

Beads as Silent Witnesses of an African-American Past: Social Identity and the Artifacts of Slavery in Annapolis, Maryland

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The knowledge that beads are among the artifacts found at slave sites is not new, but the association has been sexless and the behavior beads denoted has not often been considered worthy of study. Initially beads were taken as signs of European male/Indian interaction (Deagan 1987). Gradually as beads were found at slaves sites where no Indian ever lived, their ethnic affiliations were enlarged (Smith 1983, Adams 1987). Still, beads have rarely been associated with women's lives in the archaeological literature. This is probably because analysts connected the beads with body adornment (viewing adornment as comprised of things that spangle, glitter, flatter or enhance, but are, none-the-less, non-essential). Further, archaeologists connected these artifacts to slaves as a generalized set of people, and did not link the items to meaningful events within a genderized system of values (i.e., to social process). The use of a broad-based social category constrained the way the artifacts were seen and masked the presence of their users. That is to say, researchers adapted standard categories of analysis which privileged white men while sometimes separating white men and white women, but almost invariably conjoined both sexes when non-European peoples were discussed (Butler, 1992:155–56). They used standard procedures based on taken-for-granted beliefs, and hence unexamined assumptions. Such procedures normally obscure differences in men's and women's lives within various ethnic groups or, in this case, among Africans and African descendants. Yet beads from slave-occupied sites can provide insight on women's lives and help us see black women as people in their own right. Since most recorded history shrouds what the first generations of African women thought, felt, and did in their early years on the American continents, any source of information that can rip apart the barriers and provide insight on the fabric of their lives has the potential to be immensely helpful.

Yet, it was not among artifacts, but in court records—probate inventories—that I first saw the slave women who were members of Governor Charles Calvert's household and began to appreciate the household's social complexity (Yentsch 1994). The analytical process whereby black women stepped out of time to become visible as vital, social actors in the Calvert household was gradual. The increased awareness renewed my respect for the multicultural society of the eighteenth-century Chesapeake, and for the importance of small things such as beads whose roles in daily life are often diminished and forgotten. The process was also tricky because I had to connect what Deetz and Scott (1995) call material events (the archaeological deposition of beads) with historical events (the breaking of a necklace, the purchase of a bead) and insert them into a framework where the social action of individual actors could be inferred and then placed within its cultural context. Context, in this case, refers to the organizational principles (or structural relationships) which govern social relations,

divisions of labor, modes of production, inheritance systems, marriage patterns, religious beliefs, and world view. All the things, in other words, that make the members of any particular culture act as they do when they are behaving in accord with their cultural selves.

Governor Calvert's Annapolis slave holdings (more women, more children) contrasted sharply with those of ordinary Maryland planters although their impact on the archaeological record of his site seemed scant; the Calvert assemblage was dominated by artifacts which were apparent remnants of English activity. I was as perplexed as other archaeologists (e.g. Smith 1983; De Corse 1989) in the 1980s who found it difficult to see distinctive evidence of slave culture or African ethnicity at sites. Douglas Armstrong (1990:178–179, 272) addressed this issue using data from the West Indies, concluding it occurred because the predominant artifacts in plantation assemblages were English made. It took patient sifting through both documentary and archaeological evidence, moving back and forth between a variety of sources, and assessing each before the artifact evidence of the black women who lived at the site became identifiably theirs. This evidence included beads and faunal remains which suggest the presence of an African cuisine in eighteenth-century Maryland (Yentsch 1994). It was context dependent and became visible only as an ethnographic history of Annapolis was pieced together and the town's social process analyzed. People had to be reinserted into the material world. First, items that originally seemed simply to be English became objects with dual functions. Their roles in symbolically maintaining African ties became clearer—their messages of African influence were easier to analyze—the more one learned about the traditional cultures of West Africa. In other words, an ethnographic familiarity with a past culture derived from reading historical texts with an anthropologist's eye was a critical step in discerning an artifact's import within the larger assemblage and within specific features or stratigraphic levels.

For the most part, the beads were European made, formed from glass, and impossible to distinguish in the ground from those that European traders exchanged with Indian tribal peoples for fur, for land, and for other goods (Hayes 1983). Identifying their manufacturing origin and temporal chronology did not illuminate their symbolism. To perceive the symbolic content of beads and other jewelry or distinctive body marks requires multiple lines of research. Fortunately, many of the sources were what Daniel McCall (1964) calls "witnesses in spite of themselves," or what Henry Glassie (1975) refers to as "inadvertent bits of information." They included primary source materials: varied works of art 100–300 years old; traveler's accounts from 1600–1800. They included artifact comparanda: assemblages from West Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States.

Gradually it became evident that the circle of historical sources was wider and richer than one might imagine. It also included contemporary evidence: modern photographs (Fisher 1984); ethnographic observations by archaeologists such as Nicholas David and his co-workers (David, et. al. 1988); anthropological studies (Herskovits 1941, 1945); and informal evidence supplied by black women artists and writers who had traveled or studied in Africa. A stronger, tighter story could be woven by using late nineteenth-century photographs, by looking at literary sources, and by adding oral tradition from African-American women aged 70–100. One would want to hear what women born between 1890 and 1920 had to say because they are the people who would have direct knowledge of the ways that their mothers and grandmothers wore jewelry. These older women are the people who would know what it

looked like, how it was made, where it came from, and, most importantly, the significance it held. In turn, pushing the generations again further back in time, their ascendants (i.e., their own mothers and grandmothers) might have been born in slavery. Thus the connection between the culture of slavery in the United States and the beliefs and ideas about objects used in bodily adornment that slave women shared with their descendants could be tightly drawn for an era before a reaching out for material African connections became popular in the 1960s and 1970s. While there is a relationship today between the use of jewelry in various areas of Africa and the style or expressive tones of various contemporary pieces of jewelry worn by modern African-American women, its origin is unclear. The effect of mass communication, global markets, and the conscious decision to adopt forms and styles of material culture expressively African may be at the heart of the action rather than unifying traditions directly linking women through time. To correct for this in a research study requires moving back to an era when such influences would be less prevalent, to one where there would be less "noise" in the data. This is a project well beyond the scope of this study.

The texts that were used are varied and widely spread through the world of documents; they lie outside the standard avenues of historical inquiry. The data was obtained by working forwards in time, backwards, and sidewise. Prehistorians have often chosen, for prudent reasons, to use only historical documents which take them "upstream." That is to say, they look for direct cultural links between present-day peoples in specific geographic locales and the archaeological cultures they excavate. The move is from present to past and done in careful, spatially-bounded, sequential steps. The reluctance to "leap" derives from a lack of ethnographic information which would permit one to make reasonable inferences about certain types of cultural behavior. By and large, for most of recorded time, this exists only among those societies which also possessed writing. The analog in historical archaeology might be deed research where one begins with the present owner of a known piece of property (one with clear spatial boundaries) and moves back in time to establish its occupants two hundred years ago.

Upstreaming is a narrow approach unnecessarily restrictive within historical archaeology. Historical research can be expanded to include "down-streaming"—working from the past forward. This is a useful way to understand the impact of a kinship system on the owners of a particular house or the relationships between a series of events in the past and their impact in the "archaeological present." Two other approaches used by ethnohistorians are also valid, informative methods of documentary research for historical archaeologists. These include looking at descendant cultures of earlier groups—an approach based on the premise that one essential element of society is the "preservation of cultural values even in the midst of change" (Axtell 1981:9–11). (Speaking with older black women about the role of jewelry in their mothers or grandmother's lives would be one example of this technique). Ethnohistorians also look at what is happening with related cultures in the same general geographic area at equivalent historical periods, paying special attention to those groups whom they might reasonably expect to share cultural traits (Axtell 1981:9–11). For example, in areas of the United States where the importation of slaves was made illegal in the 1700s and laws were rigorously enforced, research on nineteenth-century slave communities would not tell much about the immediate effects of forced migration on the preservation of cultural values. However, in places such as coastal Georgia where the importation of slaves can be

documented through the mid-nineteenth century (Wells 1968), social action within slave communities should reveal how a steady infusion of African-born peoples affected expressive forms of African culture. Coastal Georgia would be an example of what a place where one might reasonably expect to see a high incidence of preserved African-based traditions because the members of the descendant slave communities were generationally closer to their African forebears (see Turner 1949 and Joyner 1984 for examples of such work in nearby South Carolina).

In research on the archaeology of slavery in Annapolis, I turned these techniques around by keeping time relatively constant, but expanding the geographic scope. This was done because African peoples were transported rapidly over a broad area within a fairly narrow time span. For example, men and women born on the African continent or individuals whose parents were African-born formed approximately 25% of the population in the Virginia Tidewater (c.1700) and a slightly lower percentage along Maryland's Western Shore. Fifty years later, the black population was nearly 45% in the Tidewater (Sobel 1987:243) and 37% in Maryland's tobacco counties (Yentsch 1994:334). The outward migration flow was rapid and intense. From this perspective, different sets of evidence converge: written descriptions of women sold in Norfolk, Virginia wearing only their beaded necklaces (Michel 1702); drawings of black women leaving a ship on the coast of Surinam in Central America in which women wear beaded necklaces (Stedman 1796); paintings of slave gatherings in the Caribbean by European artists in which women adorned with beaded necklaces appear (e.g., a work by Dirk Valkenburg entitled "Slave 'Play' on the Dombi Plantation, 1707" in Thompson (1993:129); an 1810 watercolor entitled "A Negroe Dance on the Island of Dominica" in Bush (1990:159) or another in Gaspar (1991:134)

Each individual piece of evidence becomes a stronger bit of information than it would be if it stood alone. Together they stand as one marker of a shared West African heritage which diffused to the New World.

Historians and anthropologists write that the cultures of Africa are widely dispersed across its vast continent, complex, and often highly divergent; they sometimes bear little resemblance to one another. Yet, many women caught in the slave trade came from adjacent areas of West Africa (Wax 1978). Within this region some deeply engrained "cultural understandings and assumptions" (Mintz and Price 1976) crossed societal bounds to constitute organizing principles, or so-called cognitively-based schemas, oftentimes represented in material forms of cultural expression with regional geographic scope (see, for example, the use of jewelry in Fisher 1984 or the religious beliefs discussed by John Mbiti 1975). Certainly, the flow of peoples within the African Diaspora, depending on the vagaries of slave trade, brought women to places widely separated in space, if not continents apart. Yet, some of the same women may also have had birthplaces, or points of origin, which were contiguous. The usual norms of proxemics—letting time flow, but maintaining narrowly-defined spatial constraints—may not apply. Cross-examining the sources, subjecting them to inquiry, indicates that commonalities can exist across space because of shared origins or cross-cutting beliefs about the way the world was built. In fact, in the case of beads at archaeological sites, when divergent lines of evidence reveal similar examples of cultural practice, an analyst can be fairly sure that she is not dealing with an ephemeral will-of-the-wisp and that the objects or artifacts in question have some symbolic importance that begs interpretation.

In the case of beads and other small items of jewelry, the common sense explanation is that one symbolic task was to reinforce a woman's social identity, or, simultaneously perhaps, to ward off evil or potentially dangerous spirits. Yet thinking further, this is heady stuff for it speaks to boundaries which are essential in any culture: divisions between the sexes; lines between sacred and profane; definitions of normal, ideal, and deviant behavior. The roles these small objects fulfilled thus bespoke the souls of their wearers. Silent witnesses, in one sense, they were also exquisitely revealing in others. They spoke loudly to individuals familiar with their cultural framework. Ironically, one reason slave owners let women wear beads and other similar objects that expressed a woman's African cultural identity was that the potent symbolism escaped western eyes. European or EuroAmerican men saw beads as simply decorative trifles—women's things not worthy of much heed. Thus they survived. By diminishing the importance of jewelry, members of the dominant culture unknowingly permitted its use and, hence, its African symbolism to persist unchecked.

Gradually I came to see the beads from the Calvert site in Annapolis as creative expressions of an ethnic lifestyle which denoted the maintenance of African cultural identities (no matter that the cultures might themselves vary) by the women, and occasionally men, who wore them. But the beads speak further, to larger and more broad-based issues. Some were raised by Jim Deetz (1993) in Flowerdew Hundred where he wrote of the way people use material culture to distinguish themselves from others, to give themselves individual, social, and cultural identities. Deetz (1993:65) noted that most of the explanations provided by archaeologists for this process placed "undue emphasis on 'power relationships', the statement in material things by the members of a ruling elite to declare their own position of dominance." Recently the emphasis on power has been enlarged to consider ways that those who occupy the lower levels of a hierarchy express their autonomy from or resistance to the dominant elite. These are truly provocative studies (e.g., Hall 1992, McGuire and Paynter 1991; Beaudry, Cook and Mrozowski 1991), but, as Deetz stressed, some of the differences in material culture associated with group identity may "relate to superior-inferior relationships, but by no means all" (Deetz, 1993:65).

The beads, for example, from Annapolis may speak tangentially to the power structure within the household, and because they denoted the Africanness of their wearers, could be viewed as markers of inferior rank. Certainly, African slave women stood low on the social ladder. The beads could also be viewed as small but subtle signs of resistance among the 150 or so Africans or African descendants who lived amid the larger community, approximately 600 or so, of Annapolitans. Yet these views do a disservice to the more potent role that these tiny artifacts also held.

Simply put, any black woman and her daughter who wore beads expressed her identity as an African woman or woman-in-the-making. She behaved as her mother and her grandmother before her had behaved. Here we see no bowing under to a slave owner nor necessarily any reactive response to his edicts. Rather we see a continuation of a way of doing things that was ages old, passed from generation to generation, and hence a mechanism through which women drew communal strength. It co-existed—a parallel universe—within the material culture of domination. Collectively, the artifacts form a bridge which simultaneously connects generations of black women through time and space. These small beads speak to the special relationships that black women formed with each other and with their female kin

(Brown 1991; Butler 1992); they let us bring forth some of the first generations of slave women from behind the shroud that time and text have imposed. Furthermore, the beads do so with dignity and grace because they are the residual remains of positive social action that enhanced individual and group identity.

At first glance, the Calvert beads did not seem of much importance. They individually fell between the floorboards of one room in the main house whenever their stringing materials wore out. The ones which entered the archaeological matrix were the few that could not be picked up, swept up, or recovered. Their modest presence—while higher than that recovered at most slave quarters—denotes an even larger quantity in ‘real life’. The beads number approximately 100 and come in assorted sizes from small seed beads suitable for sewing upon cloth to large beads. One or two may have been rosary beads; others may have been incorporated in jewelry that the Calvert wives and daughters wore, but not all. The beads are predominately glass—red, blue, orange, green, yellow, white—but there are also a few of semi-precious stone or coral. No color predominates and it is impossible to know whether any were once joined together as necklaces, earrings, or girdle strands. They are not grave goods, hence their numbers are not as high as those recorded from African cemeteries in the New World (New York: Sheryl LaRoche, personal communication, December 1992; Barbados: Handler, Lange, and Orser 1979). Nor do they approach the 30,000 beads recovered at Elmina in West Africa (De Corse 1989). But they still have import.

Their presence inside the main house indicates that African jewelry was not hidden nor something that black women could only wear when slaves gathered in private. The beads are but remnants. They may represent jewelry that was either public—necklaces, earrings, hair ornaments—or private—waist strands. While this distinction is an important one to sort out, their archaeological provenance makes it impossible at the Calvert site. However, the presence of the beads does seem to suggest that various forms of African-derived body adornment were part of the everyday black experience in eighteenth-century Maryland. Perhaps this is because they were viewed as insignificant ornaments by slave-owners; perhaps (and there is limited evidence in inventories to suggest this), slave-owners allowed limited autonomy in some aspects of their lives during the early years of Chesapeake slavery. Some historians assert that there was more flexibility in race relations prior to the point at which slavery became an essential element in the economic system in Chesapeake society (Morgan 1982). The reasons may also lie elsewhere. How to take what appears puzzling within an artifact assemblage and give it coherence? How to grasp the significance of this relatively unknown dimension of ethnic interaction in the colonial period? One analytical step is to return to the source, to study the data from Africa.

In Africa jewelry was a significant mark of cultural and social identity; traditional patterns of body adornment had great time depth, and the practice was geographically widespread (Geary and Nicholls 1994). Archaeologists find glass beads in contexts that date before the trans-Atlantic slave trade. They are shown in paintings on Egyptian tombs and were obtained from distant sources (India, Persia), carried across the Sahara desert to sub-Saharan markets (De Corse 1989). At the Diakhite sand pit, east of modern Dakar, workmen have found thousands of beads in or near clay pots which lie beside fragile skeletal remains (Oppen and Oppen 1989). Many of these burials date to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, contemporaneous with slave sites in the New World. In fact, some of the beads from Diakhite

are remarkably like those recovered in Annapolis. This is not surprising. In 1623, Richard Jobson wrote about a transaction he made with a Fulbie (i.e., Fulani) woman who traded dairy products for European goods including beads, knives, and other trifles (Jobson 1623:36). Descriptions of women's jewelry can be seen in many traveler's accounts, and black women are depicted in old drawings from both Old World and New wearing jewelry. In the late 1700s, Matthews observed that African women "are also very fond of ornaments, such as beads formed into necklaces, bracelets, &c., silver rings, lockets and chains, manilas (which are hoops of silver made flat or round to wear on the wrists), strings of coral and use a variety of paints" (Matthews 1788:108). Earlier, Bosman specified strings of a white coral, "Conta de Terra" and gave the native name for a blue stone, 'Agrie' or 'Accori' (1705:102). Today, the Yoruba know the latter as "aggrey," an ancient blue bead made of powdered glass that possesses its symbolic value in part because of its age (Fisher 1984:70–71).

It is easy to trace the use of such jewelry to the Caribbean where Mrs. Carmichael (1833:146–47) described the dress of women as including handkerchiefs, turbans, gold earrings, rings, coral necklaces, gold chains, lockets, and other ornaments. She specified that each woman has "one really good necklace; but they also often wear along with it, half a dozen or so necklaces of combined glass beads, light blue, yellow, white, and purple. Every Negro has a garnet necklace...little girls are dressed much as their mothers are." One can add the written to the object for more information, viewing those in book illustrations (Stedman 1796) or oil paintings (Thompson 1993; Rice and Campbell 1991), then add again, to include beads recovered at Caribbean domestic sites, as well as other archaeological examples from the West Indies (summarized in Armstrong 1990).

Two of the more provocative examples were associated with two Barbados graves (Handler and Lange 1978). First there was a simple necklace: one carnelian stone strung among varied glass beads; it is unclear whether the person buried in the grave was male or female. A second grave contained an elderly man who wore an elaborate necklace with a single carnelian stone. The necklace showed its African derivation in the mix of materials—cowry shells, fish vertebrae, canine teeth, and beads. His copper and brass bracelets and finger rings also exhibited African influence. Because the jewelry was found in only two graves, its analysts associated it with obeah men or shamans, masculine individuals who had "great influence and prestige in plantation slave communities" (Handler, Lange, and Orser 1979:16).

Residual pieces of materials used to make jewelry are not limited to West Indies sites but appear at other places associated with Africans and African descendants. William Adams (1987:187, 197) found ten blue, yellow, red, and black beads at a coastal Georgia slave cabin. Marvin Smith (1983: Appendix F) analyzed a small collection of 25, including four red glass beads—cornaline d'Aleppo—imitative of chalcedony (i.e., carnelian) from Yauhan and Curriboo plantations on the Cooper River in South Carolina. We recovered faceted blue and white beads while digging but two test pits at the slave quarters on a rice plantation in Darien with absentee ownership; conversely, Larry Babits (personal communication, January 1994) reports almost none from Julianton, another Georgia rice plantation, whose owner (as revealed through documentary analysis) maintained tight control of his slaves.

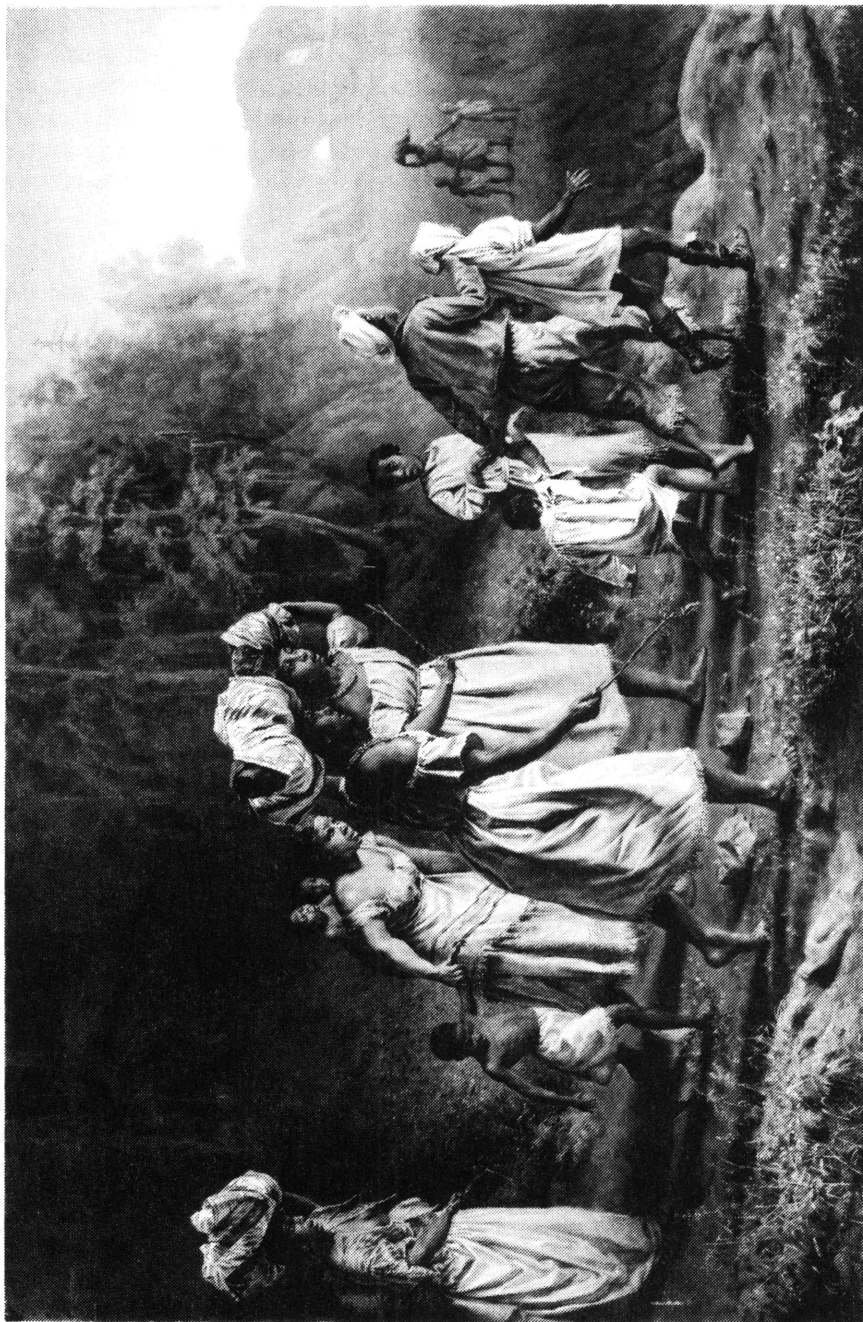


Figure 1: "On to Liberty" by Theodor Kaufman, 1867. Courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Erving and Joyce Wolf, 1982.

Other archaeologists in the South are now reporting beads in larger and larger quantities. The simple fact is that once you “see” them, they are there, impinging on one’s state of awareness, freighted with interpretive possibilities, marks of ethnic “others” with distinctive life-styles that penetrated the dominant cultural domain. Further the presence of beads in association with sites where African descendants lived, worked, played, and worshipped is not confined to the south. Mary Beaudry has found beads in the yard of an African Meeting House on Nantucket Island off the shores of Cape Cod (Beaudry, personal communication, December 1993). They appear elsewhere on New England sites which have ties to the slave trade (James Gorman, personal communication, January 1994).

These small artifacts are not confined to archaeological sites. They can be placed in the world-of-social-action through their presence in other material culture texts. In 1867, artist Theodore Kaufman, painted slave women wearing distinctive beaded necklaces in his work “On to Liberty” (Figure 1). Other American artists did as well, starting earlier in time. Although no systematic trace of the genre has been made, impressionistic evidence suggests that beaded jewelry is shown more frequently on women than on men. And at the Calvert site, we have one of the largest archaeological samples of glass beads in Maryland which has a firm association with a home where most of the slaves were women or young girls. Is there good evidence that beads should be classed among women’s artifacts or, because of their religious values, should they be classed otherwise?

Like many women, West African women delighted in dressing finely. William Bosman specified their pride in clothing: “the women’s dress is richer than the men’s. Ladies plat their hair very artfully, and place their fetishes, coral and ivory, with a judicious air and go much finer than the men” (1705:103). Black women continued to dress well whenever they could in the New World too. In Virginia, John Davis (1803:366) observed, “the girls never failed to put on their garments of gladness, their bracelets, chains, rings, and ear-rings” before setting forth on Sundays to visit neighbors. Here the issue is not one simply of dressing for joy, but revolves around using a variety of means to tell the world about one’s social and cultural identity. Handler, Lange and Orser (1979) believe that glass beads were not regularly obtained and so became highly valued items among Caribbean slaves. They attach particular significance to carnelian beads, imported from India, and important in Africa for several centuries. In 1844 Adolph Rinck painted a New Orleans woman, Marie Labeau, who some believe practiced voodoo, wearing a necklace made from carnelian beads like the one recovered at the Calvert site (Yentsch 1994:285, 304). Such beads, in Senegambia in the early 1700s, were far more expensive than cowry shells or beads made from glass, amber, or crystal. Traders exchanged crystal beads 100 to a single bar of iron; 100 of the expensive carnelian beads cost five bars. In terms of pounds sterling, a carnelian bead was 10 shillings whereas 1,000 crystal beads could be bought for 30 to 40 shillings the lot (Curtin 1975:242). To date, almost no carnelian beads have been discovered archaeologically on the North American mainland. Hence the one recovered from the Calvert site was surely perceived by its owner (and probably by other members of the black community) as precious (Figure 2).

Some archaeologists also stress the symbolic importance of blue beads; others critique them for doing so (De Corse 1994). But what very few historical archaeologists will talk about is the magic of beads and their spiritual qualities. Prehistorians such as George Hamell (1983:5, 28) have written of the metaphorical roles that beads held in Native American

cultures: Crystal (i.e., glass) as “light, bright, and white things...are reflective substances, literally and figuratively, and substances in which native ideological and aesthetic interests are one.” Thus their trade became “a trade in metaphors”; one culture’s ‘truck’—its petty merchandise, or baubles, bangles, and beads—were another’s treasure. The concept used by Hammel can be transferred to considerations of Euro-African markets too. While many of the beaded jewelry African women wore were created from British trade goods (thus “truck”), their expressive roles in the recipient cultures remained African; thus European beads became symbolic extensions of African human bodies and also suitable adornment for African gods as Robert Farris Thompson illustrates in *Face of the Gods* (1993).

Like other forms of body decoration so richly illustrated in *Africa Adorned* (Fisher 1984), jewelry conveyed information, was emblematic of cultural identity in a heterocultural society, and provided protection to its wearer. Nicholas David and his co-workers observe that variations in the style of African bracelets distinguish parents of boy twins from parents of girl twins from parents of single-birthed children. Jewelry (as with body scarification) helped separate one sex from another, older from younger, marked rites of passage, and told of special talents in life and death (David, et. al. 1988). Body adornment told of a person’s social identity; it said to others, “you are my relative and I am yours,” or spoke of social taboos. It accomplished this feat through its imagery, variations in width, length, decorative detail, color, and material components (see Figure 3). Jewelry was made from valuable metals such as gold and silver or from natural objects symbolic of wealth (cowry shells), from natural objects valued in their own right, and from others symbolically associated with gods and spirits. Ivory might be given magical properties while lions’ teeth could symbolize strength. Examples of

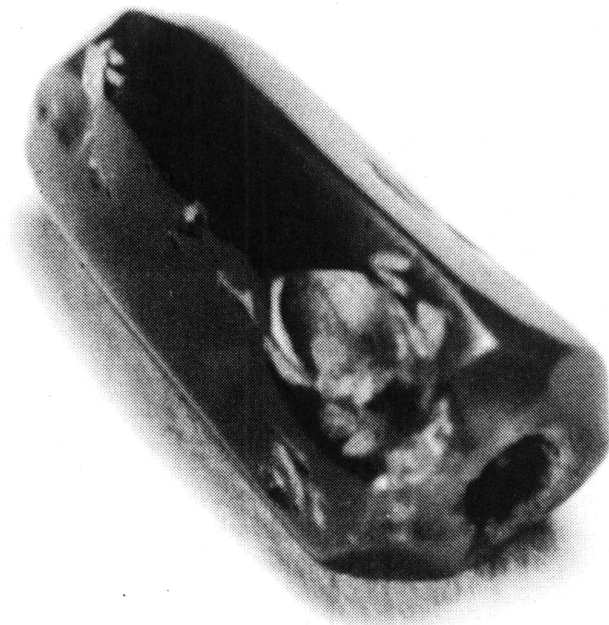


Figure 2: Carnelian glass bead recovered from the Calvert site, Annapolis, Maryland.



Figure 3: Further evidence of the importance of adornment in African cultures can be seen in modern West Africa where girls wear necklaces, earrings, bracelets, rings, and hats embellished by strings of glass beads and cowrie shells to signify wealth and marriagability. Illustration by Julie Hunter-Abbazia after Fischer (1984).

these varied symbolic meanings and the range of materials, innovative and traditional, are readily visible in the remarkable photographs by Angela Fisher (1984). The possibilities for substitution were endless and whereas bells and shell were once the common item women wove into hair designs, as time progressed, African women used coins and glass buttons with equivalent creativity. Fisher's work shows this clearly. It also calls to mind that there is no reason to suppose this same ingenuity was not applied to beads and their surrogates too by African descendants who lived across the sea.

Why do archaeologists continue to concentrate on beads as chronological tokens when Noel Hume and Deetz helped us move beyond the analysis of ceramics as nothing but the fingers of an archaeological clock three decades ago? Why don't archaeologists find more beads? Why do none of the North American samples approach the quantities recovered at West African sites? Perhaps we look in the wrong places. Initially, beads do appear as grave goods in select graves and in such cases, their numbers rise and they are associated with other artifacts that were demonstrably fashioned into jewelry. Yet when men and women hold little hope for replacement, items once traditionally buried with their owners may instead be split apart and divided among descendants. Cultural practice is reformed because the objects are precious and owning even a remnant can build generational bridges and tangibly connect one with ancestral sources of power and identification. Through such processes, the objects become heirlooms. By and large, the small glass beads found at slave quarters (i.e., domestic sites, home places) throughout the South are beads that were lost and never found, nothing deliberately thrown away. Curation of others is possible and, in fact, has been documented abroad among the Yoruba of Nigeria.

Historical archaeologists also must consider whether we are looking at objects and not recognizing their adaptability or their varying uses. Modern photographs of African men and women show a range of items turned to jewelry including buttons, coins, and small mirrors. Archaeologists routinely find quantities of buttons at domestic slave quarters and as routinely seek explanations for the numbers in which these are present. They find them puzzling. Occasionally the presence of other artifacts such as quartzite crystals suggests less mundane functions than the strictly utilitarian (Thompson 1993).

In the end, as the 1994 Berkeley session at the meetings showed, archaeologists and historians alike share the dilemma of our subjectivity. We "want to see the past 'as it actually was,' but can see it only through the medium of [our] own and other people's ideas" (Stanford 1986:27) We do not value the ethnographic familiarity with another culture that anthropology demands of its own. We work with societies that are experience far (distant in time) (Geertz 1974) and so cannot force an awareness of their experiential settings upon an archaeologist in the way that anthropological fieldworkers find inescapable. Thus we work in a research milieu where many ideas can exist unquestioned, taken-for-granted assumptions that guide, shape, and form both method and theory.

Weaving texts and artifacts together using classic ethnographic approaches and the new ethnography of recent years offers one way to become more sophisticated in artifact analysis. Ultimately, it may resolve some of the baffling issues about the use of material goods to denote group identity that face historical archaeologists and give analysts more confidence in interpretations that now seem tentative and tenuous. Ultimately it may tell far more about

beads and their roles in women's lives than is presented in this essay. Silent witnesses, beads were active elements in the African-American past. They await a more vocal future in which archaeologists will merge gender distinctions, ethnic interaction, and culture complexity into fully formed interpretive narratives derived from analysis of the visible world of material objects and the textual world of the written word.

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