greatly. People were taken from many parts of West and Central Africa and transported through coastal ports ranging from Goreé Island in the Senegambia to factory outposts on the coast of Angola. A large majority of this captive labor force was taken to Brazil, and significant proportions were transported to the American southeast, the West Indies, and the Spanish Main.

The Atlantic slave trade has been a major focus of historical and cultural research over the past six decades. Examination of African continuities in the Americas, pioneered by Melville Herskovits, has emerged as one of the central foci of this work. Prior to Herskovits’ research, African Americans were viewed as having been stripped of their cultural heritage by the disruptive effects of the slave trade. Writing in the racially segregated 1930s and 1940s, Herskovits argued that patterns of behavior in African descendent populations should not be understood on the basis of misinformed notions of biology, but rather seen as representative of cultural traits that could be traced back to West Africa (Herskovits, 1933, 1936, 1941; Redfield *et al.*, 1935). Such traits included language, music, and food, as well as elements of material culture.

In the intervening decades models of cultural change have become more nuanced and the specifics and complexities of the Atlantic trade more thoroughly documented. Scholars like Mintz (1974) and Price and Price (1980) have focussed more specifically on the ingenuity of displaced Africans in translating underlying cultural frameworks within new social landscapes. Mintz and Price (1992) assert that because “social systems have been highly responsive to changing social conditions, one must maintain a sceptical attitude toward the claims that many contemporary social or cultural forms represent direct continuities from the African homelands” (Mintz and Price, 1992, p. 52). Rather, it was an underlying grammar of “value systems and cognitive orientations” that dictated the material expressions of African peoples in the Americas (Mintz and Price, 1992, p. 55; also see DeCorse, 1999, pp. 146–149; Posnansky, 1984, pp. 198–199, 1999). Emphasized in these studies have been the issues of historical and cultural context and change. Only with these crucial concepts taken into account can an adequate picture be drawn of the symbolic and social meanings of material culture in the African Diaspora.

Analogy is one of the fundamental tools of the archaeologist and it has been used frequently in building interpretations of African American sites and material culture. Such inference draws on the ethnographic record to demonstrate how archaeological materials fit within past sociocultural contexts. These connections must be drawn guardedly. In creating an analogical argument it is crucial to demonstrate “the principles of connection—the considerations of relevance” (Wylie, 1985, p. 101; also see Stahl, 1993). In other words, how does the analogue relate to the subject in the archaeological record? [end of page 68]

Ethnic identity and its construction figures prominently in many discussions of trans-Atlantic analogies. Some archaeologists have dismissed the examination of ethnicity arguing that it is too difficult to cull from the archaeological record or that analogies for such study cannot be disentangled from their modern contexts (e.g. Atherton, 1983, p. 96; DeCorse, 1989, pp. 137–138; Singleton and Bograd, 1995, p. 24; Trigger, 1995, p. 277). However, archaeology’s potential to connect the past with the present, and the increasing political and legal implications of such study, insure that ethnic identity will remain a central focus of archaeological research. Numerous publications illustrate the continuing centrality of this issue to archaeology and the problems that confront its analysis (e.g., Franklin and Fesler, 1999; Jones, 1999; McGuire, 1982; Orser, 2001; Shennan, 1989; Singleton, 1995, pp. 130–134; Singleton and Bograd, 1995, pp. 24–29; Stark, 1998). Interpretive frameworks range from analysis of stylistic representations of identity (Burke, 1999; Conkey, 1990; Wiessner, 1990) to functional variants of cultural modes (Sackett, 1990). What these approaches share is an appreciation of the complex interplay of the sociocultural factors concerned and their material representations. Sian Jones says of identity, ethnicity, and archaeology: “group identity is not a passive and straightforward reflection of a distinct culture and languages” but, rather must be understood in “the cultural contexts and social relations in which they are embedded” (Jones, 1999, pp. 224–225). Identity and ethnicity are, therefore, contextual (Jones, 1997, p. 72).

Unfortunately, the search for African analogues in American populations is challenged by the great heterogeneity in African ethnicity represented, nuances in the specifics of enslavement and trade, and the complexities of the historical events that have shaped the modern Atlantic world. Given these factors and the influences of European and Native American societies on historically enslaved American and Caribbean societies, we cannot talk about a single diasporic African context that shaped the identity of African descendant populations in the Americas (DeCorse, 1999, p. 132, , pp. 135–137; Ferguson, 1992, p. 22; Hauser and Armstrong, 1999, p. 72; Hill, 1987; Posnansky, 1984). Study of the diaspora defies the simplistic equation of historical antecedents and modern-day expressions. Archaeological inferences must take this into account, as well as the entire range of material culture represented and the multivariate meanings conveyed by the objects present.

Unfortunately, many studies of the archaeology of the African diaspora have not taken this into account. Historical archaeologists have tended to be uncritical of the analogical arguments used and naive in their consideration of historical context. Although some researchers (e.g. Ferguson, 1992; Heath, 1999; Petersen *et al.* 1999; Wilke, 1999) have attempted to link culture specific historical descriptions of sociocultural phenomena or material culture from Africa to specific sociocultural contexts in the Americas, their interpretations reveal a realm of possibilities rather than a world of probabilities. Discussion of the African context, both in terms of data from the supposedly relevant parts of Africa and the evidence for connections with specific parts of the Americas, is essential. Yet such discussions are [end of page 69] often very limited and in some instances the allusions to African cultural, social, technological, and material patterns are drawn from secondary sources or isolated primary sources of uncertain validity or relevance. This problem is compounded by the fact that in many instances the data on the relevant areas of Africa during the appropriate time periods of the Atlantic trade are very inadequate (see discussion and references in DeCorse, 2001a). Coupled with poorly suited methodologies and limited sample sizes some studies obfuscate rather than clarify the dynamics of African American culture.

In some cases, identification of African continuities of any kind has become the goal, the conclusions reached devoid of any sense of historical context or cultural complexity. In its extreme, the identification of supposed African characteristics has been solely inferred on the basis of features that are seen, correctly or incorrectly, as outside the realm of Euro-American cultural traditions and thus “African.” Hence, Bankoff and his coauthors are able to conclude that corn cobs arranged in a geometric pattern, a cloth bag, a bovid pelvis, and an oyster shell beneath the floorboards of a Brooklyn farmhouse are evidence of “African religious rituals among slaves in New York,” despite the absence of any African antecedents for the similar use of corncobs in rituals during the relevant period of enslavement and that evidence for the presence of Africans at the site and their possible origins are left

largely unexplored (Bankoff *et al.*, 2001, p. 38). Indeed, cultural agency in the presence of the corn cobs and the associations of the individual finds with each other are open to question. Conclusions such as this belie the cultural diversity and change in African societies and inhibit both the examination of genuine continuities and recognition of the dynamic nature of identity formation in diaspora populations.

Without establishing the relevant temporal and cultural contexts for the analogues presented, any superficial similarity in practices found worldwide can become the basis for comparison. The pitfalls of making comparisons without consideration of relevance or principals of connection are nicely illustrated by an anecdote by Wurst (1994), which forced her to reconsider Africanisms and their implications. She observed that many American researchers have viewed timber and clay construction, consisting of coursed clay or wattle and daub, as an African trait. Some of these dwelling had stick and clay chimneys that have been interpreted as an African trait with Anglo influences (see discussion and references in Ferguson, 1992, pp. 63–72). This type of manufacture is, in fact, common in Africa (e.g. DeCorse, 2001b, pp. 62–63) and the slave-associated, plantation contexts of many of the American finds makes it clear that these structures were occupied by and likely built by slaves. Yet does this building method automatically presuppose an African American presence? Wurst cites a description of very similar architecture consisting of a framework of sticks or poles plastered over with “a kind of mud mortar mixed with straw” and “the chimneys made of sticks and clay” (Munson, 1969, p. 40; discussed in Wurst, 1994, p. 6). Despite similarities to some African **[end of page 70]** architecture, the description refers to the houses built by late-eighteenth-century Euro-American settlers in Syracuse, New York.

Among the most common markers of African ethnicity in the Americas has been a broadly inclusive category of low-fired earthenwares variously referred to as “colonoware,” “Afro-Caribbean Ware,” and “*Criollo* ware,” as well as a variety of other terms. The ceramics have been found throughout many parts of the southeastern United States, the Caribbean, and South America. As these ceramics and the inferences gleaned from them raise important methodological and theoretical concerns, we will examine the use of analogy in the interpretation of ceramics from African Diaspora contexts in more detail with particular focus on the Caribbean and Jamaica.

Caribbean Coarse Earthenware

Some scholars believe this disparate group of ceramics can be classified as one “regional creolized, pottery tradition” (Heath, 1999, p. 217; see also Petersen *et al.*, 1999, p. 189), because “continuity can be well demonstrated spatially” (Petersen *et al.*, 1999, p. 191), the assumption being that the underlying technological, cultural, and historical contexts of ceramic production and its use were comparable across the Caribbean. This assumption is problematic as emerging evidence suggests that, despite superficial similarities and the generally low-firing temperatures likely represented in the wares’ manufacture, there is a great deal of difference in the technological attributes present, as well as the contexts in which the vessels functioned. While there may be some continuity in form in the British and Dutch islands of the eastern Caribbean, these similarities end when one approaches the western British West Indies, the francophone islands and the Hispanic Caribbean. On these islands, though enslaved and freed Africans both produced and used ceramics, the potteries represented differ considerably from the ceramics some would identify as “Afro-Caribbean.” In fact, with superficial similarities aside, there is substantial variation in the formal attributes of assemblages from places such as Jamaica. Rather than similarity in manufacture or decorative inventory, it is slave-associated archaeological contexts that have been used unite this disparate group of ceramics.

Review of historic period pottery traditions illustrates some of the differences present in the manufacture, decorations, and contexts represented, as well as the varying amounts of information available on the various traditions (Fig. 1). While islands in close proximity do share some similarity in ceramic types and forms, as in the case of Barbuda and Antigua, most similarities in the ceramic traditions are restricted to similarities in form and low-firing temperatures. In addition, the varying degrees of analyses undertaken and the small size of some assemblages call into question the utility of making broad generalizations. The material reviewed **[end of page 71]**



Fig. 1. The Caribbean region showing islands discussed in the text.

below includes descriptions of local ceramic traditions as described in ethnographic accounts or inferred from archaeological collections. Islands included in this brief review include Antigua, St. Eustatius, Barbuda, the Virgin Islands, Hispaniola, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Jamaica.

In Antigua, Handler described a tradition of pottery manufacture characterized by a red slip, clouding, and a relatively low-luster burnish (Handler, 1964, pp. 151–152; also see Gartley, 1979, p. 47; Handler and Lange, 1978, p. 3). There are archaeological examples of fragmented body sherds from eighteenth and nineteenth-century contexts, as well as comparative studies of ethnographic forms by Heath (1988, p. 141). The modern method of manufacture includes pinch pulling and scraping (Handler, 1964, p. 151), and this may be comparable to the techniques represented in archaeological examples. Ethnographic evidence for open hearth firing (Handler, 1964, p. 152) and coring and clouding in archaeological samples (Nicholson, 1990) indicate that this pottery was low-fired in inconsistent environments. In the eighteenth century, the Antiguan pottery forms identified primarily consist of round-bottomed, hemispherical-shaped bowls and round, red-slipped griddles (Nicholson, 1990; Watters, 1997). Notably, the griddles are one of the few instances from the British West Indies where this form, normally associated with Amerindian contexts, is present in historic sites of the African diaspora. Other Antiguan ceramic forms represented ethnographically include cooking pots, monkey jars, flowerpots, and coal pots (Heath, 1988, p. 114; Handler, 1964, p. 151). **[end of page 72]** The three later forms date to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and represent a subset of the range of shapes found archaeologically.

One thousand nine hundred and twenty four archaeological ceramics from St. Eustatius have been described by Heath (1999, pp. 189–231). These ceramics were recovered from three sites primarily dating to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, though some disturbed contexts are represented (Heath, 1988, p. 149). The vessels are found in a variety of forms including cooking pots, dishes, monkey jars, tea pots, dry storage jars, liquid storage jars, and jugs produced by coiling and hand-modeling (Heath, 1988, pp. 186, 206). In addition, firing environments of archaeological ceramics were inferred to be, on the whole, variable and Heath (1988, p. 186) notes vessels produced in both reduced and oxidizing environments. Surface treatments ranged from red painted to burnished to untreated and do not seem to be linked to specific vessel forms or type of manufacture (Heath, 1988, p. 186).

Local pottery from Montserrat, represented by 20 low-fired earthenware sherds from the Harney slave cemetery, has been discussed by Watters (1987, 1988). These ceramics were coil-made and undecorated. Variable coloration, coring, and clouding indicate that the ceramics were inconsistently fired (Watters, 1988, p. 169), probably in the open. Because the paste inclusions are consistent with Montserrat's geological environment, Watters concluded the

pottery was made on the island (Watters, 1987). Howson's work at Galways plantation (Howson, 1995), also on Montserrat, has described an assemblage of local coarse earthenware that comprises approximately 47% ($n =$ not stated) of the total ceramic assemblage (Howson, 1995, p. 336). Howson noticed that, macroscopically, the inclusions found in these ceramics are similar to those in the ceramics discussed by Watters (Howson, 1995, p. 236). This may suggest either similar sources or manufacturing techniques; petrographic work could verify this observation.

To the north, low-fired earthenware from Barbuda has been excavated from Codrington Castle (Watters, 1997). The 22 vessels are represented by thick-walled, smoothed, body sherds and the assemblage was comprised mostly of utilitarian pots with no decorative treatment. The lack of any historic documentation, and the similarity in temper with the Antiguan pottery discussed above suggested to Watters that the vessels were most likely imported (Watters, 1997, p. 284). However, detailed petrographic and sourcing techniques are needed to fully evaluate this conclusion and the possibility of local production cannot yet be ruled out.

In the U.S. Virgin Islands, "Afro-Cruzan" ware, described on the basis of 31 sherds from six plantation sites in Saint Croix, is a hand-molded, inconsistently low-fired, unglazed, or untreated earthenware (Gartley, 1979, p. 47). Vessel surfaces were smoothed and evened. Similar earthenwares have been recovered by Douglas Armstrong on the East End of Saint John (Hauser, 1997; Hauser and Armstrong, 1999) and on Saint Thomas by Gary Vescelius (Gartley, 1979, p. 47). Elizabeth Kellar (personal communication, 1999) has also recovered coarse earthenware from her excavations at Adrian estate, also on St. John. Vessel forms include [end of page 73] simple restricted bowls, and everted pots (Hauser, 1997, pp. 35–36) or olla-shaped vessels (Gartley, 1979, p. 48). However, the assemblages recovered thus far are still quite small, consisting of a total of 118 sherds from East End, approximately 300 sherds from Cinnamon Bay, and some 200 sherds from Adrian. Future work could suggest how these ceramics relate in terms of their origin and manufacture.

With regard to Haiti, Gartley refers tangentially to earthenware imported from the Dominican Republic. He describes the pottery as well-made, with a polished exterior surface treatment and a red–orange paste; the specific manufacturing method(s) employed have not been determined, however (Gartley, 1979, p. 47). In Santa Domingo, sherds of distinctive wheel thrown, kiln-fired local ceramics have been reported (Garcia Arevleo, 1986, p. 53; Vega, 1979, p. 43), which seem to differ from local pottery found in Puerto Real, Haiti (Smith, 1995, p. 352). The latter is an interesting 23,267-sherd assemblage from contexts associated with early historic to relatively recent contexts. Smith (1995), who examined the ceramics, described a series of locally made wares including Christophe Plain ware, Red Slipped ware, Unidentified Plain ware, Unidentified Decorated ware, and modern "Hatian" ware. Christophe Plain ware, the focus of his analysis, is comprised of thick walled, undecorated, coarse earthenware (Smith, 1995, p. 345). These ceramics were generally coil-built, low-fired utilitarian vessels, including bowls, jars, ollas, and collared ollas, and were most likely low-fired in an inconsistent environment (Smith, 1995, p. 361). The highly varied collection of non-European ceramics recovered from Puerto Real points to the heterogeneity of this class of ceramic.

In Cuba, there are several traditions of local pottery manufacture, though there is some confusion in the attributes employed in classification and the nomenclature used is somewhat ambiguous. Some locally made utilitarian pottery is identified as *Ceramica Ordinaria*, which refers to a broadly inclusive, general category similar to European "Coarse Earthenware" (e.g. South, 1977, p. 211). In practice, however, *Ceramica Ordinaria* is more inclusive, subsuming storage jars, roof tiles, floor tiles, and sugar molds, as well as Mexican red-painted ware, Feldspar Inlaid ware, El Morro ware, and others (Pratt Puig, 1980, pp. 18–33). Hence, the category would seem to include a number of distinct local, as well as Mexican and European wares (Singleton, personal communication, 2000). Often times these ceramics bear little resemblance in either the paste or formal characteristics to any ceramics designated "Afro-Caribbean" in other parts of the Caribbean. The vessels likely produced locally include buff to red pasted, thick-walled vessels, which were made through a combination of wheel throwing, coiling, and hand modelling into a variety of forms, such as storage jars, olla-shaped vessels, coal pots, and cooking pots (Singleton, personal communication, 2000).

Some of the ceramics identified as *Ceramica Ordinaria* are comparable in manufacture, surface treatment, decoration, and form to some that have been identified as Afro-Jamaican. The Cuban ceramics, however, were not necessarily [end of page 74] produced by peoples of African descent. One subset, in fact, consists of partially glazed or unglazed coarse earthenwares of uncertain manufacture. They have been recovered from maroon sites and date to

the nineteenth century and, therefore, are associated with African diaspora populations (La Rosa Corzo, 1989). However, also included in the group are distinctive nineteenth century, low-fired earthenwares that have been attributed to Amerindians. The archaeological examples recovered are restricted to a few pieces from the Guanabacoa suburb of Havana. Cuban estate holders continued to import Native American labor from the Yucatan well into the nineteenth century and contemporary documentary accounts describe the manufacture of ceramics by the Guanabacoa Amerindians (Singleton, personal communication, 2000). Stylistically the ceramics are comparable to Afro-Jamaican ceramics in that they are devoid of a decorative inventory and occur in utilitarian forms. Lacking more information on the historical context of ceramic production in both Havana and the Yucatan makes it difficult to be certain about their origin. It is possible that peoples of African descent also manufactured some of these ceramics (Sandrino, personal communication, 2000). The forms discussed (see Fig. 1) are common throughout the Caribbean and, thus, highlight the difficulties in attributing ethnicity solely on the basis of form. A term to describe these hand-built ceramics, which has gained favor by some Cuban archaeologists, is *ceramics de transculturación* (Singleton, personal communication, 2001). This term is very similar to Ferguson's rationale behind the classification "colonoware" and implies a creolized manufacturing tradition.

Puerto Rican low-fired earthenwares, identified as *criollo* wares by Crane (1993) and Magana (1999), have been recovered from San Juan. The collections examined were not explicitly demarcated but were primarily recovered from eighteenth and nineteenth-century urban contexts (Magana, 1999, p. 131). *Criollo* ware is divided into three form types: *ollas*, *cazuellas*, and ringfooted (Magana, 1999, p. 136), which also reflect differences in paste and manufacture. The tempers/paste(s) of the *ollas* and *cazuellas* are characteristically highly variable coarse sands, quartzites, and grog temper (Magana, 1999, p. 136). The firing environment is variable with paste discolorations indicating both reducing and oxidizing environments (Magana, 1999, p. 136). They also tend to have appliqué decoration around the belly of the vessel (Magana, 1999, p. 136). In contrast, the ringfooted *criollo* ware is a coarse hand-made, sand-tempered ceramic, some with micaceous inclusions (Crane, 1993, p. 115). The vessels seem to be coiled with the bases being modelled or hand molded (Magana, 1999, p. 136). Crane examined 654 sherds of *criollo* ceramics, which made up approximately 16% of his total study collection of Puerto Rican *criollo* wares and colonowares from South Carolina (Crane, 1993, p. 92). They appear to have been low-fired, but in a consistent environment (Crane, 1993, p. 117). They were all burnished except for vessels with a heavy micaceous wash (Magana, 1999, p. 136). Decorations include stamping and rouletting (Magana, 1999, p. 140). Crane tentatively suggests manufacture [end of page 75] was by enslaved peoples of African descent influenced by Taino practices but he also argues that the complexity of identity within Puerto Rico makes it difficult to ascribe manufacture to one ethnic group (Crane, 1993, p. 115).

While far from comprehensive, the preceding discussion outlines some of the variation present in locally produced low-fired ceramics in the Caribbean. Archaeological evidence for other industries will likely be discovered. Recent work by Kenneth Kelly (personal communication, 2002) on the island of Guadeloupe has identified several potteries that have neither been documented nor systematically studied. Heath has also ethnographically documented a number of wares on the islands of Nevis, Antigua, and St. Lucia (Heath, 1988, pp. 66, 111, 124; 1990). The Nevisian tradition has also been ethnographically and historically documented by Olwig (1990) and Platzer (1979). Archaeological examples of the Nevisian pottery is currently the focus of research conducted by Grant Gilmore at the University College, London (personal communication, 2002). Certainly on many of the above mentioned islands, peoples of African descent were responsible for manufacture. Yet the multiple techniques of manufacture, forms, and decorative inventories represented also highlight the diversity of historical contexts present and the evidence for multiple manufacturing traditions. With this variation in mind we turn to low-fired earthenwares from Jamaica.

Low-Fired Earthenware Production in Jamaica

Ceramics produced in Jamaica between the seventeenth and twentieth century are varied. They can be glazed or burnished, and can be wheel thrown, coiled or pulled. In much of the relevant literature, Jamaican local earthenwares have been synonymous with yabbas, a coarse earthenware associated with Afro-Jamaican production during the English occupation of the island. Evidence for this widely held view is supported by archaeological, ethnographic, and documentary evidence. However, the variation present in form, manufacture, and decoration is indicative of a number of different traditions of uncertain age, distribution, and origin. While the slave-associated contexts of some of the ceramics are clear, the attempts by some researchers to link the wares to specific West African potting traditions are much more problematic. The archaeological assemblages represented, the historical

context of their use and production, and the possibility of African continuities in manufacturing traditions will be discussed in turn.

The earliest local earthenware identified is associated with the sixteenth and early seventeenth century Spanish occupation. Neuva Seville is the only site in which this type of ceramic, identified as Saint Ann's Bay ware, has been recovered. This earthenware was first recorded by Charles Cotter, and has been more recently described by Woodward (1988). It is hand-made, highly friable coarse earthenware, occurring in bowls, pedestaled cups, jars, and pitchers (Woodward, 1988, pp. 112–113). Manufacture is uncertain, but it is likely coiled and polished [**end of page 76**] (Woodward, 1988, p. 114). Decorations are limited to a few incised lines. This tradition, possibly made by Tainos with European inspired innovations in form (Woodward, 1988, p. 110), is clearly distinctive in manufacture, form, and stylistic attributes from other Jamaican earthenwares, most notably the Afro-Jamaican ceramics described ethnographically.

The archaeological record of the English period of occupation (which began in 1655) is dominated by another broadly inclusive category of locally made ceramics. Archaeological examples have been found on the majority of Jamaican archaeological sites with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century contexts (e.g. Agorsah, 1994, p. 177; Armstrong, 1990, pp. 157–158; Bratten, 1992; Hauser, 2001, p. 139; Mathewson, 1973, p. 26; Mayes, 1972, pp. 103–107; Meyers, 1999; Pasquariello, 1995; Reeves, 1997, pp. 246–248). Despite the fact that they are often treated as a single category, these ceramics are highly variable in terms of the attributes represented. Some are coil-built and contain quartz and angular limestone inclusions (Hauser, 2001, p. 181), while others appear to have been produced by molding and slab manufacture (Hauser, 2001, p. 183). Surfaces may be burnished, glazed, or left unaltered (Armstrong, 1990, p. 146–158; Mathewson, 1973, p. 28; Mayes, 1972, p. 103; Pasquariello, 1995, p. 39; Reeves, 1997, p. 247). Although lead glazing indicates fairly elevated temperatures, firing was inconsistent, producing clouding and cores even in the glazed examples. Unmelted lead shot used to make the glaze has been noted in puddling on the base of at least one example. For the most part, these ceramics are comprised of utilitarian forms including water pots, cooking bowls, cooking pots, flowerpots, and monkey jars, but many of the sherds represented are small, nondiagnostic body sherds from which it is impossible to infer vessel form.

While recovered from a number of sites, some collections are comparatively small and the information currently available may represent an incomplete view of ceramic production. Excavations at King's House produced an assemblage representing approximately 218 vessels, based on a minimum vessel count, from eighteenth-century contexts. Other eighteenth- and nineteenth-century collections that have been published include 469 sherds from Drax Hall (Armstrong, 1990, p. 147), 800 sherds from Seville (Report on file at Jamaica National Heritage Trust), and approximately 300 sherds from Juan de Bollas and Thetford (Reeves, 1997, pp. 248–255). Nineteenth century contexts from Juan De Bollas and Thetford include more robust assemblages, with a total of approximately 3801 sherds (Reeves, 1997, p. 379). Recent finds from Marshall's Pen (Delle, personal communication, 2001) include nineteenth century earthenwares and small collections have also been excavated by the Jamaican National Heritage Trust in White Church Street in Spanishtown and Market Street in Montego Bay (Report on file at the Jamaican National Heritage Trust). The most important collection of low-fired earthenwares from Jamaica consists of the materials excavated by various researchers at Port Royal, including work by Marx (Collection at the Jamaican National Heritage Trust) on the sunken city, Mayes (1972) in the Old [**end of page 77**] Naval Dockyard, Priddy (1976) in New Street Tavern and St. Peters Church, and Anthony Aarons at Fort Charles (Report on file at Jamaican National Heritage Trust). Most recently, an assemblage of several hundred sherds was recovered during the extensive underwater work by Texas A&M between 1980 and 1991 (Hamilton, 1992). Low-fired earthenwares from these projects, particularly those recovered by A&M, have been studied and they will be examined in more detail later. These collections are especially significant as they provide a large and varied assemblage from well-dated contexts spanning the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries.

Ongoing research by the primary author has concentrated on the petrographic and stylistic analysis of several of the above assemblages. During two field seasons, 10,046 local coarse earthenware sherds housed in the collections of the Jamaican National Heritage Trust were systematically catalogued. The six loci represented include archaeological collections from Port Royal, Spanish Town, Thetford, Juan De Bollas, Seville, and Drax Hall (Fig. 2). While a majority of the collection, $n = 6,427$, were analysed as part of a larger project examining marketing in eighteenth century Jamaica (Hauser, 2001), access to the collection provided an opportunity to study the Port Royal collections, including the material recovered by Marx (excavation notes Jamaica National Heritage Trust), Aarons (excavation notes Jamaica National Heritage Trust), Mayes (1972), and Priddy (1976). These

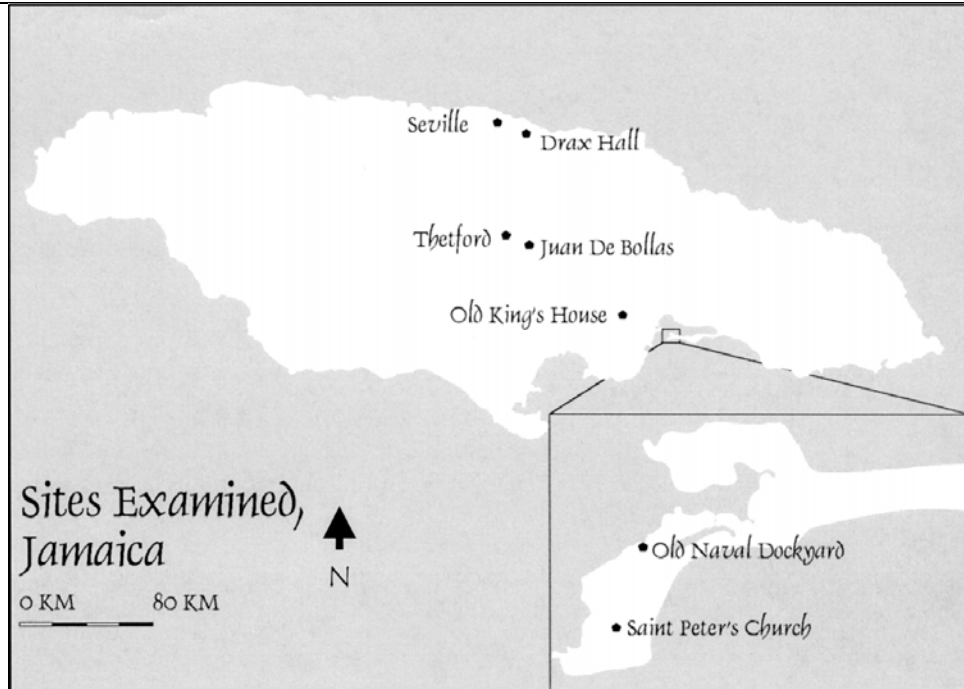


Fig. 2. Map of Jamaica showing archaeological sites mentioned. [end of page 78]

assemblages contain 2,627 sherds of low-fired earthenwares, excluding ceramics assumed to be imports such as so-called Spanish olive jars.

Although collectively viewed as having been the product of African–Jamaican labor, to date no production sites have been located and all of our archaeological evidence about these ceramics and their association with peoples of African descent comes from areas of consumption and use, such as plantation dwellings and urban residences. The archaeological contexts represented vary, are often complex in terms of the populations represented, and are associated with European, as well as Afro-Jamaican, occupations. In most instances, slave contexts from plantations have produced examples of earthenwares (e.g. Armstrong, 1990, pp. 146–147; Hauser, 2001, pp. 154–167; Higman, 1998; 1999, pp. 221–223; Reeves, 1997, pp. 245–258). However, two sites, Seville and Drax Hall, in which both the slave villages and the great house sites have been tested, have not shown this correlation to exist. European ceramics are predominant in the laborer villages of both plantations (Armstrong, 1990, p. 392, 2000, p. 176), while earthenwares identified as “Afro-Caribbean” were recovered from the great house contexts (Armstrong, 1990, p. 156, 2000, p. 176).

Such distributions again highlight the difficulty of discerning diaspora populations on the basis of signature artifacts. In particular, outside of the plantation setting the archaeological visibility of enslaved laborers may be negligible. Within urban environments the association of artifacts with specific populations is less clear as complex residence patterns blur the lines between ownership and ethnicity. Bratten (1992), Pasquariello (1995, p. 47), and Meyers (1999, p. 202) have shown that Europeans living in Port Royal acquired locally produced ceramics because servants used them in the preparation of meals and for the storage of goods. They are even listed on the probates of the owners of the house (Meyers, 1999, p. 202). Eighteenth-century contexts at sites such as the Old Kings House, the former Governor’s Mansion, have produced almost a thousand sherds of Jamaican pottery (Mathewson, 1972, p. 55, 1973, p. 28).

Are Colonowares Yabbas?

Almost from their initial discovery Jamaican earthenwares were associated with Afro-Jamaicans. Mayes (1972, p. 101) and Mathewson (1972, p. 55, 1973, p. 26) were the first archaeologists to identify locally produced low-fired Jamaican ceramics in seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth century contexts and both researchers classified these wares as “yabbas,” employing a traditional Jamaican term for locally produced Jamaican earthenware. Mathewson

further suggested that the term derived from the word “ayawa” meaning “earthenware dish” in Twi, an Akan language spoken in Ghana (Mathewson, 1972, p. 55). The use of the terms “yabba” implies a link between the archaeologically known wares and twentieth century Afro-Jamaican pottery (Ebanks, 1984; Mathewson, 1973, pp. 54–55). However, [end of page 79] the precise etymology of the word remains uncertain and other, non-Akan, West African, or Caribbean origins remain possibilities. Mathewson also identified several “West African” elements in the Jamaican earthenwares. However, as has been previously pointed out, the elements defined as “African” can also be seen in European assemblages and some of the supposed European attributes are similarly represented in pre-twentieth century African industries (DeCorse, 1999, pp. 137–139). In particular, ring footed bases occur in a number of Ghanaian assemblages of the relevant period.

More recently, Meyers (1999, p. 202) argued that “decorative attributes consistent with West African pottery traditions can be isolated” in a seventeenth century Port Royal assemblage. Meyers’ conclusions, based on a small subset of the earthenwares recovered from Port Royal, are compared with disparate ceramic traditions of uncertain relevance to the Jamaican material. Meyers focuses on the analysis of decoration, specifically the techniques employed. Out of the 899 sherds in the study collection, 28 sherds were decorated with stamping, punctation, incision, and/or grooving. These techniques, Meyers’ claims, represent African traditions. He draws a link between the Port Royal potters and potters from Jene jeno in Mali, Qsar es-Seghir in northern Morocco, and Abodum, Twifo Heman, Elmina and New Buie, Ghana (Meyers, 1999, pp. 212–215). Meyers’ argument is that stamping as a decorative technique diffused from northern Africa into Mali through Islamic expansion, and then into Ghana through the northern trade and then across the Atlantic through slavery (Meyers, 1999, p. 215). Although long distance, north-south trade did exist in West Africa, Meyers admits his scenario is speculative.

Earlier attempts at similar arguments (Ebanks, 1984, p. 36) have been criticized (DeCorse, 1999; Hill, 1987). The failure of these arguments rests in the inability of the authors to draw credible historical and cultural connections and lines of relevance. To examine seventeenth-century Jamaican low-fired earthenwares through a West African lens, we should use as our analogue seventeenth century West African ceramic traditions from those portions of West Africa where the enslaved potters of the Americas likely originated. We should further establish spatial and temporal continuity between the technological and stylistic elements employed by the West African potters from whom the analogy is drawn and the Caribbean potters to whom the interpretation is applied. Having done this we can look at constellations of attributes that may suggest continuities in the traditions. As discussed, African potting traditions are extremely varied, incorporating a tremendous diversity in manufacturing technique, decorative inventory and the sociocultural context of production. Modern, ethnographically described potting traditions may provide some insight, but the relevance of forms and meanings derived from a modern context to archaeologically recovered assemblages from earlier periods would have to be established through the direct historical approach. This becomes especially difficult when one considers transformations [end of page 80] in African societies during the post-European contact period and, further, that in various American settings “social and cultural characteristics—and, some would say, individual idiosyncrasies of their inhabitants—cannot be accounted for, or even described, without reference to colonialism” (Trouillot, 1992, p. 22). The strongest analogies, therefore, are made by comparing contemporaneous ceramic traditions from the areas for which historical connections can be documented.

The data presented and the conclusions drawn in Meyers’ study illustrate the methodological and conceptual problems faced in drawing trans-Atlantic analogies. Several discrete issues are concerned in the interpretation of the African and Jamaican data, namely the identity of the manufacturers of the Jamaican ceramics, the relevance of specific African data sets and time periods, the sample size of the Port Royal assemblages, and the inferences made. Although there is evidence for an association of the Jamaican ceramic traditions with African diaspora populations, demonstrating continuities with specific African industries is much more problematic. Evidence for multiple ceramic traditions reflecting different manufacturing techniques and, likely, different sociocultural contexts must also be considered.

While there may be several traditions of uncertain age, origin, and distribution represented, there is good evidence for the production of low-fired earthenwares by African descendent populations. Drawing on ethnographic and documentary data we can develop an analogy linking at least some of the pottery production to Afro-Jamaicans. During the course of the slave trade between 1655 and 1807, some 750,000 enslaved laborers were brought to Jamaica (Dunn, 1972, pp. 235–237). Between 1688 and 1755, the number of enslaved peoples retained in Jamaica, rather than resold to other colonies or islands, rose from 67 to 10,784, resulting in a steady increase in the African diaspora population on the island (Wu, 1995, p. 376). There were 514 enslaved laborers living in Jamaica in 1661;

9500 in 1673; 45,000 in 1703; and 210,894—working on 710 plantations—in 1787 (Edwards, 1793, p. 237; Pitman, 1917, p. 373; Sheridan, 1973, p. 210). Given the size of this population, the nature of plantation society, and the labor requirements of the island, African descendent populations likely played a central role in Jamaican craft industries, including ceramic production.

The ethnic and cultural identities of these individuals are, for the most part, unknown. However, some evidence suggests that people from portions of modern day Ghana, historically known as the Gold Coast, constituted a major component of the African diaspora population of Jamaica and some researchers have consequently argued that the cultural traditions of this region should be looked to for antecedents of Afro-Jamaican cultural patterns (e.g. Ebanks, 1984; Mathewson, 1972; Meyers, 1999, pp. 208–209). The evidence for people of Ghanaian origin in Jamaica will not be reviewed here. Suffice it to say that the available data are limited and that more research can be undertaken, nevertheless, it may be that many of the enslaved Africans that reached Jamaica did come from this part of **[end of page 81]** Africa. Drawing such connections is a critical step in starting to build trans-Atlantic analogies. Accepting the Gold Coast origin of Jamaican slaves, the question then becomes what was the cultural composition of the Ghanaian coast and hinterland during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries and what were the cultural traditions that could have contributed to emerging diasporic societies?

Archaeological and ethnographic research in Ghana is, in many respects, still in its preliminary stages. Although more work has been conducted here than in neighboring areas, the cultural histories, artifact distributions, and regional chronologies for many portions of the country remain poorly described. To some extent, research has been dominated by work on the Asante Kingdom, which emerged as an important power during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, the coast and hinterland of this area incorporates a great deal of diversity (Fig. 3). Approximately the size of South Carolina and Georgia combined, modern Ghana stretches from the West African savannah to coastal forest. Presently, some 45 to 50 ethnolinguistic groups with varying degrees of social cohesion are found within the county (Kropp Dakubu, 1988). Although the nature of population movements and sociocultural transformations during the period of the Atlantic trade are not well documented, available evidence suggests that there has been a fair degree of stability in terms of the distribution of some ethnolinguistic groups and coastal polities (DeCorse, 2001b, pp. 18–20, 199 n. 37; Hair, 1978).

West African societies did not, however, remain frozen in time. There was tremendous change in sociopolitical institutions, trade patterns, and settlement organization as the region was increasingly enmeshed in a world economic system dominated by Europe. At the core of a variety of economic, social, and political transformations were the labor requirements of the emerging plantation economies of the Americas and the structural changes that made it possible to supply African labor. Along the Gold Coast, there was a trend toward urbanization and increasing craft specialization in the trading enclaves associated with European outposts. New or incipient states such as Elmina emerged and expanded their influence over surrounding settlements. In the hinterland, fortified towns and refugia from slave raiding appeared (DeCorse, 2001a, 2001b, pp. 18–31).

While it is worthwhile to underscore underlying continuities in worldview, there was also change in African religions, at least in terms of certain rituals and their material expression (e.g. DeCorse, 2001b, pp. 178–191). In general, there is a great deal of similarity within the Akan language family, which can in turn be contrasted with neighboring groups. Akan sociocultural organization is matrilineal, and the clan elders enforce ideological and ritual conformity. However, patrilineal ties of various kinds crosscut and compliment this overarching matrilineal framework. Beginning with the earliest Portuguese incursions in the late fifteenth century, there were attempts to convert the local inhabitants to Christianity with varying success. Converts were often criticized by Europeans for their continued adherence to indigenous beliefs and instances of mass conversions to Christianity, **[end of page 82]** which do occur in other parts of Africa, did not take place (c.f. DeCorse, 2001b, pp. 244 n. 17). Nevertheless, some aspects of Christian ritual may have been incorporated into indigenous beliefs to varying degrees and new practises emerged.

Islam has also been noted as an important influence on some African cultures, and of possible significance in examining cultural patterns in the diaspora (Meyers, 1999, p. 219). Introduced into North Africa in the eighth century A.D., Islam spread to West Africa via the trans-Saharan trade. Many West African populations are at least nominally Muslim, yet the advent of Islam in individual areas was incredibly

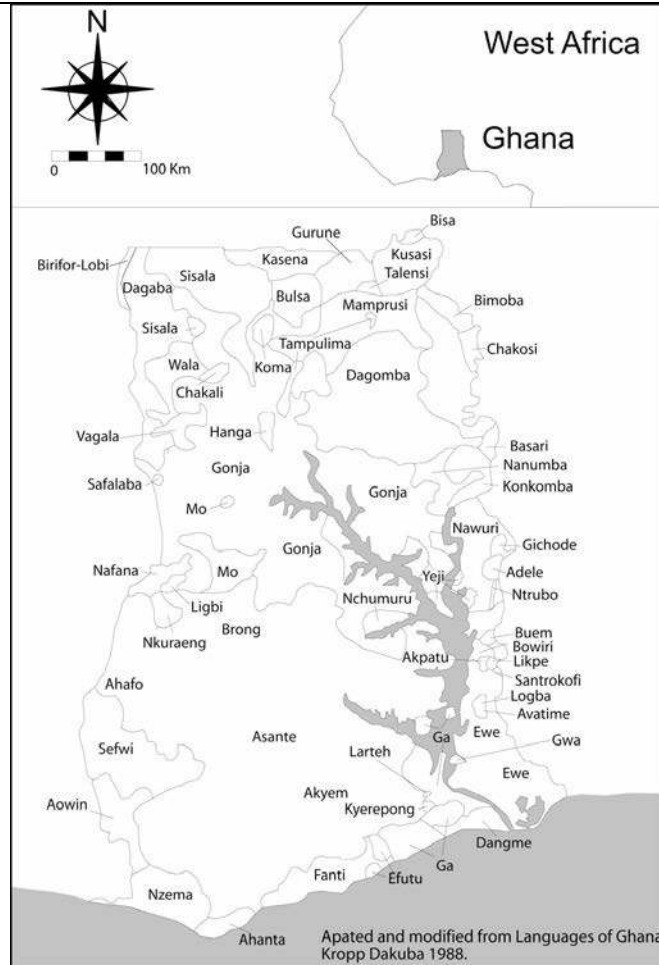


Fig. 3. West Africa showing main ethnolinguistic groups in West Africa (adapted from Murdock, 1959). [end of page 83]

diverse in terms of the timing, the forms of Islam represented, the mode of introduction, and the influences on indigenous cosmologies (see discussion and references in Bravmann, 1980, 1983; Hiskett, 1984; Trimmingham, 1978). In many instances it impacted indigenous practises to only a limited degree or was adapted and transformed to be incorporated into local cosmologies. With regard to Ghana, there is no question that the region was part of broader trade networks by the second millennium A.D., in some cases Islamic Mande traders making up a discrete quarter within a settlement (Posnansky, 1987, pp. 17–20). However, with regard to the Akan coast, evidence for Mande traders is negligible and evidence for the influence of northern Islamic migrants on local traditions scant (DeCorse, 2001b, p. 49, Hair, 1978, pp. 53–54 n. 33, pp. 55–56 n. 37). The varying modes of introduction and the syncretic nature of West African Islam is in many respects similar to the advent of Christianity, which in some cases was substantially earlier, Islam not reaching portions of the West African coast and hinterland until the nineteenth century.

Importantly, the material culture associated with these various peoples vary in both time and space. Archaeologically and ethnographically observed ceramic industries differ in terms of manufacture, vessel forms, and decoration, even in neighboring areas (Fig. 4). For example, Akan ceramics are produced by slab molding, while the pottery of the adjacent Ewe is coil built (DeCorse, 2001b, pp. 118–120; Tetrault and DeCorse, 2001; Fig. 3). Although there may be some similarities in utilitarian vessel forms, these account for only a subset of a wide range of vessel types. This diversity is matched by substantial differences in the sociocultural contexts in which the ceramics were produced (see discussion and references in DeCorse, 1999, pp. 138–139). Nor were ceramic industries static through time. Assemblages from throughout southern Ghana reflect substantial change during the post-European contact period. In addition to greater amounts of European trade materials in the artifact inventories,

there is change in house construction, metal working, and craft production. Ceramics of the seventeenth through twentieth centuries are different from earlier pottery in terms of vessels forms, decoration, and the manufacturing techniques likely represented (DeCorse, 2001b, pp. 116–118). With the expansion of Asante, aspects of Asante culture became incorporated into other areas. Hence, typically Asante style carinated, smudged, modeled vessels appear with increasing frequencies in coastal assemblages in the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (DeCorse, 2001b, p. 122).

The impact of the slave trade on the Ghanaian coast and hinterland are just now being evaluated but it is clear that enslaved peoples from throughout the region, representing many ethnic groups, were brought to the Americas. Although the numbers of individuals shipped from the coast are comparatively well documented, their precise origins and ethnicities are much more poorly known. People became associated with the area of the coast through which they passed, regardless of their actual origins (Lovejoy, 1989). Hence, slaves were referred to as “Cormante” or “Kormantin,” a reference to a relatively small fort and associated African settlement [**end of page 84**]

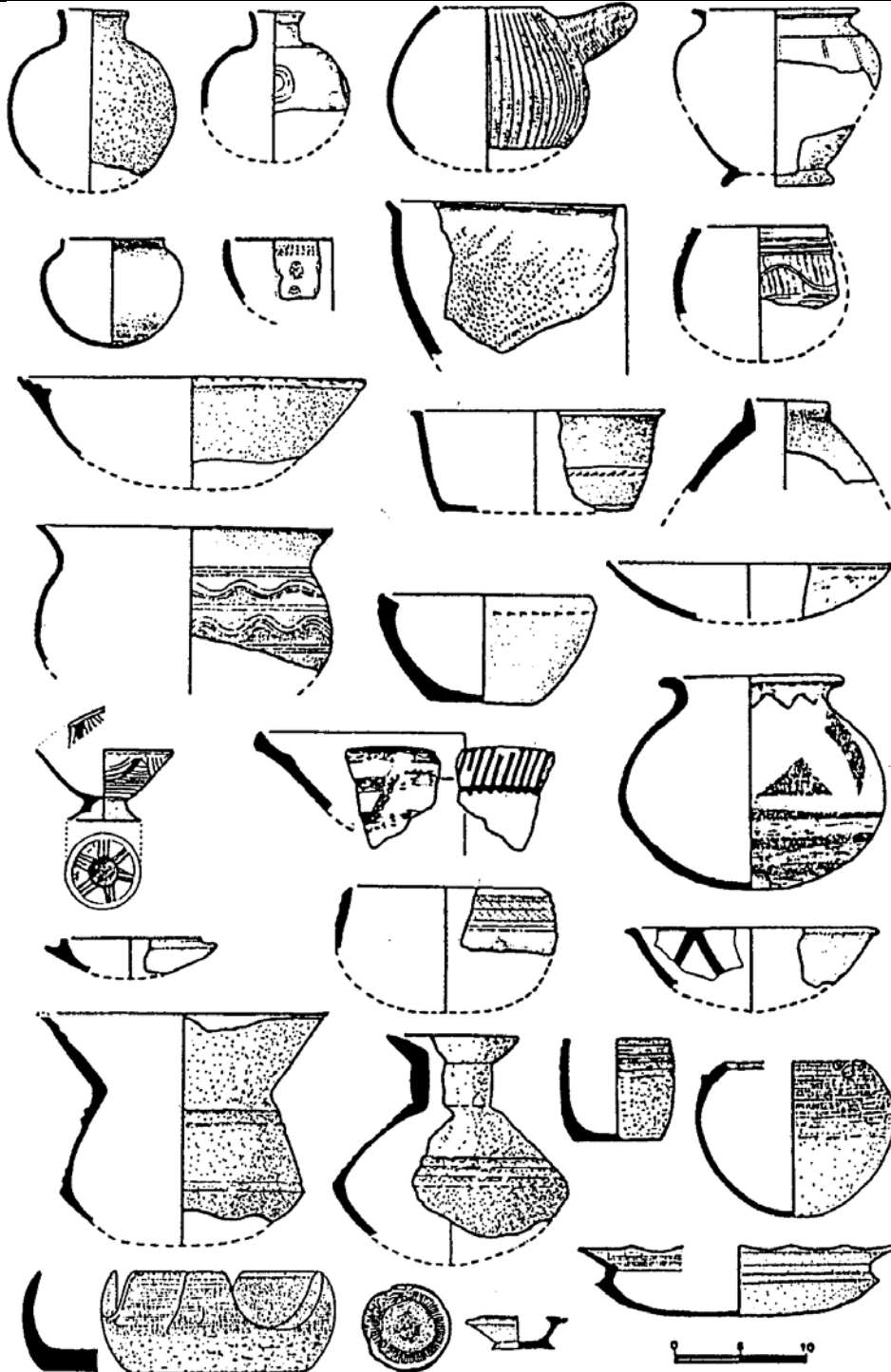


Fig. 4. Post-fifteenth century ceramics from Ghana illustrating some of the variation in decorative inventory. [end of page 85]

on the central Gold Coast (Van Dantzig, 1980, pp. 21–22), which could not possibly have produced the vast numbers of captive Africans that supposedly came from there. In fact, both the Portuguese and the Dutch prohibited the taking of slaves from entrepôts such as Elmina and their immediate hinterlands, not because of abolitionist concerns, but because this was seen as disruptive to trade (DeCorse, 2001b, p. 27). Many slaves were brought to the coast to be held for shipment to the Americas, as well as to meet local labor demands and for sale to local African merchants. As early as the 1470s, substantial numbers of slaves were taken from coastal Nigeria to the Gold Coast

(DeCorse, 2001b, pp. 34–35; Rodney, 1969; Vogt, 1973). Occasionally, people from coastal settlements like Elmina may have been sold into debt slavery (panyarred), but the majority of captives came from much further afield in the hinterland or other parts of West Africa. “Elmina” or “Mina” slaves were reportedly the instigators of the St. John revolt of 1733 (Pope, 1969, pp. 134–135), but it is more likely that these were Adangme and Akwamu men and women from the eastern Gold Coast sold to agents of the Danish West India and Guinea Company following the break-up of the Akwamu state (DeCorse, 2001b, pp. 27–28; Kea, 1996).

Given the preceding, it is likely that the captive Africans from the Ghanaian coast that reached Jamaica during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries brought varied cultural backgrounds and life experiences with them. There may have been some commonalities, or at least familiarity, with certain languages and agricultural practises, such as shifting hoe cultivation. Yet the specific cosmologies, cultural practises and technologies the Ewe, Fante, Krobo, and Ga would have brought with them across the Atlantic were distinct. Within the context of the diaspora, this heterogeneity further mitigated the survival of direct continuities and contributed to the variation in individual regional and island patterns seen today. Today, African descendent populations make up the majority (90%) of Jamaica’s population. Understanding of specific phenomena is contingent on the understanding of the complexities of the past and the genesis of the unique constellation of features that became “Jamaican.”

Although there is no evidence for direct, one to one correlations with West Africa, there is evidence for Afro-Jamaican ceramic production. Ethnographic work by Ebanks (1984) documented twentieth-century ceramic production by Spanish Town potter Ma Lou. Ebanks records:

Fanny Johnson was a potter, as was her mother before her. The Yard in which Ma Lou [Fanny Johnston] was born contained a large external family of maternal aunts and their children. All of these aunts made pots, and almost every yard in the district was occupied by a family of potters (Ebanks, 1984, p. 3).

Ebanks further suggests that the tradition represented by Ma Lou’s family dates back to the eighteenth century and, indeed, can be traced back to the Shai, a Ga-Dangme language group in eastern coastal Ghana. The family enterprise lasted until the 1950s when the economy crashed, at which time Ma Lou claimed she **[end of page 86]**



Fig. 5. Pottery sellers in Kingston Jamaica (National Anthropological Archive, Smithsonian Institution, Neg. 92-2462).

lost much of the skill she had developed as a young child. The pottery produced today by Munchie, Ma Lou’s daughter, mostly consists of monkey jars, cooking bowls, and coal pots intended for the tourist market. They are coil built, slipped, and burnished vessels, which are fired in the open.

Earlier evidence for the role of Afro-Jamaicans in ceramic production comes from a late nineteenth or early twentieth century photograph that reveals the diversity of ceramics produced in Jamaica at that time (Fig. 5). Taken

at what is likely Port Royal Street near the Kingston Waterfront, the photograph shows Afro-Jamaican higglers selling pots. What is remarkable about this photograph is not only the activities evident, but the range of pottery represented. Vessels include internally glazed, inverted bowls in the lower right hand corner; glazed chamber pots in the center; monkey jars toward the bottom left; Spanish jars toward the top; and water pots toward the upper right of the picture. Some of the same vessel shapes can be found in a Bellasrio print dating to the 1840s entitled "Water Jar Sellers" (Water Jar Sellers, National Library of Jamaica, Neg. N/11,144). In this image we see two men, one carrying an array of stylised water pots and monkey jars, and another carrying a Spanish Jar. [end of page 87]

A suggestive reference is provided by James Phillippo, who described the area around Kingston in the mid-nineteenth century. He noted: "[p]articles of golden mica have been found in districts near the source of the Rio Cobre, and sometimes, near Spanish Town, it has been incorporated with the potter's clay" (Phillippo, 1843, p. 72). Spanish Town is the location of modern potters documented by Ebanks and, although not diagnostic of any particular source, micaceous inclusions, such as biotite, have been identified in local ceramics found archaeologically (Hauser, 2001, p. 289).

Eighteenth century sources also describe pottery manufacture, indicating the kinds of pottery produced, as well as the identity of the potters. In 1797, an anonymous writer described the domestic utensils of enslaved African Jamaicans in the *Columbia Magazine*: "[s]ome negroes are expert in manufacturing pots and other common vessels on which they bestow a coarse glazing. Their pans (called Yabbas) are convex at the bottom without a ring as ours" (Anonymous, 1797, p. 293). In 1774, Edward Long described pots that were "a better sort of earthenware, manufactured by the Negroes" (Long, 1774, p. 851). According to an anonymous source, these pots were used primarily for cooking: "[t]he trivet for supporting the vessel in which he prepares his food, consists of three large stones" (Anonymous, cited in Armstrong, 1990, p. 292).

The preceding sources clearly link Africans to some Jamaican pottery production. Archaeological examples of ceramics comparable to that produced in the twentieth century by Spanish Town potters are plentiful in the archaeological record dating back to the seventeenth century. This pottery can be described as coarse, red slipped, and burnished. It was produced by coiling, is typically undecorated, and it occurs in everted-rim pots, vertical-rim pots, and restricted bowls. However, the modern Spanish Town pottery that is similar (because of its lack of glazing and application of burnishing) to other types of local ceramics found elsewhere in the Caribbean (e.g. Nevisian, Antigua industries) is only one type of Jamaican earthenware. The archival sources noted also indicate differences in production, variation that is also suggested by archaeological and petrographic data. Indeed, there are at least five types of locally made coarse earthenwares from the Jamaican archaeological record. The only unifying factors of these ceramics are their generally simple, utilitarian vessel forms, the lack of decorative inventory, and their low-firing temperatures.

Beyond these features locally produced Jamaican ceramics are highly variable in terms of the attributes represented. Coarse earthenwares include three types of hand-made ceramics (glazed, slipped, and untreated varieties), as well as wheel-thrown, untreated ceramics and wheel-thrown, glazed ceramics. The most common ceramic of these five distinct categories is an internally lead glazed ceramic commonly found in restricted direct rimmed bowls. Potters' fingerprints on this variety indicate pulled manufacture (Fig. 6; Hauser, 2001, p. 183), while ethnographic analogy and breaking patterns indicate that the slipped variety was [end of page 88]

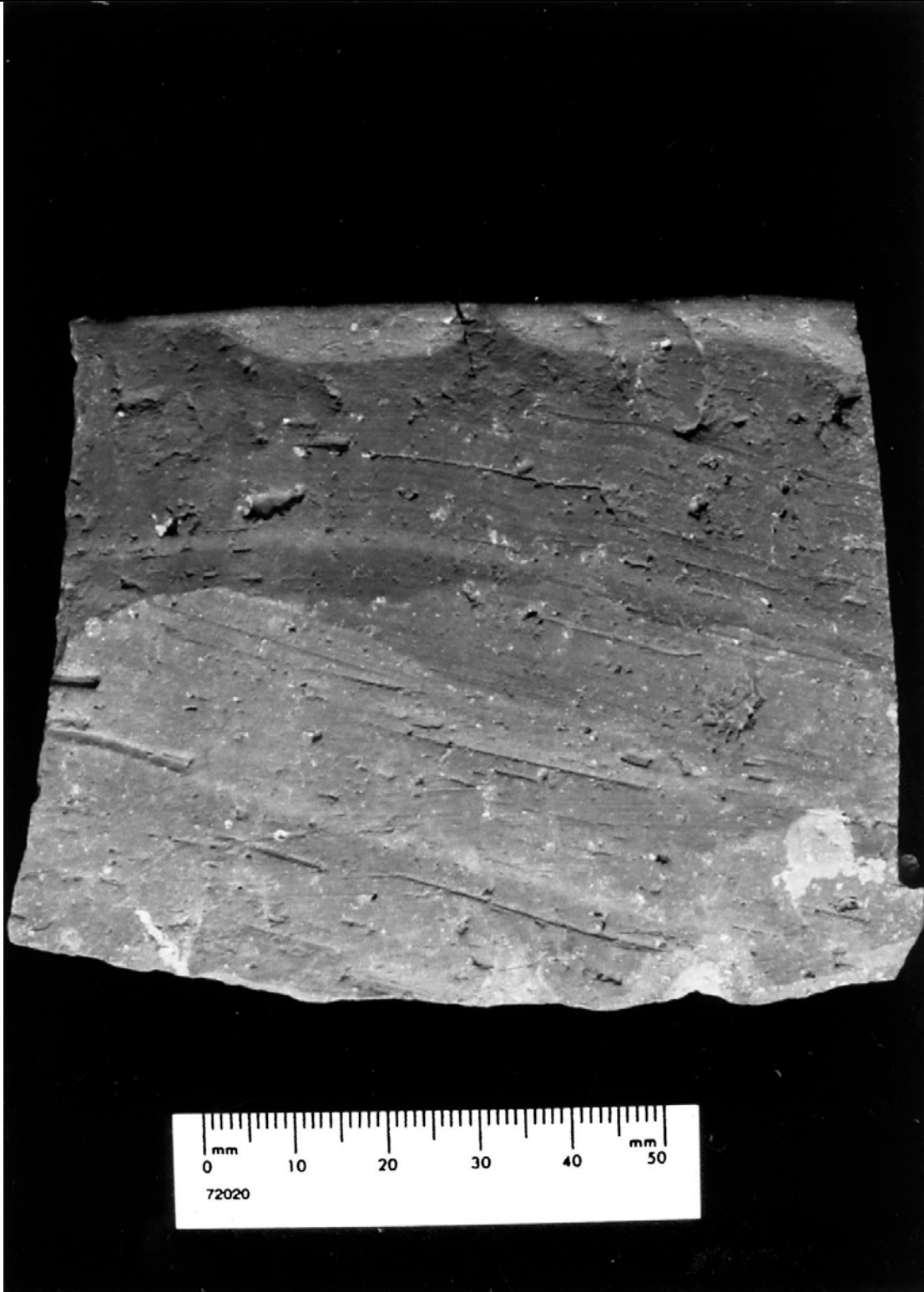


Fig. 6. A sherd of glazed pottery from Port Royal, Jamaica showing finger marks. [end of page 89]

produced by coiling (Ebanks, 1984). A category of ceramics far less represented in the archaeological record consists of incredibly friable and generally undecorated vessels. Patterns of breakage allow us to infer that this ceramic was produced using coiling and smoothing. It is found solely in the form of small everted pots. Wheel

throwing, also relatively uncommon, was identified either through the presence of flat bases or through the identification of throwing marks.

Local coarse earthenwares occur in a myriad of forms throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, but open and restricted bowls, and inverted and everted pots predominate. The function of these ranged from water storage to cooking and serving vessels. Indeed the term yabba traditionally refers to the restricted, direct-rimmed bowl that was used as a cooking pot (Higman, 1998, p. 223). The inverted pots were most likely used for a combination of tasks including cooking and water storage. A picture entitled “Candy Sellers” depicts a market woman drinking from such a pot (Candy [Doughnut] Sellers, National Library of Jamaica Neg. N/ 11,434). Other forms include chamber pots (primarily an urban form with the exception of sherds discussed by Reeves, 1997, p. 257), monkey jars, and coal pots. The latter two forms date primarily to the nineteenth century (Howson, 1995, p. 236).

What’s In a Decoration?

Decoration provides further indication of the varied traditions that were incorporated into Jamaican ceramic industries. These attributes are diverse, are limited in occurrence, and sort independently of the different manufacturing processes and forms represented. It is the comparative simplicity of the decorative inventory that makes these attributes so strikingly different from African assemblages of the post-European contact period. Yet the presence of this heterogeneous attribute category has been used to infer trans-Atlantic continuities with a pan-West African, Islamic decorative inventory. If we extrapolate Meyer’s assessment (1999, p. 219), decorations are a window into the ethnicity of the potter, African artisans “seemingly transported their knowledge of art and craft production” to the Americas. While such an idea might be supported in some settings (e.g., Price and Price, 1980; Thompson, 1984), the argument for a cohesive underlying logic system of decorative techniques or stylistic forms in Jamaican ceramic assemblages is problematic.

Historic Jamaican pottery has almost no decorative inventory. In the seventeenth century collection Meyers analysed, he reported that only 28 out of 899 sherds were decorated, while of the 2602 sherds in the Port Royal collection studied by us, 90% ($n = 2364$) were undecorated (Hauser, 2001). Additional work on this collection revealed that the 442 sherds from seventeenth century contexts included 67 decorated examples; eighteenth-century deposits produced 137 decorated sherds out of a total of 1897; and in the nineteenth century we see 32 decorated **[end of page 90]** sherds out of 261. These numbers, small as they are, likely significantly *overrepresent* the amount of decorated sherds as one of the major seventeenth century collections included (recovered by Marx) appears to consist solely of diagnostic sherds making the proportion of decorated sherds subsequently higher.

Decoration that is present is an incredibly fluid and heterogeneous variable. The data from Port Royal indicate individual decorative types are so rare and inconsistent in occurrence that it is very difficult to associate individual techniques or motifs with discrete groups of ceramics. Many decorative categories are represented by single examples. The number of decorative techniques found, however, shows some variation through time that is suggestive. In the seventeenth century, decoration included rouletting, incision, grooving, punctuation, stamping, carving, and molding. Techniques do not seem to have greater representation on any particular type of ceramic; rouletting, for example, occurs on slipped and untreated hand-built earthenwares alike. Individual decorative patterns are also varied in terms of their form and the areas of the pots represented. By the eighteenth century, most decorative techniques disappear with the exception of the circum-incision of vessels, filleting of rims, and occasional makers’ marks on the bases of vessels. In the nineteenth century, there is a flourishing of new decorative techniques including molding, appliqué, and perforation. These techniques, however, seem to be restricted to new forms, like flower pots and monkey jars introduced in the mid-nineteenth century.

The decorative inventories of West African ceramics are as varied as the industries themselves. Techniques used include stamping, stabbing, rouletting, painted or slipped decoration, cord marking, punctuation, various kinds of incising, burnished area decoration, and appliqué. The frequency and placement of these decorations also vary. As in the case of manufacture and vessel form, certain decorations are associated with particular cultural groups. Painted or slipped decoration in Ghana, for example, is primarily confined to northern ceramic industries. As Meyers (1999, pp. 212–215) notes, stamping does occur. This is, however, a broadly inclusive category that subsumes different types of technique that are quite different in their placement and effect and of uncertain relatedness. Further, given the paucity of archaeological data available for some areas, any statements about the distribution and temporal

occurrence are tenuous. Examples of various kinds of stamping using shell, cord marking, and so-called comb stamping, occur in sites throughout West Africa (e.g., Breunig *et al.*, 1996; Connah, 1981; Desmedt, 1991; Frank, 1998; McIntosh and Bocoum, 2000; Ogundiran, 2002; Soper, 1985; Stahl, 1999; Also see references and discussion in DeCorse, 2001a).

In assemblages from the Ghanaian coast, decoration on ceramics dating from the mid-first millennium A.D. (predating the spread of Islam) through the seventeenth century consist primarily of stamping and parallel grooves done with the edge of shells, probably *Arca senilis*. Incising and occasional examples of roulette decoration also occur. Stamping is uncommon in post-seventeenth century assemblages, the majority of decoration consisting of shallow groove incising in bands [end of page 91] and arcs done, in comparable ethnographic examples, with the edge of a calabash. Punctuation (or die stamping), comparable to that commented on by Meyers (1999, pp. 212–213) includes a minute portion of the assemblages studied (less than .01%) and date to the nineteenth century. The distinctive and regular appearance of these marks may indicate that they were done with imported metal artifacts.

The timing and occurrence of individual attributes in the forest differs from the coast. As previously noted, some of the distinctive Asante-style wares occur earlier in the interior forest than on the coast. In the distinctive ceramic industries of the northern savannah, the expansion of Asante does not appear to have the same degree of impact (Stahl, 1992, p. 138). Even within ceramic traditions there is some localized variation. Given these variables, it would be inappropriate to lump together data on individual attribute categories from northern and coastal Ghanaian sites, much less North African and West African sites thousands of miles apart, without careful consideration of the contexts represented and the entire suite of attributes concerned. Surveying the data from the Inland Niger Delta and North Africa (McIntosh, 1995, p. 163), it is not simply the occurrence of stamped decoration, but its presence in discreet areas of distinctive vessel forms. The ceramics from the sites of Qsar-es-Seghir, Jene jeno, Elmina, and Port Royal are not contemporaneous nor do the ceramics present reflect a shared ceramic tradition. While similarities in some techniques may be represented, the industries as a whole are more different than they are similar. No cultural or temporal link can be drawn and the distinctive stamping motifs discussed by Meyers cannot be seen as a unique and pan-West African decorative attribute. The small sample sizes of the Jamaican decorative inventories, their simplicity, and the uncertainty of the historical connections represented raise serious concerns about the conclusion that the Jamaican decorations can be seen as Islamic and African inspired, as opposed to the result of independent invention or influences from other traditions.

Conclusion

The preceding discussions, specifically with regard to Jamaica, demonstrate a varied ceramic industry in flux over time. This variation belies the attempt by some scholars to classify a broad range of ceramics as a single Afro-Jamaican ware. The presence of some utilitarian forms (including so-called yabbas) remains constant in the archaeological record. However, this observation is matched by the sudden appearance and popularity of other forms in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Rather than automatically subsuming all low-fired earthenwares into generalized categories such as “colonoware,” “Afro-Jamaican,” or “yabba,” care should be taken to discern differences in manufacture, decoration, and the sociocultural context of production. This observation is equally valid with regard to the Caribbean and other parts of the Americas. [end of page 92]

In attempting to establish a link between the ceramic industries of Ghana and Jamaica Meyers follows the pattern of many scholars who attempt to draw one-to-one connections between African and American populations. Such studies typically draw on secondary West African sources and lack evidence for historical connections between the pertinent study areas. The conceptual frameworks often do not take into account the complexity of the culture change in African societies and the Atlantic trade. These studies also underscore the problems of using ceramics as an index of identity.

Following Meyers' argument, one might expect the African-inspired decorative inventory to increase as more enslaved Africans arrived in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Rather than relying on indigenously born slaves for labor, planters increasingly required larger numbers of African born slaves until the slave trade was abolished in 1807. We also know from work by Carney (1996), Goucher (1993), and others that planters and owners at times obtained skilled slaves from Africa to meet specific needs. Yet we see that while there is an increase in the imported slave population Jamaica during the eighteenth century, we see a decrease in the decorative inventory of Jamaican ceramics. While some have argued that the change in decorative inventory is evidence of a process of

creolization (Ebanks, 1984) whereby first generation potters with rich cultural inventories were replaced by second and third generation potters without the same cultural background, the demographic and archaeological data point to other scenarios. Indeed the original artisans in Jamaica during the English period were most likely Creole in the historic sense of the term. They were primarily from Suriname, Barbados, St. Kitts, and Nevis (Burton, 1997; Watson, personal communication, 2002). Concomitantly, the archaeological data seem to suggest that in the eighteenth century there was an intensification of production where decoration became more standardized and less prevalent. Compositional studies on the eighteenth century wares point to very few production sites (Hauser, 2001, pp. 261–272). The later rise in the amount of decoration and decorative types in the nineteenth century is also difficult to explain in terms of increased influence from African artisans. The nineteenth century increase in decoration most likely points to increased intra-Caribbean trade through which ideas from neighboring Spanish and British islands were exchanged.

The point of the preceding discussion is not to deny African influence in American ceramics. We know that African-inspired features have been found in many American societies. Certainly the fact that coiling and slab manufacture, as opposed to wheel throwing or molding, are the predominate type of manufacture in many Caribbean low-fired earthenware traditions is notable, as is the occurrence of a suite of decorative techniques that may be found in African ceramics. The issue is whether it is possible to delineate correlations with specific parts of Africa—namely the Gold Coast—or an Islamic decorative tradition. We know that African cultures were not transplanted en masse to remain static and unchanged in the Americas. This factor, combined with the extremely limited contemporary **[end of pag 93]** data for many areas of Africa, as well as ambiguities about ethnicities of slaves in the Americas, allows only the most tenuous statements to be made about continuities. The disruptive nature of the enslavement and the melding of different cultures (numerous African, European, and Native American) makes direct connections unlikely and, in fact, unexpected. Indeed the multiple colonial histories and heterogeneous populations involved require a more nuanced understanding of creolization and its material residues. Methodologically, such studies must begin with a strong grounding in the historical contexts represented and recognition of the dynamic and innovative nature of African American societies. It is only within the context of local and regional interactions that this variation and change in pottery assemblages becomes meaningful.

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