JEAN E. HOWSON

Social Relations and Material Culture: A Critique of the Archaeology of Plantation Slavery

Introduction

The archaeology of southern plantations promises to provide new data about slave life. This is most welcome, but like all sets of data—whether historical, anthropological, or archaeological, archaeological data require analysis and interpretation before becoming important or even useful. It is well to pause periodically and assess the links between methods of analysis and the theories which shape archaeological interpretations.

The way archaeologists think about the relationship of material remains to slave societies will—and should—shift in response to changing ideas about slave culture and about culture change in general. Plantation archaeology is currently undergoing a shift: (1) like historians, archaeologists are coming to view the culture of slaves as a key to understanding social structure and its transformation in the plantation South; (2) the meaning of the African heritage is being explored critically; (3) material culture studies are beginning to help in addressing questions about meaningful cultural categories and social change; and (4) a social action approach is replacing a status model of plantation social relations. All of these reflect, perhaps belatedly, the development of social theory in which culture is viewed in terms of a dynamic relationship between structure and practice, and symbols are analyzed in contexts of action. A critical approach to the relevant theoretical issues hopefully will be part of the new direction in which plantation archaeology is beginning to move.

This brief examination of the archaeology of plantation slavery reviews some of the dangers into which archaeologists have already fallen and offers suggestions for enhancing the theoretical underpinnings of archaeological work. First, a look at the use of cultural markers points up the need for a more sophisticated approach to the issue of culture change. Next is an exploration of the ways in which interpretations of material culture can be enriched through a more dynamic understanding of context. Finally, the usefulness of status definitions for modeling plantation social relations is assessed. To begin, a discussion of the relation between historical archaeology and the discipline of history brings out a curious fact: most archaeologists' notions about the purpose of history have hindered the participation of historical archaeology in some of the most interesting debates in the historiography of American slavery, centering on the meaning of slave culture.

History and Historical Archaeology: The Search for Africa in Slave Culture and the Problem of Acculturation

As historians of slavery have turned their attention to questions of culture, providing an important bridge to anthropological archaeology, archaeologists must be aware of historiographic issues and develop a critical approach to the broader arguments. Critical reading of the work of historians over the past 15 years (e.g., Genovese 1974; Gutman 1976; Mintz and Price 1976; Levine 1977; Blassingame 1979; Joyner 1984; Sobel 1987; Stuckey 1987; Fox-Genovese 1988) points out both how fruitful the cultural approach to history can be and the variation in orientation possible within the culturalist framework. Archaeologists for the most part still tend to turn to history for "the facts," confining their historiographic critique to a discussion of how "good" the documents are for specific purposes. History is often seen as a set of givens which provide background for archaeological research; at best, documentary research provides a complementary body of data which can promote constructive feedback between the disciplines (Deetz 1988:363; Salwen 1988; Schuyler 1988). But the historiography of slavery

surely stands as one of the outstanding examples of how complex theoretical issues underlie scholarly historical research (e.g., Fox-Genovese and Genovese 1983a:136–171). History is not an established sequence of events, nor is it an existing explanatory structure just waiting to be filled in with more data, some documentary, some archaeological. Many archaeologists—especially those in public archaeology—applaud the interdisciplinary approach of historical archaeology, but what they are really extolling is the benefit they derive from having trained historians on the job to supply the facts about people, places, and things. If "the gap between history and anthropology appears to be closing in plantation archaeology" (Orser 1984: 3), it is more a by-product of the fact that people trained in anthropology are being forced to draw on historical research methods than a move toward interdisciplinary theory-building.

Turning to a concrete example, a potentially wasteful direction for archaeological research may be avoided by adopting a more sophisticated approach to the place of African roots in slave society. Just as social anthropologists went through a period of searching for tangible remnants of true African culture—or "survivals" or "retentions"—in African-Caribbean and African-American culture (Herskovits 1941; Mintz and Price 1976), historical archaeologists were for a time concerned with finding a visibly African style in the material remains they unearthed. Because archaeologists did not find many clear stylistic markers, they have had to be more subtle in their analyses in order to *make* materially visible the African component in the material remains of slaves. The focus recently among many researchers has been on finding an African-American "pattern" in the material record (e.g., Singleton 1980; Wheaton et al. 1983; Armstrong 1985), but others still seek tangible evidence of stylistic continuity. Leland Ferguson's (1989) study of pottery marks and Matthew Emerson's (1988) work on clay pipes are perhaps the best examples of the latter approach and demonstrate that African stylistic elements could survive in material culture as submerged indicators of belief systems or in a syncretic alliance with European style.

What is not always explicitly recognized by archaeologists is that the study of "Africanisms" is a politically significant and highly charged issue; for a brief review see Watson (1978). Important debates in linguistics, folklore, art and architecture, family and kinship studies, sociology, economics, and every other field relating to black America have centered on the question of cultural roots. But while it is beyond doubt that African culture did survive in many important ways under slavery and played an immense role in the forging of a new and viable society among slaves, sorting this sense of an African tradition out from the equally important constraints of slavery is no simple matter. For one thing, the very diversity of African societies from which slaves came needs to be taken into account from the start (Posnansky 1989). This diversity had a profound affect on the cultural transformation that took place in the plantation societies of the Western hemisphere.

A seminal essay argues that, given the diversity of African cultures and the process of adaptation necessary in the New World setting, archaeologists need to look for continuities at the level of underlying assumptions and structure:

> Those deep-level cultural principles, assumptions and understandings which were shared by the Africans in any New World Colony—who tended to be a tribally heterogeneous aggregate of individuals—would have represented a limited though crucial resource. For they could have served as a catalyst in the processes by which individuals from diverse societies forged new institutions, and could have provided certain frameworks within which new forms could have developed (Mintz and Price 1976:7).

The notion of transformational principles which lay beneath the "creolization" process has proven useful to historians, as well:

> Changes in other aspects of culture were akin to the transformation in [Gullah] language. Implicit but pervasive grammatical principles of culture lay behind the transformation of slave folklife in all its various manifestations. It is axiomatic that any people must build their response to the challenges and demands of a new environment out of the materials at hand. But those materials are put together in the manner they perceive to be most appropriate to the situation. The response may be in itself innovative—the creation of a new language, a new house-type, or new folktales—but the perception of appropriateness is cultural. Traditional notions of appropriateness in work and worship,

> in feeling, thinking, and living—notions . . . influence the cultural choices forced by new conditions (Joyner 1984: 237).

Care should be taken in such an approach, however, not to imply a uniform understanding of "appropriateness" among African Americans. Culture is not a uniform thing in the first place, and the diversity of African origins meant that variation was a particularly essential aspect of culture in slave societies. The relation between *variation* and *change* has been central in analyses of creole language, and the extension of a creolization model to all of culture should incorporate a concept of variation as a locus of change (Drummond 1980; LePage and Tabouret-Keller 1985). Mintz and Price (1976:7) themselves are actually cautious about just how much weight can be given to a shared cultural "grammar" given a context of rapid change, stating that, "The probable importance of such generalized principles notwithstanding, the Africans in any New World colony in fact became a community and began to share a culture only insofar as, and as fast as, they themselves created them."

Although others would consider them overly cautious about tangible African "survivals" (e.g., Braithwaite 1971; Sobel 1987), Mintz and Price are certainly correct in pointing out that *traits do not equal culture,* and that even the act of reconstituting African cultural forms in the New World plantation setting implied creative transformation. Herbert Gutman (1976:260), who was influenced by Mintz, also argues in his study of the black family that African-American beliefs, even given African roots, had to be sustained by cultural forms and institutional arrangements which developed over time within slavery. But the "problem" of slave culture remains: The building of an African-American community with its own culture involved the development of traditions of practice within a day-to-day existence conditioned unavoidably by the fact of enslavement itself. Eugene Genovese (1974) thus chooses a model of class conflict and focuses on the role of the master-slave relationship in the development of black culture under slavery. All of these authors recognize the political significance of slave culture.

Given the foregoing, plantation archaeologists address some fairly central social and historical issues whenever they explore issues of "Africanism" and "acculturation." Simplistic notions of culture change will not work when applied to material culture any more than to belief systems or social structure. Reliance on cultural markers—specific material traits which archaeologists can discern—in reconstructing so-called "acculturation" sequences not only is dangerous in terms of over-simplifying the role of "Africanisms," but also is naive about the role of material culture. Material evidence about slave life on the plantations should be analyzed within a theoretical framework in which *both* change and continuity, at various times and in various contexts, embodied the process of cultural and political struggle of African Americans.

The study of slave-produced ceramics provides a good example of the "cultural marker" approach. A great deal has been said about these artifacts (Ferguson 1978; Lees and Kimery-Lees 1979; Anthony 1979; Deetz 1988), and no review is attempted here; however, a study published by Wheaton, Friedlander, and Garrow (1983)—see also Friedlander (1985) and Wheaton and Garrow (1985)—on South Carolina plantation sites points out the complexities in the interpretation of "Africanisms" and their relation to "acculturation." These authors are sensitive to the fact that slaves' material culture was restricted by slaveholders, and they have chosen to study foodways because this intimate aspect of slave life is less likely to reflect direct coercion from above. They present "a chain of data . . . which tends to link Colono with colonowares in other regions of the east coast, and to the Caribbean Islands and possibly to Africa" and conclude that "Colono and colonoware may be the most African 'Africanism' to appear on slave sites and as such the single most useful artifact for studying slave acculturation" (Wheaton et al. 1983:335). (As an aside, Wheaton, Friedlander, and Garrow mis-cite Handler and Lange as stating "that as Barbadian slaves became more acculturated the African attributes in their pottery disappeared" [Wheaton et al. 1983:335]. No such sequence was revealed for Barbados, nor is "ac-

culturation'' mentioned. Rather, and importantly, Handler and Lange [1978:144] discuss specific historical, geographic, and ''industrial'' factors which affected the slave manufacture of ceramics.)

The acculturation model posits a gradual process of adapting to European-American ways with concurrent loss of African traits. The hypothesis of these researchers (Wheaton et al. 1983) is that the observed decrease in Colono ceramics was due not simply to availability of European wares but to the changing attitude of slaves toward those items—in other words, the cultural identity of slaves was being transformed. But the development of their argument involves a specific historical sequence:

> [The] data . . . showed a clear increase in the nonlocal ceramics and a decrease in Colono from 1740 to 1825. . . . Reasons for this trend were hypothesized to have been an increase in the slave population, a resident owner at Yaughan, and intensification of agricultural activity which caused greater regimentation to be imposed on the slaves and allowed them less free time to pursue individual craft activities. Perhaps the most important reason for this trend was acculturation of the slaves themselves (Wheaton et al. 1983:343).

The ''most important'' reason for the decline of Colono ceramics may never be known. Significantly, these authors have chosen to see the decline in terms of cultural change rather than as a function of the trans-Atlantic trade and economic conditions in the Old South (see Lees and Kimery-Lees 1979). But by abstracting this change from the context of power within which it occurred, they have obscured rather than clarified the nature of the process. Acculturation is an inaccurate, passive model for a dynamic process: the creation of a community and shared culture among slaves in the context of their struggle against an oppressive system, a system with styles of domination and resistance shaped by specific relations of production. The whole concept of acculturation rests on an inadequate definition of culture, one which emphasizes complexes of traits rather than peoples' ongoing interpretation, evaluation, and creative response, the strategies and symbolic revaluing that form the basis of cultural process. The acculturation model was developed in the context of the anthropological study of Native American groups, and some of the best criticism of the model comes from Americanists; see especially Fowler (1987).

Wheaton, Friedlander, and Garrow adopt an interdisciplinary approach at the outset of their research (Friedlander 1985:217). The ahistorical model which they develop is not a function of any lack of historical information, which is amply provided, but rather the result of the kinds of a priori assumptions about culture change which most archaeologists adopt. Their argument rests on the idea that slave-owner interaction is a *demographic* issue (Friedlander 1985), that somehow the degree of contact between the two is the crux of the matter and has determined the course of culture change. This position is a troubling notion akin to the idea that social structure in itself determines the meaningful content of social action. The approach corresponds to the mistaken archaeological notion that the meaning of things somehow can be construed directly from frequency distributions (Wheaton and Garrow 1985:253). As these authors are no doubt aware, the forces behind culture change were not demographic but had to do with the kinds of social interaction—among slaves and between slaves and free whites—that developed in slave societies.

Others also are aware that master-slave relations played a part in determining African cultural continuity:

> Despite the apparent persistence of certain African architectural traits, most planters openly discouraged African style huts on their plantations. . . . Thus, the more intimate expressions of tidewater slave life—which were either overlooked by plantation whites *or were hidden from their view*—often contained vestiges of the African cultural past: these included cookery, speech, stories, sorcery, basketry, quilting, the carving of figurines and walking sticks, and dance forms . . . intangible words, behaviors, or artifacts that were fashioned from perishable wood and fiber [emphasis added] (Otto 1984:43,87).

Like Wheaton, Friedlander, and Garrow, Otto recognizes that power was exercised over slaves in terms of cultural style. What kind of power was this, and how did it operate? *Why* did slaves have to hide their cultural expression? Otto addresses this question for workplace contexts:

> The plantation whites were most concerned that slaves acquire the appropriate standards of speech and behavior

> that would allow them to perform their agricultural, skilled, and service roles. In the work context, there was much interaction between blacks and white supervisors, and the domestic servants, in particular, were under the close scrutiny of whites. Therefore, the slave operating cultures in the white-dominated work contexts would have shown conformity to white American standards (Otto 1984:86).

The "more intimate" lives of slaves, it can be argued, also were subject to pressure from above, all the more reason for slaves to hide as much as they could. That pressure stemmed from the masters' fear, from their understanding that cultural expressions are not harmless, and from their ideology of paternalism. As Genovese (1974) has so well understood, paternalism was an invasive policy. The problem of cultural hegemony and the debate over the "paternalistic compromise" needs to be addressed in examining the significance of African style—if only because Genovese has brought Gramsci's concept to bear on slave studies and created heated controversy in so doing (see criticisms by Anderson 1976; Wilson 1976; Johnson 1978:91). But in each specific case the question remains as to whether, how, and to what extent pressures on slave culture penetrated and were resisted—surely a pertinent question in the study of material culture.

Historical archaeologists have a tendency to confuse behavior with culture. Particularly disturbing are comments such as J. W. Joseph's (1989:64) suggestion that "more diligent supervision may have inspired more rapid acculturation" on the part of slaves housed along orderly streets. "Acculturation" is not an appropriate or accurate way to describe slave response to "diligent supervision." Culture change is rarely a simple response to coercion; behavior can be coerced, not culture. Cultural continuity is not simply the residue surviving in the interstices of imposed change. Change and continuity characterize all cultural systems and can be evaluated only insofar as archaeologists understand specific historical contexts and the social relations that obtained in those contexts. It is the political content of cultural style that is lost when archaeologists adopt an acculturation model.

The search for African style misses a crucial point about the nature of slavery, having to do with relations between classes, not with forms of culture contact or the contact of cultural forms. What has been called "acculturation" was a question of power in the broadest sense. Thus, resistance, rather than mere conservatism or continuity, may be the relevant context within which to view expressions of separate cultural style on the part of slaves. Perhaps "separatism" is a better concept than "persistence" or "continuity," because it does not exclude transformations, is interactive, and has more political force than "boundary maintenance." At the same time, culture change within the slave community which can be "demonstrated" archaeologically or otherwise is not necessarily an indicator of acculturation, except insofar as the material idiom of the political battle had shifted.

Wheaton, Friedlander, and Garrow (1983) are not alone in neglecting the political aspects of culture change, and the conceptual muddiness inherent in an acculturation model has not cleared. The model continues to lead to rather unfortunate interpretations and has been misapplied in an approach which sees change as bidirectional. In a recent example, Joseph (1989) has written an otherwise useful article which picks up on the contrast between plantations studied in South Carolina and Georgia first pointed out by Theresa Singleton (1985a:7). Differences in agricultural region, research design, and excavation strategy can account for some of the variations in "artifact pattern" that have been discerned, but time period is also shown to determine which pattern applies. Joseph suggests this reflects real culture change between the 18th and 19th centuries. Instead of seeing this change as one way, he argues that slaves and masters alike "acculturated" on the plantations. Other archaeologists probably will be attracted to a bidirectional model, even though it represents an incorrect use of the term acculturation and is a potential way of sidestepping the important issues. (Acculturation, in its classic formulation, meant the gradual loss of indigenous culture traits and assimilation to white European-American culture [see Linton 1940; Spicer 1961]. Archaeologists subsequently adapted the concept for use in clas-

sifying material culture in terms of degrees of acculturation. The model is unidirectional in any case.)

Joseph (1989:64–65) suggests that whites realized "by the 19th century" that slaves were humans, became concerned with slave health when the slave trade was cut off, came to view their chattels differently, and thus were "acculturated." There can be little doubt that masters recognized the humanity of their slaves all along, and it also seems clear that the strongest racist ideologies developed alongside 19th-century paternalist policies, while mutual cultural exchange was particularly marked in the 18th century (Sobel 1987). The argument that acculturation on the part of masters "fostered an improved, and also more Anglo American, material culture for 19th-century slaves" (Joseph 1989:65) cannot stand close scrutiny. An argument for the changing perceptions of slaveholders, however, can in fact be made, not on the basis of their recognition of slaves' humanity and the need for a self-reproducing labor force, but on entirely different grounds: Slaves had so staunchly fought for and defended their customary rights, and through slaves' efforts, the patterns of material exchanges between them and their masters had become so entrenched, that the perceptions of the masters came to include many "taken-for-granteds" brought about through this interaction. Whether this is labeled a "paternalistic compromise"—after Genovese (1979)—or not, at its core is the struggle between slaves and masters, *not* a shift between cultural models.

Attitudes toward time and work rhythms are another good example of the dialectic within which slave culture affected slaveowners' relations with their labor force—and hence the whole character of the southern economy—as well as vice versa (Genovese 1974:283–324; Joyner 1984:41–89; Sobel 1987:21–67). While plantation owners forced slaves to do specific kinds of harsh labor necessary to keep profits up, slaves took advantage of agricultural, season-, and crop-oriented rhythms, as well as community forms of labor, to create distinctive work patterns. This in turn reinforced the essentially rural and preindustrial character of a system highly resistant—in terms of culture as well as economics—to the type of change associated with capitalist production.

In rejecting the idea of slaves as passively acculturated, archaeologists must not merely rely on a simplistic argument that acculturation was a two-way street; the nature of the relationship between the two groups involved must remain central. In contact situations both cultures change, but surely New World slavery is a special case of "contact." The plantation clearly provided a special environment for intimate contact between bearers of African and white European-American culture, but at the same time it was the locus of profound class antagonisms between enslaved and free. Recent historical treatments reflect this dualism, and archaeologists can benefit from insights gained through different approaches. Mechal Sobel presents the Virginia masters' and slaves' "world they made together" as a product of cultural interaction, and often convergence, over the course of the 18th century. If Sobel seems to overlook too much of the political content of cultural interaction, she nevertheless provides an important addition to the history of plantation life and the necessary historical foundation for studies of the 19th century when "the social and emotional distance between whites and blacks grew" (Sobel 1987: 240). From Joyner's (1984) point of view, the distinctive life of the quarters underpinned a viable creolized slave culture which can be studied as a coherent whole on its own terms. To understand how slaves used the cultural space which they carved out for themselves is crucially important, but Joyner downplays the political, contested aspects of culture and the class-consciousness behind cultural distinctiveness. Focusing on the 19th century, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese (1988) sees the plantation "household" as a context for surface intimacy between mistresses and slaves, underlain by deep divisions and racist oppression. Like Genovese (1979), Fox-Genovese sees class and cultural identity as inextricably intertwined and conflict as the motor force behind social and cultural change on the plantations.

Archaeologists may find one of these ap-

proaches more appropriate to their data than the others, depending on the important variables of time and place, but change within the dominant class culture and within slave culture cannot be subsumed within a model of mutual acculturation. The imposed conjunction of class and race tended to over-determine all social relations, and the struggles within which African-American culture developed must be placed with this context of unequal interaction. At the same time, the fundamentally separatist aspect of slave culture is not obviated because slaves eventually lived in, used, wore, and ate European material goods. All cultures change as people actively create and respond to historical realities. What archaeologists should want to know is how the institution of slavery and the African heritage alike shaped the process by which African Americans made their world.

In sum, when historical archaeologists set out to "build a case for acculturation" (Wheaton and Garrow 1985:243), it is not clear whether they view it as an active *response* to oppression or as a *by-product* of culture contact. In any case, neither approach to culture change in the slave community is appropriate. These authors insist that material culture can be an index of change, but their notion of change is far too simplistic:

> The acculturation of the Afro-American slaves from an Afro-Caribbean (or West African, or Afro-Caribbean-American Colonial) cultural model within Yaughan and Curriboo plantations to a more Euro-American cultural model can be demonstrated through a study of architectural evidence, recovered artifacts, and subsistence data (Wheaton and Garrow 1985:243).

People do not shift from Cultural Model A to Cultural Model B, and if "acculturation" is to be used by plantation archaeologists in this way, the term should be discarded. Moreover, it would be difficult for material culture to "demonstrate" any such shift, for material things are imbedded in multiple contexts of behavior and meaning.

The Contexts of Material Culture

From the point of view of archaeology, material culture is at least quadruply imbedded—its past involved contexts of production, distribution (including procurement, acquisition, exchange), use, and discard. Archaeologists working at plantation slave sites have too often erred in focusing on only one or at most two of these contexts. The interpretation of cultural remains depends upon the ability not only to reconstruct individual contexts, but to discern multiple and often ambiguous ones. Furthermore, archaeologists need to consider relationships between the relevant contexts for particular classes of artifacts.

A concentration on either distribution context or use context characterizes much plantation archaeology, including both Handler and Lange's (1978) study of a Barbadian cemetery and Otto's (1984) work at Cannon's Point Plantation. These researchers have advanced the interpretation of material remains, and their analyses make it abundantly clear that information about social life potentially can be gleaned from archaeological data. Their work also points to a next step in the analysis of material culture, however, which relates distribution to use in attempting to derive meaning. If the treatment of one specific artifact, clay pipes, is examined, the problem can be highlighted.

As an illustration of their ethnohistorical approach, Handler and Lange discuss their research into the reward/incentive system on the plantation. Documents were reexamined for information on artifacts recovered archaeologically, including clay pipes. Pipes and tobacco were among the material items used as "rewards" to slaves, and Handler and Lange

> began to suspect that the occurrence of particular artifacts . . . with interments may have been a manifestation of plantation rewards or incentives. As a result, the notes were more intensively reexamined, the presence of a reward-incentive system was established to a degree not previously understood, and the function of various archaeological materials as remnants of the system was inferred (Handler and Lange 1978:218).

If, however, the use context of clay tobacco pipes on slave plantations is examined, the interpretation can be richer and more pertinent to the study of slave life. As noted by archaeologists, pipe smoking was a very important "recreation"

among slaves (Handler and Lange 1978; Otto 1984:91). The use of tobacco marked their leisure hours, their Sundays off, "their" time as opposed to their master's time (Genovese 1974:556; Joyner 1984:127–140). Smoking could also be a social activity, and social life within the quarter was the crucible of slaves' resistance, central to their survival and humanity. This means that even if the white owners on Barbados thought that the reward/incentive system created compliance, obedience, and status hierarchy among slaves—as well as social distance between slaves and paternalistic masters, the material and behavioral results of that system also may have furthered the social and cultural distinctiveness of slaves and made more obvious the existence of an alternative society to that envisioned by planters.

So when Handler and Lange find burials containing clay pipes, are they seeing evidence of a system meant to foster obedience through status-striving, or are they actually seeing evidence for a system of values among slaves that resulted in people being buried with the items that they enjoyed in daily life among their fellows and that represented membership in a community? It should be obvious that both are represented; the ambiguity is real. Lange and Handler (1985:26) in fact do suggest that the pipes buried with some Newton slaves had symbolic significance. The question is, from what social contexts did that significance derive? Many archaeologists have limited their interpretations by choosing to focus on factors of distribution, such as the common categories "imported" versus "local," and to neglect use context. Care should be taken not to assign social meaning to material remains without taking into account the ambiguous contexts which produced that meaning, because:

> Material symbols can be used covertly to disrupt established relations of dominance. . . . The 'power' of material symbols . . . resides also in the ambiguous meanings of material items. Unlike spoken language, the meanings of material symbols can remain undiscussed and implicit. Their meanings can be reinterpreted and manipulated covertly (Hodder 1983:10).

Otto's (1984:168–169) analysis of plantation material culture sets slaves' clay pipes against the cigars which were used by white owners and overseers, a material pattern related to one kind of status difference between blacks and whites. This difference is said to reflect the "white dominance" pattern, a material reflection of the fact that whites of any bracket held higher racial-legal status than slaves. Otto focuses on the use context of pipes to derive this pattern but points out that slaves *acquired* these goods through purchase or trade in garden produce or livestock (Otto 1984: 71–80). (The subject of slaves' "internal economy" has received a great deal of recent attention among historians of the plantation South, though its importance has long been recognized in the Caribbean [Mintz and Hall 1960; McDonald 1981; Morgan 1982, 1983].) Distribution context is therefore at least as relevant as use context in this case. The ability of slaves to purchase and trade for "luxury" items places such goods firmly within a separate category. The pipes can hardly be said to "reflect" slaves' given subordinate status when they are the result of a clear bid for a degree of autonomy and an independent livelihood. Once again the struggle between slaves and owners, not their structural position, must be centralized. It can be argued that the internal economy was just another aspect of the slaves' exploitation to the extent that they were merely providing their own subsistence. The meaning of the system for its participants, however, could never have been determined solely through such an objective analysis. As Otto (1984:79–80) notes, planters fought to restrict slaves' trading activity; evidence that this was an area of contention should draw attention to the possible implications for the meaning of material goods at slave sites.

It would probably be possible to incorporate an analysis of acquisition context within Otto's formulation of status patterning since the boundary between slaves and whites was maintained, the line of "white dominance" drawn from above. But in identifying such a "pattern" it is necessary to focus on the *contrast* between the smoking habits of slaves and whites, thus obscuring the internal meaning of pipe smoking within slave culture. Likewise, overseers' material culture had an internal social meaning: The smoking habits of overseers would be more similar to planters than to

slaves because it is the planters with whom they wished to identify socially, not because they were legally dominant over blacks. Here again, material culture theorists have urged caution against oversimplifying the processes of cultural categorization of the material world. Hodder (1983:9) notes that "the meaning of an object resides not merely in its contrast to others within a set. Meaning also derives from the associations and use of an object, which itself becomes, through the associations, the node of a network of references and implications. There is an interplay between structure and content," and Miller (1987:129) states, "The physicality of the artifact lends itself to the work of praxis—that is, cultural construction through action rather than just conceptualization." In other words, material objects are more than just a language of distinction between social groups. The contrast between cigars and clay pipes has to do with the meaningful contexts of their acquisition and use, not just with the structural relationship between whites and slaves. Just as the context of pipe acquisition was the struggle for a measure of autonomy, the social context of pipe smoking among slaves was the internal life of the slave quarter. The abstraction of a pattern has in this case meant the reduction of meaning.

If archaeologists have tended to isolate either use or distribution context, they have also failed to look for relationships between contexts. The study of slave diet illustrates this problem. It has been suggested that "one of the most promising areas of study" in regard to understanding "the archaeological nature of plantation slavery in concrete, material terms" is the study of slave diet (Orser 1984:4). Many have shared this optimism, as an examination of the sections on diet in most studies of plantation sites demonstrates—see, however, a review of the evidence by Reitz (1987). But archaeologists should also be interested in viewing food in less "concrete" and "material" terms.

Twenty years ago, Robert Ascher and Charles Fairbanks stated:

> People classify the food they eat in many ways. . . . From the point of view of the slave, a fundamental division was food distributed by the owner and food the slave supplied for himself. . . . With this knowledge, we abandon our usual categories and replace them with those meaningful to the people who interest us (Ascher and Fairbanks 1971:11).

Accepting this position, historical archaeologists classify food remains accordingly. This classification by production and procurement/acquisition contexts is an appropriate one, and analyses of diet that follow from it are equally so. But analysis of context should not stop here. It should be possible, with historical research, to relate use context—that is, consumption—to these other contexts when analyzing archaeological remains. Did consumption of slave-raised stock and produce or slave-collected wild foods take place at different times and on different social occasions than that of planter-provided fare? And what about stolen food? Were consumption patterns related solely to supply and the dictates of hunger and nutrition, or did the preparation, serving, and consumption of food have additional cultural significance in part *derived from* its means of acquisition?

A pattern is emerging regarding the co-option by slaves of items associated with or produced by their masters, to be given new meaning and new context within their own society. Much more research is required, perhaps, concerning the adoption by subordinate classes of the cultural property of elites. This forms a part of the larger problem of culture change and the role of material culture in that process. The problem is particularly relevant in situations of culture contact, colonialism, and slavery. It can be argued that what has recently been labeled "recontextualization" (D. Miller 1987) in fact has long been the central interpretive issue addressed by all American historical archaeology.

The role of material goods in maintaining and articulating social categories and relations—with consumption serving to establish, mark, or transform people's perceptions of themselves especially in relation to others—has been explored in detail (Douglas and Isherwood 1979), to which has been added a cross-cultural perspective (Appadurai 1986) which may be more attuned to the realities of slave society. The crossing of a cultural boundary between slaves and slaveholders by commodities may involve very shallow sets of shared values (Appadurai 1986:14) yet result in considerable

overlap in material goods. Moreover, it seems possible that different values nonetheless might be deliberately expressed through very similar, even identical, things, especially if one group perceives a commodity as having been diverted and hence its value enhanced or transformed. The flouting of implicit sumptuary laws on the part of slaves caused continual annoyance to white southerners, for instance. The supposed preference of slaves for stolen meat was, if anything, an example of this conscious revaluing. Arjun Appadurai (1986:26), in referring to theft as a form of commodity-diversion, illuminates its political implications. It does seem obvious that "theft" by slaves of their masters' goods was a political act. The pertinent question becomes, then, in what ways did the "paths" of commodities—in Appadurai's sense—determine their meanings to consumers?

What all of this means is that archaeologists must contextualize their data more fully. Hodder (1987) has conceived the method of "contextual analysis" as threefold: (1) to examine functional-environmental context; (2) to analyze material things structurally-semiotically, as in reading a text; and (3) to examine particular situations to derive historical meaning. The first task traditionally has been most archaeologists' strong suit, and the second has been enjoying primacy among structuralist-oriented researchers. The third task is most basic if archaeologists wish to incorporate a view of culture as constituted through praxis, a view too often lacking in historical archaeologists' treatment of slave material culture. Marshall Sahlins (1976:22) has contrasted "praxis theory"—which holds that "the specific construction of culture is the product of a concrete activity which transcends the system to appropriate the novelty and actuality of the material world—with structuralism, in which the focus is on the system itself. Writing on material culture, Christopher Tilley (1983) uses the "notion of praxis as mediation between activity and consciousness" to argue that material things, as foci of social action, embody ideational systems. The assignment of artifacts to particular classes within overall distribution patterns cannot continue based on partial understandings of context. The derivation of meaningful patterns can only rest on meaningful and thickly conceived historical and anthropological interpretations.

Status Patterning

Handler and Lange (1978:226) note that a central problem in the study of plantation sites is that the sources of material goods were available to free whites, free nonwhites, and slaves, and that patterns of lateral cycling through "purchase, trade, exchange, or gift giving would have tended to blur absolute artifactual distinctions between the nonslave and slave segments" of a population. Otto (1984) has taken as his starting point the elucidation of a pattern that at first simply appears "blurred." By holding status constant, he can look at how variously defined status differences produced patterning in the archaeological remains. Classes of artifacts were found to reflect one of three patterns: (1) "white dominance," based on racial/legal status (housing construction, housing amenities, liquor bottles, pipes, and glass beads); (2) "hierarchical," based on social/occupational status (housing living space, ceramic shape and form); and (3) "wealth-poverty," based on economic status (wild food, domestic food, and ceramic decorative type). The classification depends upon whether each item is most similarly distributed between overseers and planters versus slaves (white dominance), overseers and slaves versus planters (wealth-poverty), or graded between the three (hierarchical).

Otto's work has been criticized for oversimplifying plantation social organization in terms of planter/overseer/slave, when in fact social distance between overseers and planters varied greatly (Orser 1984:5–6). The importance of Otto's work, however, is not in showing how to recognize these three groups archaeologically (Drucker 1981), but in demonstrating that different kinds of status may be manifested materially by different kinds of remains; in other words, that status and its material correlates are too complex to be inferred directly. Nevertheless, archaeologists persist in applying a status model, concentrating on explaining devia-

tions from Otto's original formulation. There is less need for a continued refinement of the artifact assignments (e.g., Adams and Boling 1989) than for an examination of the underlying reason for inconsistencies, namely the limitations of the model itself.

The problem Otto faces—along with many others—stems from conceiving of society in terms of differing levels of status in the first place, rather than in terms of social relations (Orser 1988a). Slaves had lower status than their owners because they were owned—clearly the power relations are primary, and status is simply a static way of describing the product of social action.

Dominance is not a status term, it is a relation, one in which the dominant group always has an effect on the dominated, and in which the autonomy of the dominated is restricted in order to be consistent with the interests of the dominant group. The response of one group to domination by another takes certain forms. What archaeologists should study is how domination operates and how responses to it are enacted, which means that differences in material remains should be examined in terms of their function within a context of social action, rather than as status markers. Furthermore, material culture must be understood not as merely reflecting social relations, but as participating actively in their creation, operation, and maintenance. Regardless of the nature and degree of elite penetration of slaves' cultural identity, the material contexts of daily life certainly played a role. The resistance of slaves was largely acted out daily in the assertion of a degree of cultural autonomy, which necessarily had to make use of material "givens" and their manipulation. Again, the work of Douglas and Isherwood, Hodder, Daniel Miller, and Appadurai on material culture can be useful for historical archaeologists.

Through co-opting items of material culture, slaves created material contexts for the internal social life of their community. Clay pipes suggest that Otto's pattern of "white dominance" in material remains was at best ambiguous. Beads and liquor bottles fall into the same category of "white dominance," but these objects, too—regardless of their distribution among slaves, overseers, and owners, speak to slaves' private and/or communal lives, not to the structure of subordination.

What about the "wealth-poverty" and "hierarchical" patterns? The first is problematical because Otto fails to consider fully the relationship between planters and specific overseers—some of whom were planters' sons—at Cannon's Point. Once again, social relations have been overlooked in the desire to establish status. If overseers look "poor" in terms of food and ceramic patterns, it may be because they actually participated in the domestic life of the great house to a greater extent than assumed by Otto. But the fact remains that many poor overseers lived on southern plantations. This situation does not mean, however, that the relevant contrast is between poor slaves and overseers on the one hand and wealthy planters on the other. Ideologically speaking, poor whites were participants in the same social caste as wealthy ones, whereas slaves were a separate caste. To consider slaves and poor whites as members of the same economic class is to overlook the caste aspect of slavery. Put another way, it is to see class as fully definable in terms of its economic determinants, without its social and ideological correlates.

In a critique of the analyses of both Otto (1984) and Sue Mullins Moore (1985), Charles Orser (1988a) argues that their caste model of plantation society links race and class but gives race primacy. He prefers to focus on the power the class of slaveowners held over their slaves, a power that included control over material items slaves possessed. Orser is right to bring economics and power more prominently into the archaeological analysis of plantation social relations, but these factors cannot "replace" caste and status. The imposed conjunction of race and class is precisely what gave planter hegemony its strongest tool.

"Hierarchy" is equally problematical. To use the concept of hierarchy is to assume the existence—either actual or ideal—of a continuous series of social statuses. No such continuous series—either actual or ideal—existed in southern society. The series was discontinuous at the point where some groups of people owned others and at the point where racial lines were drawn. Orser (1988a) rightly calls attention to the occupational

ranking system on plantations, but his argument that "occupation can be looked upon by archaeologists as the most important social characteristic" within the plantation hierarchy (Orser 1988a:741) is disquieting; occupation may have been the *second* most important criterion of social rank, but surely the slave/free dichotomy came first. This is part of a wider issue which continues to have relevance today, the question of cultural evaluation of social situations. Groups and individuals *interpret* their inequality differently: Where some see occupation and wealth as the primary determinants of status, others see discrimination and racism as key, reflecting real differences in experience as well as "objective" analysis. This is a good example of how structural relations are subject to varying interpretation as well as ideological manipulation. Diane Austin (1984) analyzes the ideology of education in Jamaica as the modern outgrowth of an earlier ideology of occupational ranking that had its roots in the slave plantation. She argues that this dominant-class ideology is refuted by the poor, who interpret inequality in terms of discrimination.

Given the fact that legal and racist barriers do exist in societies such as the plantation South under slavery, the expression of hierarchy in material culture nevertheless may serve a very real social end. The pretense of a status hierarchy can function in society toward fostering the acceptance of inequality. Slaves were clearly not simply on the bottom rung of some social ladder. The interest of the elite was to create an illusion of such a social order to promote a sense of "naturalness" in inequality, which they possibly accomplished partially through overt material signs.

If Otto's classification of material remains relating to housing is examined, an interesting "pattern of patterns" can be discerned. In terms of how well built the structures are and the amenities they contain, "white dominance" is indicated. But in terms of sheer space, hierarchy is represented. Bernard Herman (1984:276) also notes that in the South dwelling size was not necessarily correlated with quality, comfort, or expense of furnishings and concludes somehow that this situation contradicts Genovese's (1974) contention that planter hegemony was expressed in housing. What may be expressed is the creation of an environment—the material context of life on the plantation—in which external signs illustrate and promote the false and artificial concept of social hierarchy, only to be belied by the evidence for actual quality of life.

Whether or not planters were attempting to express and create the cultural hegemony of their class—based on the idea of a patriarchal order—in this way becomes an historical question. Of particular interest to some historical archaeologists is the role of material culture in relation to ideology, used here in the sense of the establishment of taken-for-granteds which serve to obscure power relations (Leone 1982). At first glance, a Marxist definition of ideology may seem inappropriate for slave societies. After all, here is a case where dominance and coercion were overt, where status was assigned by law, and where the need for promoting a false consciousness on the part of the oppressed was surely obviated by their legal enslavement. The question of motivation is complicated: Planters needed an ethical justification for the basic inequality on which they depended and may have sought it in the "natural order," while conscious misdirection of observers' perceptions of plantation life may have motivated others. These "internal" and "external" factors motivating plantation planning need to be explored through research into the historical records relating to plantation housing. It is hardly necessary to point out here that the use of material symbols by planters to establish a naturalness in the patriarchal order does not at all mean that slaves were "taken in." Slaves knew all too intimately what occurred within planters' and overseers' houses. Likewise, poor whites, especially plantation dependents, may have been well aware of the political nature of their subordination and may have seen it as anything but natural. It is a grave mistake to assume that what planters told themselves about plantation life ever convinced anyone else who had to experience it.

Other archaeologists have looked at status patterning in the material record in their attempts to apply or add to Otto's formulation. William Adams and Sarah Boling (1989:94), for example, point out that slaves on three coastal plantations in

Georgia had higher priced ceramic wares in some forms than their owners. They argue that the task system allowed these slaves time to earn income of their own. Given that many of their material goods were obtained through purchase, Adams and Boling conclude that these slaves were using ceramics, much as did whites, as status markers within their *own* community. But this interpretation begs the question: *Why* would these items have held status value for slaves? If such goods were indeed high-status possessions for slaves, their meaning derives at least as much from their context of acquisition as from their association with white European-American culture. Care must be exercised when interpreting material goods in the same way for slaves as for plantation whites precisely because slaves did *not* "participate freely within the Southern market economy" (Adams and Boling 1989:94). To conclude that "on [task-labor] plantations slaves may be better understood within the context of being peasants or serfs, regarding their economic status" (Adams and Boling 1989:94) is to overlook a host of economic, political, social, and cultural realities for the sake of retaining status-markers as analytical tools. Historical archaeologists need to examine historically how slaves' interpretations, reinterpretations, and contested interpretations of material things were worked out.

Conclusions

Otto has done historical archaeologists an important service. He has shown that status cannot possibly be inferred directly from material remains. He and many others nonetheless have retained this concept, simply assigning independent status definitions to various data as they seem to fit. The analytical weakness of a concept of status has been demonstrated, but plantation archaeologists do not seem to realize the implications, choosing instead to refine the heuristic device in order to apply it more closely without noticing that this approach only takes the discipline further from society conceived as a whole. Human social relations are not reducible to sets of status variables, any more than historical change is reducible to models of acculturation.

What is needed is a contextual description of material culture that is conscious of both plantation class relations and historical processes of culture change—an ambitious goal. The study of slave culture can liberate historians—and slaves—as historical actors from the bare analysis of exploitation and oppression. On the other hand, a focus on the class structure of plantation society and the master-slave relationship, always keeping in view the issue of power and the political fact of enslavement, prevents researchers from *neglecting* the bare realities of exploitation and oppression. This essay has attempted to show that given an adequate conception of culture and social action, contexts of both power/resistance and cultural separatism are relevant to the interpretation of material remains at slave sites. The exercise of power affects the material idiom of cultural expression and the political interpretation of material symbols. Cultural separatism allows meanings to be articulated and contested by individuals and groups within the black community, but also constitutes a form of resistance to slaveholder power. Throughout, archaeologists need to recall that meaning is generally negotiable and that material things are susceptible to various or contested meanings through contexts of action. As Sahlins (1985:ix) notes, "If culture is as anthropologists claim a meaningful order, still, in action meanings are always at risk."

Artifacts, then, do not work well either as cultural markers or as status markers. Their distributions do not "map" culture change or social relations in a direct way. An interpretive step must be taken in the archaeological study of slave culture and plantation society, a step which should incorporate: (1) an analysis of whether material change reflects the structure of power relations or social strategies and cultural recontextualization within that structure; (2) an understanding of how material things come to have meaning through specific and historically definable contexts of action; and (3) an exploration of how manipulation of material symbols helps to create and maintain particular interpretations of social reality. Culture itself must be defined in a way that reflects the acknowledg-

ment of contested interpretations of symbols and experience. A more sophisticated understanding of culture in turn will allow archaeologists to approach the historical issues from a new perspective, with new means for using material culture to address key questions.

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