The New York African Burial Ground Phenomenon

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Public interest, in the New York African Burial Ground, has been truly extraordinary. There have been more than 500 news articles, 3 documentaries, an opera, and a children's play since 1991. There have been numerous libation ceremonies, candlelight vigils, and years of community struggle through protests, public meetings, and congressional lobbying to save this site, memorialize it, and to place its anthropological and historical interpretation in the hands of the African American community. This is a Rock (a northern Jamestown) for the African science realm, the African Burial Ground's significance is that of the largest early African cemetery in North America. The was used in the late 1600s until 1794 with possibly thousands of burials, of which 400 were excavated and made available for study. The history of the African presence and contribution to New York has been neglected and misrepresented by American public education. Our task is to restore their lives to memory. This is our "Lucy or "The Unexpected Wonder," as the Ethiopians themselves refer to A. afarensis.

Preliminary Findings

Our research design calls for a biocultural approach. Biology is a very narrow window on the world when taken in isolation. The historical and cultural data sets, when related to our biological findings, will allow us to better engender and enculture the African Burial Ground population, just as we use the physical evidence from these skeletons as reflections of social conditions and cultural life. Even the contradictions between the various biological and cultural data sets may lead us to new questions that might not have been asked otherwise. Our principal questions are: where did the people buried in the African Burial Ground come from; what was the physical quality of their lives during their enslavement; and what were the biocultural transformations which took place at the origins of the African American people?

Thus far, the skeletal biology of this project has moved ahead of the other disciplinary components. The current phase of research is, therefore, essentially descriptive. Some archaeological and historical information has begun, nonetheless, to emerge.

Our findings are based on a sample
of the 300 burials that have been processed to date. Given the preliminary nature of the available data, the range of descriptive cases will be stressed rather than the statistical analysis which is likely to change as our sample grows.

Dental enamel hypoplasia (a developmental defect of dental enamel that results from childhood malnutrition and disease) is common in children under twelve years of age (over 60%). This frequency is high for children and comparable to the plantation populations studied by our laboratory and others. Approximately 49% of adult dentitions have defects that occurred during childhood. This frequency is about 1/2 that of Nineteenth Century African American plantation populations (Mack, et al 1995a). These data suggest a separate (non-New York and possibly African) context of childhood for those who died as adults as contrasted with those dying as children.

We are also finding childhood cases of rickets and porotic hyperostosis indicative of vitamin D deficiency and anemia, respectively. Those observed cases of craniosynostosis (pre-mature closure of cranial sutures) in children is well above modern rates. Children’s skeletons often show combinations of two or more of these effects. Indeed, 50% of the population died by 12 years of age, approximately 35% of which died in infancy. These data on children clearly represent a high stress population (Mack, et al 1995b).

What strikes us as particularly profound in frequency and severity is the evidence of work and load-bearing stress in adults. Both men and women often show hypertrophic muscle attachments in bones of the shoulders, arms, and legs. There are several cases of os acromiальное—resulting from excessive mechanical strain on the shoulder mechanism during childhood, causing the acromion to remain unfused in adulthood. Cases of enthesopathy (resulting from the tearing of muscle and bone at muscle attachments) is evident in most individuals, male and female, in the upper and lower limbs. Heavy lifting and other work should have caused these changes. These individuals performed work that pressed the skeleto-muscular systems to its limits, and arguably beyond those limits (Hill et al 1995).

Osteophytosis of the cervical vertebrae has often been observed. We are exploring our best hypothesis for this excessive degeneration of the bones of the neck as caused by lifting and carrying heavy loads on the head (Hill et al 1995).

Finally, there are a few other cases of trauma, most of which involve women. Burial #25 is the most graphic case in point. A woman of approximately 22 years of age was found to have a musket ball in her thoracic area. The projectile appears to have entered through the upper back or side (left scapula). Blunt force fracture of the lower face and a torsion fracture due to the twisting of her right arm are also present. All trauma occurred within a short time prior to death. These data are begin-
ning to tell of the hardship of slavery in a northern colony.

Archaeological data have just begun to focus our attention on Akan speaking West African origins, with the discovery of an Ashanti adinkra symbol ("Sankofa") on the coffin lid for burial #101. This symbol can be interpreted as meaning, "look to the past to inform decisions for the future; one can correct one's mistakes" (Ofari-Ansa, 1995). Those who initially excavated the site, having no substantial background in African history and culture had taken this important symbol to have the meanings normally associated with the European connotations of the geometricized heart-shape (The geometricized Sankofa is a particularly elaborated "heart-shaped" symbol). The twelve cases of modified anterior dentition, comprising 7 different styles of filing, direct our attention to West and Central African societies to which these variations might be usefully compared.

Historican data have also begun to provide a context within which to consider likely explanations for the skeletal indicators of African origins and the physical quality of life of the people who worked at the docks, on the farms, cleared the land, constructed roads, walls, and buildings, maintained the European domestic sphere, rebelled, worshipped, and negotiated the establishment of their own families and communities. These were the people who built and maintained colonial New York. Yet they are also people who often had a life in Africa, the Caribbean, or the American South, prior to arriving in New York. Our African Diasporic historians and archaeologists, conscious of this fuller life, will attempt to recreate the larger identity of these ancestors, in such a way that one might understand them as "enslaved African people" rather than simply as "slaves."

An Anthropology of Engagement

In addition, our work constitutes an engaged anthropology. That is to say, we are working on behalf of the community under study, which in this case means the descendant, cultural affiliated African American community. Many members of this community, especially in New York, have been involved by reviewing drafts of our research design and contributing their criticisms, preferred questions, and stylistic elements (more on African predecessors, openness to very early dates for the cemetery’s use, the term “enslaved” rather than “slave,” etc.) Our research design has been improved in this way. Moreover, the public has come to share of and commitment to our project—it has become their project, too. An Office of Public Education and Interpretation has been established for the project, as a clearing house for information to and from the public.

The cultural and spiritual significance that these icon-like ancestral remains represent, is respected and fostered by our work with the community. Yes, we are scientists, be we accommodate religi-
Consensus does not easily emerge from a descendant community that is as
diverse and embattled as African
Americans in New York City. Decisions
about how to develop a sacred and histori­
cal site that is under continued threat of
desecration, and where the Federal
Government repeatedly breached trust,
tended to be wrenching. The fact that most
of the anthropologists currently involved
in the project are themselves descendants,
has probably been essential, while insuffi­
cient, as a basis for community confidence
in the conduct of research.

The approach to our project is also
possible partly because it is taking place in
a contract or practicing anthropology vein,
within an academic institution. Unlike
contract firms, the University is not wholly
dependent on the continued support of
contracting agencies. This frees us to be
responsive to our ethical client in a manner
that must occasionally aggravate our busi­
ness client. Our multi-disciplinary intel­
clectual resources, and the academic emphasis
on the development of theory might also
make a difference. These are the contradic­
tions that make the African Burial Ground
Project both controversial and successful
by most standards. I believe there are ideas
that we can all utilize from our project's
experience.

A few years ago, a group of 9
anthropologists were organized by Roy
Rappaport during his presidency of the
American Anthropological association. In
the book that resulted from this work
Diagnosing America: The Anthropology of
Public Engagement (Forman, 1994), we
give exampl
give examples of how anthropology might be made more useful to the people of the United States.

In essence: "An engaged anthropology assumes a special responsibility to the communities of persons it studies. Rather than extracting knowledge from its environment in pursuit of academic goals, knowledge developed in a community must be democratically produced, analyzed, and reported." We should "seek to give communities voice," "we have the opportunity to engage on the major social issues that are confronting our society or we can remain peripheral to them." "

Applied or practicing anthropologists who apply their skills in the service of government or service organizations often face serious constraints. When organizations put anthropologists on the payroll, they have certain defined objectives in mind (Forman, 1994)." The statement goes on to point to our abeyance to institutionalized rewards for obscure technical writing and individualized, non-applied work as a detriment to engagement.

Finally, the very demography of anthropology, its near exclusionary whiteness, biases its perspectives and effects. The African Burial Ground as an African American-led project, afforded a level of self-determination and a type of discussion otherwise impossible. There are long-standing "family" discussions among people of African descent (for example, African roles in the slave trade, or reparations claims directed toward European and American governments) for which people of European descent are often seen as either inappropriate or uninformed commentators.

Self-criticism by our field is a necessary part of the process of engagement with the broader public. Pluralism within the field will be necessary for more adequate disciplinary critique and approaches to community engagement and policy formulation. As common ground for this discussion, the Disorders panel had agreed to be guided by values of democratic participation and pluralism. Yet, we recognized that exclusionary and racist values competed with those values, across the American and anthropological landscape.

What About Pure Science?

But why all the talk of politics and cultural values; can't we just do good objective science. Years ago I analyzed survey data from Sol Tax's 1975 Fifth International Directory of Anthropologists. From this exercise (Blakey, 1983), I learned that Eastern European archaeologists were far more involved in preservation and the use historical materialistic theory than Americans. I believed then that this emphasis related to the conscious integration of anthropology with state apparatus, which served to construct a public history that legitimated socialist political and economic structures.

At the same time, I found that American archaeologists, although more individualistic, privatized and seemingly less directly tied to the government's ideological production, ultimately showed leanings that equally made of them producers
of state ideology. Once the convenient archaeological interest in our own region of the world was removed from the picture, American archaeologists showed a preponderant interest in Europe and the Middle East. American archaeologists showed the most meager interest (2-3% of my sample of respondents) in Africa and Asia. Western Europeans showed a primary interest in Europe and a secondary level of interest in the Middle East. These Judeo-Christian and Eurocentric interests help create notions of what are the important and unimportant societies; societies about which there were known details versus stereotypes, and societies that were important to the "American" sense of national identity (Blakey, 1983). Those same trends were and are reflected in the exhibitions of the National Museums of the United States (Blakey, 1990). Of course, these patterns equally reflect the demographic composition of American archaeologists, of whom non-Euro-Americans comprise less than .01%. None of these factors suggest archaeological neutrality, but instead define Eurocentrism as a culture-bound norm. The corrective is demographic, critical, and engaged.

There are many other examples of the deep and intrinsic subjectivity of anthropological pursuits. Indeed, the most virulent racist founders of our field seemed to believe they were acting objectively, while their intuitively racist and classist results were floated to the public (Gould 1981; Blakey 1987). One can refer to the 19th century, also for the origins of critical science and activist scholarship, that sets an early precedent for engaged research among African American ideas. It was Frederick Douglass who, in 1854 analyzed the new physical anthropology and archaeology as contributors to the ideas that justified the perpetuation of the American institution of slavery. In conclusion, he wrote:

The relation subsisting between the white and black people of this country is the vital question of the age. In the solution of this question, the scholars of America will take an important and controlling part. This is the moral battle field to which their country and God now call them. In the eye of both, the neutral scholar is an ignoble man. Here, a man must be hot, or accounted cold, or, perchance, something worse than hot or cold. The lukewarm and the cowardly, will be rejected by earnest men on either side of the controversy. The cunning man who avoids it, to gain the favor of both parties, will be rewarded with scorn; and the timid man who shrinks from it, for fear of offending either party, will be despised. To the lawyer, the preacher, the politician and to the man of letters, there is no neutral ground, he that is not for us is against us. Gentleman, I assume at the start, that whatever else I may be required to speak with bated breath, here at least, I may speak with freedom the thought nearest my heart. (Frederick Douglass, "Address Delivered at Western Reserve College, July 12,
1854).

As a Nation, the United States have long stood, vulnerably at the cross-roads of democracy and white supremacy. As anthropologists, we have always reflected and influenced our society, admittedly or not. Claims of scientific neutrality are often asserted among arguments for the empowerment of scientific information and its exclusive manipulation and control by scientists. To speak of democracy and require exclusive control has never brought resolution to the conflicts between democracy and white supremacy. The contradiction of this characteristically Euro-American conflict, furthermore, has seldom escaped the attention of the non-dominating people of this country. And if such people have often needed to be the ones to raise these contentious issues and lead the way toward a greater democracy, then so be it. The choice is all of ours, if we will but choose.

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Mack, M E, Blakey, ML, and Hill, MC

Mack, ME, Hill, MC and Blakey, ML
delivered at the 94th Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Washington, D C


A lens of binoculars is shown. Text reads:

In the United States, over sixty percent of estimated AIDS cases have been infected, predominantly with curative treatments of women. An alarming rate of... (AIDS, 1994). In these infections, the virus is transmitted generationally.