

## *Sources and Interpretations*

### Reassessing the “*Sankofa* Symbol” in New York’s African Burial Ground

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FOR many decades scholars from disciplines including history, archaeology, and ethnomusicology have demonstrated the influence of African art, religion, music, and language on the cultures of the Americas. In the early years of this inquiry, scholars tended to identify discrete “survivals” of African culture in the Americas, pointing to a specific weaving pattern or syncopated rhythm or linguistic construction transported from a particular African region to the New World. More recently, scholars have formulated complex models of cultural influence and change, identifying a broader poetics or sensibility that Africans carried with them when forcibly brought to the Americas. Not to be found solely in discrete formal connections between Old and New World cultural products, these legacies of African culture are seen in ideas about tradition, memory, and historical change among people of African descent.<sup>1</sup>

These recent models of cultural change demonstrate impressive subtlety, yet there remains nothing like a concrete survival to capture the

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<sup>1</sup> The foundational work in identifying discrete “survivals” of African culture in the Americas is Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941; repr., Boston, 1958). For a few works that examine the influence of African art, religion, music, and language on the cultures of the Americas, see Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York, 1983); Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York, 1987); Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1998). Examples of complex models of cultural influence and change appear in Sally Price and Richard Price, *Maroon Arts: Cultural Vitality in the African Diaspora* (Boston, 1999); Jason R. Young, *Rituals of Resistance: African Atlantic Religion in Kongo and the Lowcountry South in the Era of Slavery* (Baton Rouge, La., 2007).

attention of scholars, students, and the public at large. Though some historians have documented the connections between discrete survivals and their African predecessors, others have too readily attributed cultural practices to African antecedents without convincing documentary or archaeological evidence, especially in the study of African American deathways. Part of the problem lies in the extant primary sources on West and West-Central African burial practices, almost all of which were written by European observers with varying degrees of ethnocentrism and cultural blindness. Furthermore the incomplete state of historical archaeology in West and West-Central Africa offers scholars scant material evidence to corroborate or contradict biased European observations. Finally, the very vastness of the region from which New World slaves were taken makes generalizations about West African deathways suspect. These problems with sources have led some scholars to make poorly substantiated claims about the African origins of African American deathways. Several historians have asserted that the burial of slaves along an east-west axis is a legacy of African practices, when in fact numerous peoples (including European Christians) buried along an east-west axis and interments in West Africa occurred along a wide range of orientations. Others assign African roots to practices that are either not well documented in Africa (speaking frankly about the dead at the funeral and throwing handfuls of earth into the grave) or also widely practiced in non-African cultures (forming burial insurance societies, holding emotional funerals, having large numbers of people attend funerals, surrounding the dying with many people from the community, and walking slowly to the grave in the funeral procession).<sup>2</sup>

One of the most frequently cited examples of alleged African influence on African American mortuary practices is a heart-shaped design made out of tacks on a coffin lid found in New York's African Burial

<sup>2</sup> On the excitement generated by a concrete survival, witness the coverage in the *New York Times* and on Public Radio International of an early-eighteenth-century "spirit bundle" unearthed in Annapolis. See John Noble Wilford, "Under Maryland Street, Ties to African Past," *New York Times*, Oct. 21, 2008, D1; Public Radio International interview with Mark Leone, Oct. 21, 2008, <http://www.newsdesk.umd.edu/sociss/release.cfm?ArticleID=1760>. The Associated Press and United Press International wire services picked up this story, and it then appeared in newspapers across the country. There are numerous careful accounts of African influence on African American mortuary practices. See Jerome S. Handler and Frederick W. Lange, with Robert V. Riordan, *Plantation Slavery in Barbados: An Archaeological and Historical Investigation* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978); James C. Garman, "Viewing the Color Line through the Material Culture of Death," *Historical Archaeology* 28, no. 3 (1994): 74–93; Handler, "A Prone Burial from a Plantation Slave Cemetery in Barbados, West Indies: Possible Evidence for an African-Type Witch or Other Negatively Viewed Person," *Historical Archaeology* 30, no. 3 (1996): 76–86; Douglas V. Armstrong and Mark L. Fleischman, "House-Yard Burials of Enslaved Laborers in Eighteenth-Century Jamaica," *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 7,

Ground. Scholars have asserted that this design is a *sankofa* symbol of the Akan people of West Africa's Gold Coast. This particular example is important because of the widespread attention it has received in scholarly literature and in the popular press. On closer inspection, however, the African origins of this symbol appear doubtful. Indeed it is more likely an example of Anglo-American mortuary culture. People of African descent seem to have adopted this aspect of Anglo-American burial practices, as they did with other Anglo-American objects such as coffins and palls, even as they retained some African customs in the formation of new African American mortuary practices.<sup>3</sup>

As free and enslaved blacks created a distinctive culture in the New World, they drew on remembered African practices and Anglo-American religious and material culture to fashion something altogether original. To fully understand this new hybrid culture, scholars must carefully delineate its sources, including those found in the physical record.<sup>4</sup>

IN THE MIDDLE OF the eighteenth century, people of African descent made up from 18 to 21 percent of New York City's total population.

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no. 1 (March 2003): 33–65; Vincent Brown, *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Cambridge, Mass., 2008). On the dearth of West African historical archaeology, see Merrick Posnansky, "West Africanist Reflections on African-American Archaeology," in *"I, Too, Am America": Archaeological Studies of African-American Life*, ed. Theresa A. Singleton (Charlottesville, Va., 1999), 21–37, esp. 33–34; Christopher R. DeCorse, *An Archaeology of Elmina: Africans and Europeans on the Gold Coast, 1400–1900* (Washington, D.C., 2001), 213 n. 75. On burial along an east-west axis, see Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974), 198; David R. Roediger, "And Die in Dixie: Funerals, Death, and Heaven in the Slave Community, 1700–1865," *Massachusetts Review* 22, no. 1 (Spring 1981): 163–83, esp. 170–71; Margaret Washington Creel, "A Peculiar People": *Slave Religion and Community-Culture among the Gullahs* (New York, 1988), 320. On the variability of orientation of West African burials, see Handler, Lange, and Riordan, *Plantation Slavery in Barbados*, 198; DeCorse, *Archaeology of Elmina*, 66, 188. On speaking frankly of the dead, see Herskovits, *Myth of the Negro Past*, 204. On throwing earth into the grave, see Roediger, *Massachusetts Review* 22: 173. On burial insurance societies, see Joseph E. Holloway, "The Sacred World of the Gullahs," in *Africanisms in American Culture*, ed. Holloway, 2d ed. (Bloomington, Ind., 2005), 187–223, esp. 194–95. On emotional funerals, see Mechal Sobel, *The World They Made Together: Black and White Values in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (Princeton, N.J., 1987), 218. On the large number of funeral attendees, see Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1998), 53. On dying surrounded by community, see Creel, "A Peculiar People," 311. On proceeding slowly to the grave, see Roediger, *Massachusetts Review* 22: 170, 174.

<sup>3</sup> For more on the emergence of African American deathways, see Erik R. Seeman, *Death in the New World: Cross-Cultural Encounters, 1492–1800* (Philadelphia, 2010), chap. 6.

<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere, following Rachel Frankel's and Aviva Ben-Ur's interpretations, I suggested that hearts and upside-down hearts on Jewish gravestones in Suriname

Despite this large pool of potential converts, missionary activities were desultory, with an Anglican schoolmaster here and an itinerant preacher there seeking to bring the word of Christ to the city's black residents. The converts these preachers inspired were few in number, generally the domestic servants of the city's wealthiest families. If Christianization occurred only fitfully among black New Yorkers, Anglicization proceeded more rapidly. People of African descent learned the English language, wore English clothes, and, as most of them were bound laborers, took up artisanal trades and domestic tasks. Their deathways reflected their immersion in English material culture.<sup>5</sup>

Like slaves throughout the New World, enslaved New Yorkers were largely free to attend to their dying and dead without a great deal of interference from their masters or from the local clergy. In 1713 Anglican minister John Sharpe, upset by the lack of ministerial presence at slave deathbeds, complained that "there is no notice given of their being sick that they may be visited" by the clergy. Ministerial inattention continued after slaves died. People of African descent were, Sharpe grumbled, "buried in the Common by those of their country and complexion without the office [that is, the Anglican burial liturgy], on the contrary the Heathenish rites are performed at the grave by their countrymen."<sup>6</sup> Given that in this period "country" connoted an area of relatively restricted extent, Sharpe's words seem to indicate that there were enough Africans in New York of a variety of different ethnic backgrounds that members of each nation could attend to their own dead.<sup>7</sup>

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might be *sankofa* symbols. See Frankel, "Antecedents and Remnants of Jodensavanne: The Synagogues and Cemeteries of the First Permanent Plantation Settlement of New World Jews," in *The Jews and the Expansion of Europe to the West, 1450 to 1800*, ed. Paolo Bernardini and Norman Fiering (New York, 2001), 394–436, esp. 425–26; Ben-Ur, "Still Life: Sephardi, Ashkenazi, and West African Art and Form in Suriname's Jewish Cemeteries," *American Jewish History* 92, no. 1 (March 2004): 31–79. I now believe there is not enough evidence to make such an assertion. See Erik R. Seeman, "Jews in the Early Modern Atlantic: Crossing Boundaries, Keeping Faith," in *The Atlantic in Global History, 1500–2000*, ed. Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra and Seeman (Upper Saddle River, N.J., 2007), 39–59, esp. 53–55.

<sup>5</sup> For population figures in censuses from 1723 to 1746, see Gary B. Nash, "The New York Census of 1737: A Critical Note on the Integration of Statistical and Literary Sources," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 36, no. 3 (July 1979): 428–35, esp. 430 (table 1). On Christianization and Anglicization among black New Yorkers, see Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998), 179–80, 189; Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626–1863* (Chicago, 2003), 30–31, 35–36.

<sup>6</sup> Rev. John Sharpe, "Proposals for Erecting a School, Library and Chapel at New York," 1712–13, *Collections of the New-York Historical Society for the Year 1880* 13 (1880): 339–63 (quotations, 355).

<sup>7</sup> On slave autonomy in performing burials, see Handler, Lange, and Riordan, *Plantation Slavery in Barbados, 173, 189, 195*; Brown, *Reaper's Garden*, 69. For the definition of "country," see *Oxford English Dictionary*, <http://www.oed.com>, s.v., "country," defs. 2a, 4.

Sharpe’s brief reference to burial in the common glossed over the exclusionary Anglican burial policy in the city. In the seventeenth century, some whites and blacks—primarily those not members of churches or too poor to afford church burial—had been buried in one of two public cemeteries in Manhattan. The public cemetery just north of the town’s wall was incorporated into the burial ground of New York’s impressive new Anglican church, Trinity. In one of their first orders of business, Trinity’s vestrymen banned the burials of people of African descent. In 1697, immediately after the edifice was completed, the vestrymen ordered that “after the Expiration of four weeks from the dates hereof no Negroes be buried within the bounds & Limits of the Church Yard of Trinity Church . . . & that no person or Negro whatsoever, do presume after the terme above Limited to break up any ground for the burying of his Negro, as they will answer it at their peril.”<sup>8</sup> Other denominations were equally committed to segregated burials. Historians have found records of only nine churchyard burials of blacks in eighteenth-century New York: five at the Dutch Reformed Church, two at Trinity Lutheran, and two at the Moravian Church. Excluded from the city’s churchyards, black New Yorkers began to bury their dead in the common, a rocky ravine of little use to the city’s white residents, a place that would eventually be called the “Negros Buriel Ground,” as indicated on Francis Maerschalcck’s 1755 “Plan of the City of New York” (Figure I).<sup>9</sup>

The funerals there kept white New Yorkers on edge. Twice in the early eighteenth century, New York city officials passed legislation aimed at preventing people of African descent from using their funerals as cover for planning rebellions. In 1722, fearing that night gatherings might allow free and enslaved blacks to mount an offensive that would catch white New Yorkers unaware, New York’s Common Council banned evening funerals for “all Negroes.” Nine years later the city went even further, limiting to twelve the number of people who could attend slave funerals because at such gatherings slaves “have great Opportunities of Plotting and Confederating together to do Mischief.” In the same legislation, New York officials placed another restriction on slave funerals, one concerned less with preventing a revolt and more with reminding African Americans of their inferior place in the social hierarchy. The 1731 law decreed that slaves were forbidden to cover their coffins with palls, with those who ignored the statute to be “Publicly

<sup>8</sup> Trinity Church Vestry Minutes, Oct. 25, 1697, in Warren R. Perry, Jean Howson, and Barbara A. Bianco, eds., *New York African Burial Ground: Archaeology Final Report* (Washington, D.C., 2006), 1: 42.

<sup>9</sup> Perry, Howson, and Bianco, *New York African Burial Ground*, 1: 43.

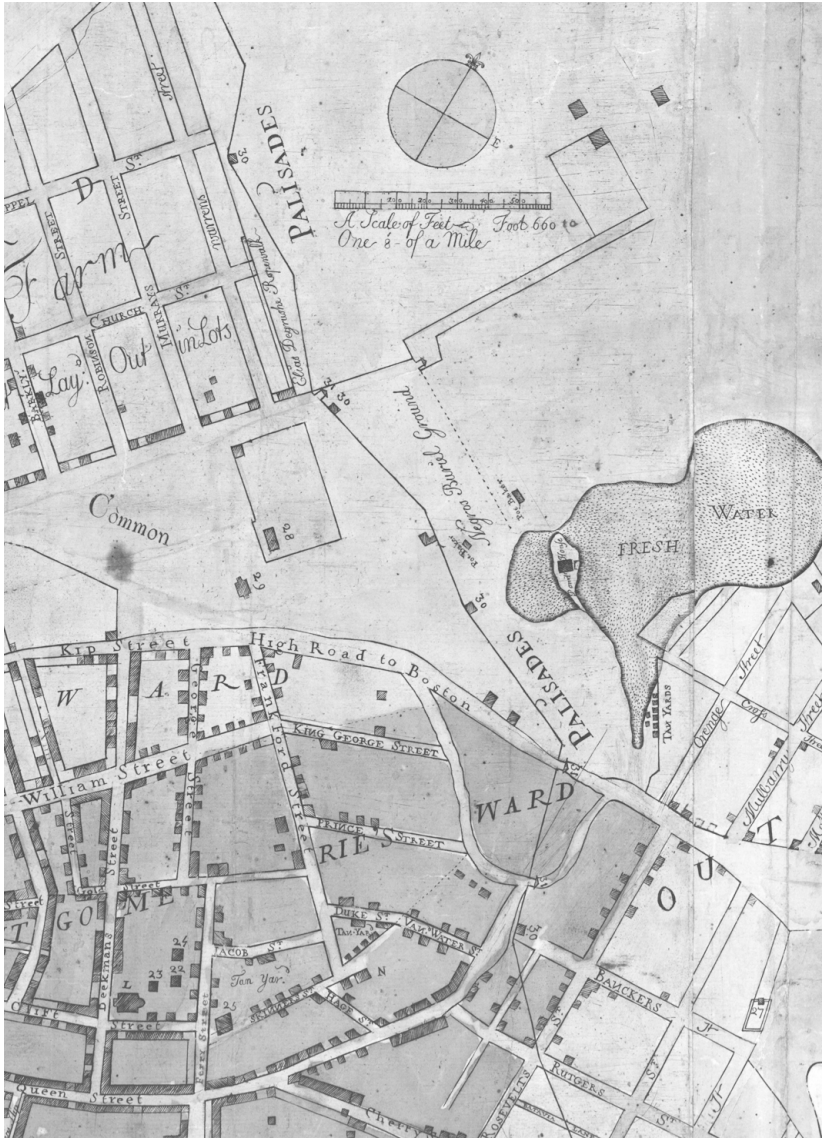


FIGURE I

Detail from Francis Maerschalck, "A Plan of the City of New York," 1755. North of lower Manhattan's densely populated neighborhoods lay an area unsuitable for commercial development that became the "Negros Burial Ground." Courtesy, Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division, G3804.N4 1755 M3 Vault. An enhanced, interactive version of this map is available on <http://oieahc.wm.edu/wmq/Jan10/seeman.html>.

whipped at the Publick Whipping Post.”<sup>10</sup> This law reveals not only that some blacks had adopted this artifact of European material culture but also that white New Yorkers were unwilling to allow blacks to appropriate an object that had its origins in the pomp of European heraldic funerals.<sup>11</sup>

This foregoing discussion would represent the sum total of knowledge about African American deathways in colonial New York except for the U.S. government’s desire to build a new federal office building at 290 Broadway in lower Manhattan. With construction about to start in the summer of 1991, the federal government hired a consulting firm to see if any salvage archaeology needed to be done before the project could get under way. The archaeologists found bones, and then more bones, and soon it became clear that they were digging in the African American burial ground of colonial-era maps. Under increasing pressure from black New Yorkers and others, construction was finally halted in 1992 so that a full archaeological excavation could be mounted.<sup>12</sup> By the time the work was completed, archaeologists had unearthed the remains of 419 individuals from what they now dubbed New York’s African Burial Ground.

For fifteen years the archaeologists in charge of the excavation published few of their findings. Those that did appear emphasized the African origins of the material culture unearthed in lower Manhattan: beads, shells, rings, and more. Historians followed this lead, seeing in the African Burial Ground artifacts glimpses of a long-hidden African worldview in New York.<sup>13</sup> Though the final archaeological report, published in

<sup>10</sup> Herbert L. Osgood et al., eds., *Minutes of the Common Council of the City of New York, 1675–1776* (New York, 1905), 3: 296 (“all Negroes”), 4: 88 (“have great Opportunities”), 4: 89 (“Publicly whipped”).

<sup>11</sup> On the origins of palls, see Ivor Noël Hume, *Martin’s Hundred* (New York, 1982), 80–82; Ralph Houlbrooke, *Death, Religion, and the Family in England, 1480–1750* (Oxford, 1998), 260. On the importance of palls for Newport’s African American community in the 1790s, see William H. Robinson, ed., *The Proceedings of the Free African Union Society and the African Benevolent Society: Newport, Rhode Island, 1780–1824* (Providence, R.I., 1976), 78–79, 83, 93–94.

<sup>12</sup> Anne-Marie Cantwell and Diana diZerega Wall, *Unearthing Gotham: The Archaeology of New York City* (New Haven, Conn., 2001), 277–88.

<sup>13</sup> Early reports from the site can be found in *Update: Newsletter of the African Burial Ground and Five Points Archaeological Projects*. Historians who emphasize the African worldview revealed by African Burial Ground objects include Cantwell and Wall, *Unearthing Gotham*, 290–91; Craig Steven Wilder, *In the Company of Black Men: The African Influence on African American Culture in New York City* (New York, 2001), 33; Thelma Wills Foote, *Black and White Manhattan: The History of Racial Formation in Colonial New York City* (New York, 2004), 141–43; Jill Lepore, *New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery, and Conspiracy in Eighteenth-Century Manhattan* (New York, 2005), 231–32.

2006, was more balanced in its assessment of African influence, some of the claims still need to be revised.

Most of the 419 African Americans removed from the African Burial Ground were buried in ways identical to those of their white neighbors. Or, to be more precise, the material remains of the vast majority of the African Burial Ground interments are identical to those of white New Yorkers. Religious rituals rarely leave a trace in the material record, and thus archaeology cannot shed light on most of the rites that mattered to those who performed and observed them. Still, few of the burials contain African elements. Of the individuals whose remains were sufficiently well preserved to allow for analysis, 92 percent (352 of 384) were buried in coffins, 94 percent (393 of 419) were single interments, 98 percent (367 of 375) were buried with the head facing west, and 100 percent (269 of 269) were supine, that is, lying faceup. This is precisely how white New Yorkers were buried in the eighteenth century: confined (with perhaps a few exceptions for indigents), west-headed, supine, single interments. Likewise 93 percent (351 of 376) of the African Burial Ground interments had no personal adornment such as rings, buttons, or cufflinks, and 93 percent (350 of 376) were not buried with coins, shells, pipes, or other durable objects. Thus the vast majority were buried without grave goods, again mirroring Euro-American practices.<sup>14</sup>

Other aspects of the material record demonstrate fewer connections with Africa than the first reports from the site suggested. In 1995 Kwaku Ofori-Ansa, an expert in African art, analyzed the heart-shaped symbol found on the coffin lid of Burial 101, a young man twenty-six to thirty-

<sup>14</sup> The authors of the final historical report on the African Burial Ground also recognized a lack of African elements: "the deceased were laid to rest in a manner not unlike that of white New Yorkers." See Edna Greene Medford, ed., *The New York African Burial Ground: History Final Report* (Washington, D.C., 2004), 184 (quotation). Data on the African Burial Ground interments are found in Perry, Howson, and Bianco, *New York African Burial Ground*, 1: 134–41. Unfortunately, historical archaeology on Euro-Americans buried in New York is underdeveloped. This discussion of white burials is based on secondary sources about the colony, supplemented with material about Euro-American burials in eighteenth-century New England. For New York, see Alice Morse Earle, *Colonial Days in Old New York* (New York, 1896), chap. 14; David Charles Sloane, *The Last Great Necessity: Cemeteries in American History* (Baltimore, 1991), 13–28; Robert V. Wells, *Facing the "King of Terrors": Death and Society in an American Community, 1750–1990* (New York, 2000), chap. 2. For New England, see David E. Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death: A Study in Religion, Culture, and Social Change* (New York, 1977); Gordon E. Geddes, *Welcome Joy: Death in Puritan New England* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1981); Kristen Bastis, "Health, Wealth, and Available Material: The Bioarchaeology of the Bulkeley Tomb in Colchester, Connecticut" (master's thesis, University of Connecticut, 2006). For personal adornment and durable objects, see Perry, Howson, and Bianco, *New York African Burial Ground*, 1: 382, 419.



five years old. The design, about eighteen inches wide and nineteen inches high, was composed of 51 iron tacks with heads about three-eighths of an inch in diameter, hammered into the center of the coffin lid (Figures II–III). Ofori-Ansa wrote that "it could be safely concluded that the image was meant to be" a sankofa symbol used by the Akan people of Ghana.<sup>15</sup> The sankofa symbol is connected with modern-day Akan mortuary practices; the word sankofa translates as "go back to fetch it." This phrase refers to a proverb, "it is not a taboo to return and fetch it when you forget," that describes the connections between the spirit world and this world. For this reason the sankofa is one of the hundreds of symbols that are today stamped onto *adinkra* cloth—meaning "a message one gives to another when departing"—from which Akan mourning garments are made.<sup>16</sup> Scholars rapidly incorporated this example from the African Burial Ground into their narratives as evidence of African cultural survivals in the New World. According to one scholar, the man in Burial 101 "was honored with a *sankofa*, or Akan ideographic symbol from Ghana, tacked into the lid of the coffin."<sup>17</sup> As another historian asserts, this coffin lid demonstrates that "a trace of the Akan belief system . . . survived the native Africans' enslavement in colonial New York City."<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Kwaku Ofori-Ansa, "Identification and Validation of the Sankofa Symbol," *Update: Newsletter of the African Burial Ground and Five Points Archaeological Projects* 1, no. 8 (Summer 1995): 3. See also Cheryl J. LaRoche and Michael L. Blakey, "Seizing Intellectual Power: The Dialogue at the New York African Burial Ground," *Historical Archaeology* 31, no. 3 (1997): 84–106, esp. 95. Archaeologists numbered the burials consecutively as they unearthed them. Burial 101 was thus the 101st grave excavated.

<sup>16</sup> W. Bruce Willis, *The Adinkra Dictionary: A Visual Primer on the Language of Adinkra* (Washington, D.C., 1998), 188 ("not a taboo"), 1 ("message one gives"). Alfred Kofi Quarcoo translates sankofa as "return and pick it up." See Quarcoo, *The Language of Adinkra Patterns*, 2d ed. (Legon, Ghana, 1994), 17. The most thoroughly researched work on *adinkra* is Daniel Mato, "Clothed in Symbol: The Art of Adinkra among the Akan of Ghana" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1987). In addition to Willis, *Adinkra Dictionary*, and Quarcoo, *Language of Adinkra Patterns*, see also Kofi Antubam, *Ghana's Heritage of Culture* (Leipzig, Germany, 1963), 155–61; Emmanuel V. Asihene, *Understanding the Traditional Art of Ghana* (Cranbury, N.J., 1978); Peggy Appiah, "Akan Symbolism," *African Arts* 13, no. 1 (November 1979): 64–67; John Picton and John Mack, *African Textiles: Looms, Weaving, and Design* (London, 1979), 165–67.

<sup>17</sup> Andrea E. Frohne, "Reclaiming Space: The African Burial Ground in New York City," in *"We Shall Independent Be": African American Place Making and the Struggle to Claim Space in the United States*, ed. Angel David Nieves and Leslie M. Alexander (Boulder, Colo., 2008), 489–510 (quotation, 495).

<sup>18</sup> Foote, *Black and White Manhattan*, 143 (quotation). For similar interpretations, see Sheila S. Walker, "Introduction: Are You Hip to the Jive? (Re)Writing/Righting the Pan-American Discourse," in *African Roots/American Cultures: Africa in the Creation of the Americas*, ed. Walker (Lanham, Md., 2001),

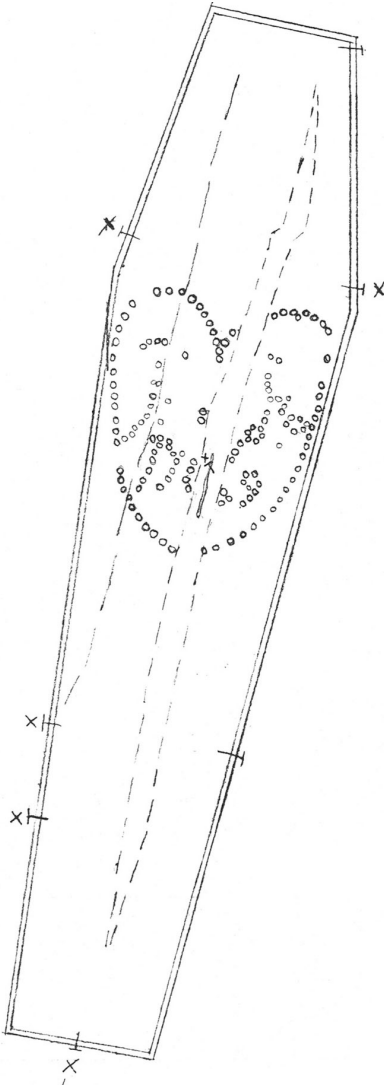


FIGURE II

Coffin lid with heart, Burial 101. This coffin was made of larch, a wood similar to pine. The dashed lines represent cracks in the coffin, which make the date (1769?) and deceased's initials difficult to read. Original sketch of in-situ burial, African Burial Ground Collection, Howard University, Montague Cobb Laboratory Record Group. Courtesy, U.S. General Services Administration, New York City.

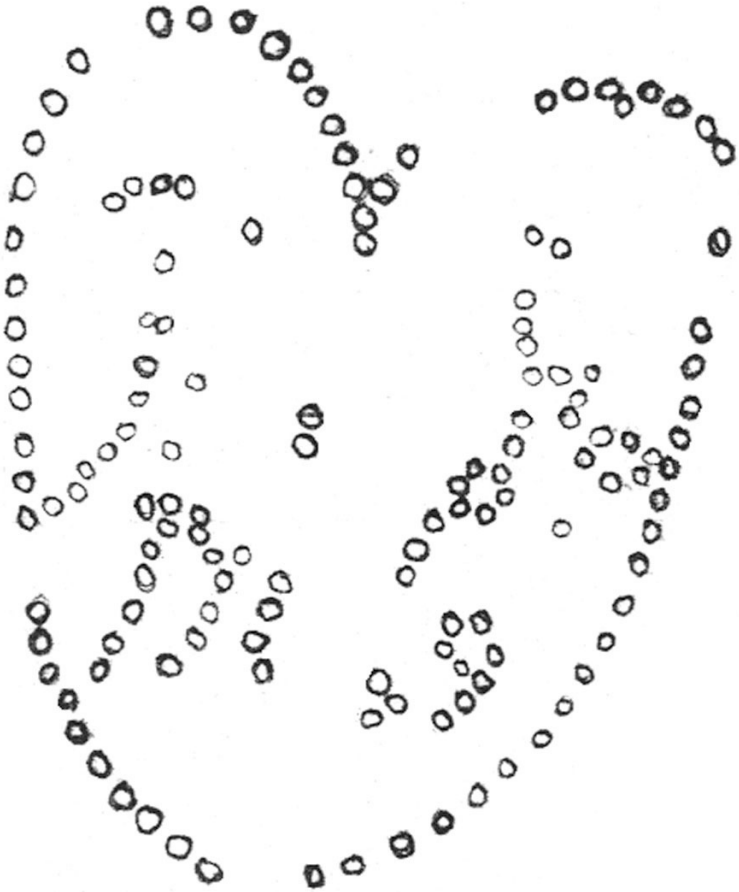


FIGURE III

Heart-shaped design, Burial 101. Made of 51 iron tacks, this heart measures about nineteen inches high and eighteen inches wide. Original sketch of in-situ burial, African Burial Ground Collection. Courtesy, U.S. General Services Administration, New York City.

Three problems complicate such an interpretation. First, no evidence survives that the sankofa symbol was a part of eighteenth-century Akan mortuary practices. Though it is impossible to disprove the existence of a cultural form in the past, scholars cannot place adinkra cloth definitively in the eighteenth century, and other evidence suggests that the sankofa symbol in particular may have emerged as late as the early twentieth century. African oral tradition dates the arrival of adinkra among the Akan to the conclusion of the 1818 Asante-Gyaman War. Englishman Thomas Edward Bowdich, however, collected an adinkra cloth on the Gold Coast in 1817, suggesting that adinkra art existed before the traditional starting date. Yet ascertaining when adinkra cloth became part of Akan mortuary practices is impossible before 1817. Numerous seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European observers commented about Akan funeral practices, but none mentioned mourning cloth stamped with symbols. Because of this silence in the primary sources, and because scholars have not unearthed adinkra cloth from eighteenth-century archaeological sites, virtually no historians and archaeologists have claimed that adinkra was part of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Akan society.<sup>19</sup>

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1–44, esp. 26–27; Theresa A. Singleton, “Before the Revolution: Archaeology and the African Diaspora on the Atlantic Seaboard,” in *North American Archaeology*, ed. Timothy R. Pauketat and Diana DiPaolo Loren (Oxford, 2005), 319–36, esp. 331; Richard E. Bond, “Shaping a Conspiracy: Black Testimony in the 1741 New York Plot,” *Early American Studies* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 63–94, esp. 92. Leslie M. Harris states that the design is “possibly” a sankofa symbol. See Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery*, 1.

<sup>19</sup> For a similar point about the lack of eighteenth-century evidence, see Walter C. Rucker, *The River Flows On: Black Resistance, Culture, and Identity Formation in Early America* (Baton Rouge, La., 2006), 50. On African oral tradition, see Mato, “Clothed in Symbol,” 72. For more on the Asante-Gyaman War, see Larry W. Yarak, *Asante and the Dutch, 1744–1873* (Oxford, 1990), 140–42. Descriptions of Akan deathways are found in Nicolas Villault, Sieur de Bellefond, *A Relation of the Coasts of Africk Called Guinee . . .*, 2d ed. (London, 1670), 182–95; John Atkins, *A Voyage to Guinea, Brasil, and the West-Indies . . .* (London, 1735), 105; William Smith, *A New Voyage to Guinea . . .* (London, 1744), 143–44, 214–15, 226–27; William Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea: Divided into the Gold, the Slave, and the Ivory Coasts*, ed. John Ralph Willis, J. D. Fage, and R. E. BrADBury (London, 1967), 225–33; Adam Jones, ed., *German Sources for West African History, 1599–1669* (Wiesbaden, Germany, 1983), 31, 104–5, 122–23, 178–80, 256–58; Jones, ed., *Brandenburg Sources for West African History, 1680–1700* (Stuttgart, Germany, 1985), 88, 186; Pieter de Marees, *Description and Historical Account of the Gold Kingdom of Guinea (1602)*, trans. and ed. Albert van Dantzig and Jones (Oxford, 1987), 69–70, 179–85; P. E. H. Hair, Jones, and Robin Law, eds., *Barbot on Guinea: The Writings of Jean Barbot on West Africa, 1678–1712* (London, 1992), 2: 590–92 (letter 27); Selena Axelrod Winsnes, trans. and ed., *Letters on West Africa and the Slave Trade: Paul Erdmann Isert’s Journey to Guinea and the Caribbean Islands in Columbia (1788)* (Oxford, 1992), 127–33; Ludewig Ferdinand Rømer, *A Reliable Account of the Coast of Guinea (1760)*, trans. and ed. Winsnes (Oxford, 2000), 97–98, 104–9, 181–87. Scholars of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries who discuss Akan deathways without mentioning adinkra include James O.

Nineteenth-century examples of adinkra cloth, moreover, do not contain the sankofa symbol. Bowdich's cloth, which is at the British Museum, is stamped with fifteen symbols, none of them the sankofa (Figure IV). Another adinkra cloth, commissioned in the mid-1820s by the Dutch Governor of the Guinea Coast and now at the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden, is stamped with sixteen symbols but not the sankofa. In photographs taken by German missionaries in 1898 of Akan craftsmen making adinkra cloth, the eighteen symbols visible on two cloths do not include the sankofa. The first evidence of the sankofa appeared in R. S. Rattray's 1927 catalog of adinkra symbols. Rattray, an early anthropologist who specialized in the art and religion of what is today Ghana, documented fifty-three symbols used on adinkra cloth. He gave two different versions of the sankofa symbol: one a heart-shaped pattern, the other a more elaborate expression of the heart design (Figure V). Thus even if adinkra art had emerged by the middle of the eighteenth century, there is no evidence that the sankofa was part of the symbology. Adinkra art has grown dramatically during the last century to incorporate hundreds of new symbols, including by the 1980s images of steering wheels, the U.S. flag, and modern commercial logos such as Coca-Cola and Mercedes-Benz. Adinkra art is therefore a dynamic and fluid cultural tradition rather than a storehouse of images from the distant past.<sup>20</sup>

Second, though slaves had considerable autonomy in burying their dead, masters were customarily responsible for supplying coffins for

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Bellis, *The "Place of the Pots" in Akan Funerary Custom* (Bloomington, Ind., 1982); Harvey M. Feinberg, "Africans and Europeans in West Africa: Elminans and Dutchmen on the Gold Coast during the Eighteenth Century," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, new ser., 79, no. 7 (1989): 1–186, esp. 102, 141; T. C. McCaskie, *State and Society in Pre-Colonial Asante* (Cambridge, Eng., 1995), 60, 78; DeCorse, *Archaeology of Elmina*, 66–67, 88–89, 100–102, 187–89; Sandra E. Greene, *Sacred Sites and the Colonial Encounter: A History of Meaning and Memory in Ghana* (Bloomington, Ind., 2002), 64–69. Alfred Kofi Quarcoo suggests that the adinkra tradition arrived among the Akan around 1700. See Quarcoo, *Language of Adinkra Patterns*, 6. But, in the words of Daniel Mato, Quarcoo's date "is unfortunately given with no supportive data." See Mato, "Clothed in Symbol," 111.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Edward Bowdich wrote that "the white cloths . . . they paint for mourning with a mixture of blood and a red dye wood. The patterns are various, and not inelegant." See Bowdich, *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee, With a Statistical Account of that Kingdom, and Geographical Notices of Other parts of the Interior of Africa* (London, 1819), 310 (quotation). The earliest evidence of the sankofa symbol is R. S. Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (Oxford, 1927), 265. On the number of symbols on the nineteenth-century cloths, see Mato, "Clothed in Symbol," 79, 100, 174. Because they share some symbols, the four nineteenth-century cloths use a total of twenty-eight different adinkra stamps. For images of steering wheels and the U.S. flag, *ibid.*, fig. 196, fig. 205. For the Coca-Cola and Mercedes-Benz logos, see Willis, *Adinkra Dictionary*, 28.

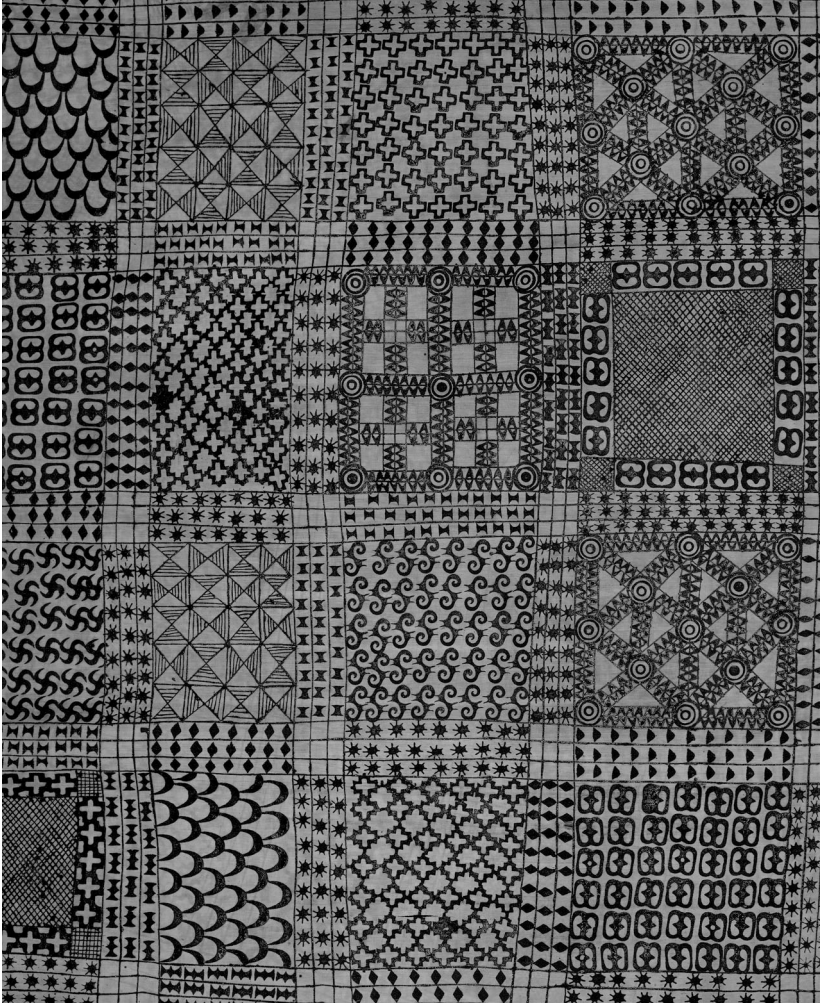


FIGURE IV

*Adinkra* mourning cloth collected by Thomas Edward Bowdich in 1817. Bowdich obtained this cotton cloth in Kumasi, a city in south-central Ghana. The patterns were printed using carved calabash stamps and a vegetable-based dye. This oldest known example of *adinkra* art does not include the *sankofa* symbol. Instead it features fifteen other stamped symbols, including *nsroma* (stars), *dono ntoasuo* (double *dono* drums), and diamonds. Image © Trustees of the British Museum.

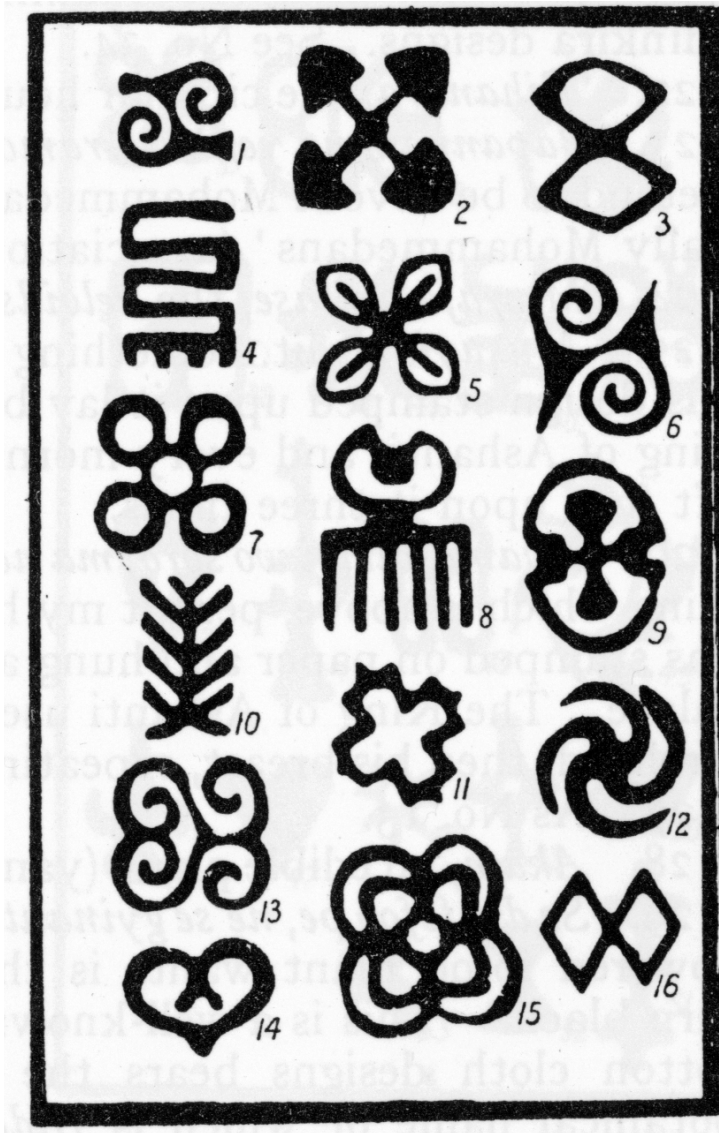


FIGURE V

The first documented appearance of the sankofa. Symbols thirteen and fourteen in the lower left are different sankofa symbol variations. Photograph from R. S. Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (Oxford, 1927), 265.

their slaves, as the financial records of plantation owners throughout the Americas reveal. The 1753–56 account book of Joshua Delaplaine, a New York cabinetmaker who built coffins for a wide range of customers, from the wealthy to those buried by the almshouse, records at least eight examples of slave owners purchasing a “coffin for his negro boy” or a “coffin for his negro man” or the like.<sup>21</sup> Sometimes an owner spent more than necessary on a coffin, presumably to reward a faithful or well-liked slave. Most adult slave coffins sold by Delaplaine ranged in price from nine to twelve shillings, except for the one purchased by Christopher Fell in 1754, a “black coffin for his negro woman rozind & with screws,” which cost fourteen shillings.<sup>22</sup> Fell paid a few extra shillings to have his slave’s coffin painted black (rather than left unpainted, as most were) and tightly secured with rosin and screws rather than the usual cheaper nails, probably to show his affection for the deceased. This evidence suggests that if Burial 101 was a slave—and he may have been free—it would have been his master’s decision to pay extra for the tacks on his lid.<sup>23</sup>

Third and perhaps most importantly, hearts made out of tacks were not uncommon adornments on Anglo-American coffin lids. Nathaniel Harrison, for example, who died in 1727 in Surry County, Virginia, was buried in a pine coffin elaborately decorated with brass tacks in the shape of a heart (and a skull and crossbones). When a nineteenth-century local historian entered the Wainwright family tomb in Ipswich, Massachusetts, he found ten coffins in various states of disintegration. Five coffin lids included “hearts formed with iron nails; and initials and dates with brass nails”; the dates ranged from 1731 to 1798.<sup>24</sup> More recently, twenty of the thirty-four coffins removed from the Bulkeley family tomb in Colchester, Connecticut (covering the period 1775 to 1826), had lids with heart-shaped designs made out of tacks (Figure VI). Delaplaine, the busy New York coffin maker, recorded an order for a fancy coffin of expensive “bilsted,” or sweet gum, wood, almost certainly for a wealthy white person, for whom he had a heart with the deceased’s name, age, and date of death “struck” on the lid, presumably with tacks.<sup>25</sup> This description resembles the design on

<sup>21</sup> Perry, Howson, and Bianco, *New York African Burial Ground*, 1: 254 (table 10.2).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> There are several other ambiguous entries, such as when John Stephens purchased a “black coffin for a negro child” (*ibid.*). Stephens could have been a master purchasing a coffin for his slave or a free black man buying it for his offspring.

<sup>24</sup> Arthur W. Dowe, “Col. John Wainwright’s Tomb,” [Ipswich, Mass.] *Antiquarian Papers* 2, no. 17 (March 1881): [2]. Many thanks to Jason LaFountain for this citation.

<sup>25</sup> Perry, Howson, and Bianco, *New York African Burial Ground*, 1: 253 (“bilsted,” “struck”). See also an 1818 coffin from Cornwall, Conn.: “Going Home: Henry Opukaha’ia Returns to Hawaii,” *Digging In: Newsletter of the Office of State Archaeology and Connecticut Historical Commission*, no. 2 (Fall 1993), <http://archnet.asu.edu/archives/crm/conn/digin/dig2.htm>. On the importance of heart imagery in early American Protestantism, see Sally M. Promey, “Mirror Images: Framing the Self in Early New England Material Piety,” in *Figures in the Carpet: Finding the*





FIGURE VI

Coffin lid of Asa Bulkeley. Archaeologists found thirty-four well-preserved coffins in the Bulkeley family tomb in Colchester, Connecticut, twenty of which had heart-shaped designs made out of brass tacks on the lid. As the design indicates, Bulkeley died at age thirty in 1804. His pine coffin was marked with this heart as well as tacks around the edges of the coffin. Courtesy, John J. Spaulding, Friends of the Office of State Archaeology.

the lid of Burial 101's coffin, which included not only a heart but also what appear to be the deceased's initials and year of death.<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps the family and friends of the young man now known only as Burial 101 ascribed meanings to the heart-shaped symbol on his coffin different from, or in addition to, the meanings the same symbol evoked for their Euro-American neighbors. Whereas white New Yorkers used the heart to symbolize the soul and its ascension to the Christian heaven—the heart was where the soul was believed to reside—black New Yorkers may have replaced or complemented those significations with other meanings.<sup>27</sup> If the sankofa existed 175 years before its first appearance in the historical record, the symbol on Burial 101's coffin may even have recalled the Akan proverb about crossing from the spirit world to this world. But in the absence of any literary or archaeological evidence supporting the eighteenth-century appearance of the sankofa symbol, and in light of the numerous ways that black New Yorkers incorporated aspects of Anglo-American deathways such as coffins and palls into their own mortuary rituals, that interpretation must remain highly speculative.

By contrast a small minority of the African Burial Ground interments display indisputable material links with African practices. One of the most evocative is the adult woman known as Burial 340. Despite her anonymity this woman left behind a material record that embodies some of the ways black New Yorkers used their mortuary practices to keep their memories of Africa alive. This woman, whose poorly preserved remains suggest only that she was anywhere from thirty-nine to sixty-four years old, is believed to have died before 1735, at a time when a high percentage of black New Yorkers had been born in Africa. She was almost certainly among those forcibly taken from her homeland: her incisors had been filed, one into the shape of an hourglass, another into the shape of a peg, a practice usually diagnostic of African birth.<sup>28</sup>

Her grave goods show how objects of European, American, and African origin could be combined to create distinctively African American

*Human Person in the American Past*, ed. Wilfred M. McClay (Grand Rapids, Mich., 2007), 71–128, esp. 109–16. Hearts were also fairly common elements on Anglo-American gravestones in eighteenth-century New York and northern New Jersey. See Richard F. Welch, “The New York and New Jersey Gravestone Carving Tradition,” *Markers* 4 (1987): 1–54, esp. 16, 18.

<sup>26</sup> On Nathaniel Harrison's coffin, see Brent W. Tharp, “Preserving Their Form and Features’: The Commodification of Coffins in the American Understanding of Death,” in *Commodifying Everything: Relationships of the Market*, ed. Susan Strasser (New York, 2003), 119–40, esp. 124. On the Bulkeley tomb, see Bastis, “Health, Wealth, and Available Material,” 46, 48–51.

<sup>27</sup> Promey, “Mirror Images,” 113.

<sup>28</sup> Perry, Howson, and Bianco, *New York African Burial Ground*, 1: 154. A filed incisor “strongly indicates African birth.” See Handler, Lange, and Riordan, *Plantation Slavery in Barbados*, 117. Burial 340 is described to extraordinary effect in Lepore, *New York Burning*, 231–32.

mortuary practices. In her grave, near her pelvis, someone placed an unused, white kaolin clay pipe of British or American manufacture. White and black New Yorkers enjoyed smoking tobacco, yet only people of African descent placed goods in coffins to be used by the deceased in the afterlife. Even more distinctively African were the beads with which the woman was buried: a bracelet around her right wrist composed of forty-one glass beads and a string of waist beads around her hips consisting of seventy greenish-blue glass beads, one amber bead, and seven cowrie shells. The amber bead, translucent red with fourteen facets, might have been made in Africa, the cowries came from the Indian Ocean coast of Africa, and the glass beads were manufactured in Europe, likely Venice. Their use as waist beads, not their origin, makes them characteristically African. West African women wore waist beads under their garments as a way to tuck in and hold up their skirts or aprons, and thus they were visible only to a woman's spouse or lover or her female bathing partners. Whoever prepared this woman for burial must have known the waist beads were important to her and made sure that she was buried with them.<sup>29</sup>

The contents of a probable conjuring bundle found in a different burial likewise demonstrate a direct connection with African practices. Called *minkisi* (singular *nkisi*) by Kongolese but used elsewhere in Africa and throughout the African diaspora, conjuring bundles were small cloth or fiber bags containing objects with magical or ritual significance. Burial 147 was an old man, 55 to 65 years old, probably buried in the last decades that the African Burial Ground was in use, sometime after 1776. He was found with four straight pins and fourteen tiny copper-alloy rings—at eleven millimeters in diameter, too small to fit on an adult's fingers—between his upper right arm and his chest (Figure VII). The rings had likely been contained in some kind of small cloth sack pinned to his burial garment. It is impossible to know for what purposes the old man carried his tiny rings in a small sack, or whether he carried them in daily life, as in death, attached to his arm, though there is evidence that African men in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries wore amulets and protective bracelets on their upper arms. He likely kept his bag of precious, possibly magical rings hidden from the white New Yorkers he interacted with, including, if he was a slave, his master, just as the bag remained hidden from view in his coffin for more than two centuries.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Perry, Howson, and Bianco, *New York African Burial Ground*, 1: 387, 393, 403, 410. See also Cheryl J. LaRoche, “Beads from the African Burial Ground, New York City: A Preliminary Assessment,” *Beads: Journal of the Society of Bead Researchers* 6 (1994): 3–20, esp. 14–15; Linda France Stine, Melanie A. Cabak, and Mark D. Groover, “Blue Beads as African-American Cultural Symbols,” *Historical Archaeology* 30, no. 3 (1996): 49–75, esp. 53–54.

<sup>30</sup> Patricia Samford, “The Archaeology of African-American Slavery and Material Culture,” *WMQ* 53, no. 1 (January 1996): 87–114, esp. 107–9; James H.



FIGURE VII

Burial 147. Look carefully between the right arm and rib cage to see the tiny rings interred with the older man. Archaeologists infer that they were originally contained within a cloth bag that no longer survives. Original sketch of in-situ burial, African Burial Ground Collection. Courtesy, U.S. General Services Administration, New York City.

SLAVES AND FREE BLACKS undoubtedly drew on their African heritage—proudly, even defiantly—as they created African American culture in the New World. Their deathways reflect this reality, as several interments in the African Burial Ground convincingly demonstrate. But the evidence from the African Burial Ground paints a more complicated portrait of black life in eighteenth-century New York than is sometimes seen in the historical works that have used evidence from the cemetery. The African Burial Ground’s material culture suggests that eighteenth-century black New Yorkers creatively combined African and Anglo-American deathways. Some of the graves show connections with African material culture or cosmology, including Burial 147 with his mysterious bundle of rings and Burial 340 with her prized waist beads.<sup>31</sup> These African elements often appeared alongside the Anglo-American artifacts found in most of the interments, including linen shrouds closed with straight pins and pine coffins held together with iron nails. Similarly, the heart-shaped design made out of tacks was more likely an Anglo-American mortuary emblem than an Akan sankofa symbol. The material record—though it cannot capture the thoughts, feelings, rituals, and even nondurable offerings such as food and drink that may have accompanied many of these burials—points toward a hybrid of African and Anglo-American deathways emerging in eighteenth-century New York.

Today the African Burial Ground stands as a powerful reminder of the presence of free and enslaved blacks in early America’s northern cities, a presence about which most Americans remain completely ignorant. With this lack of awareness in mind, it is important to recognize the invaluable efforts of those who work to protect this space and interpret it to the public. The African Burial Ground is now run by the National Park Service, whose rangers annually lead tens of thousands of people through the site. For many visitors, especially those of African descent, the sankofa symbol holds special significance. This is suggested by the written reactions left during the one-month public comment phase of the memorial design competition. In 2004 the U.S. General Services Administration and the National Park Service presented five designs to the public and solicited comments at venues accessible to New York’s African American residents, including the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture and Bronx Community College. Architect Rodney Léon’s winning design, with the sankofa symbol as its centerpiece, alone generated more than three hundred comments (Figure VIII). One person admired Léon’s entry for its “very sacred

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Sweet, *Recreating Africa: Culture, Kinship, and Religion in the African-Portuguese World, 1441–1770* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2003), chap. 6; Young, *Rituals of Resistance*, chap. 3. On African bracelets, see Perry, Howson, and Bianco, *New York African Burial Ground*, 1: 432–33.

<sup>31</sup> See also Burial 328 with a broken pot placed atop the coffin lid, and Burial 387 with oyster shells left on top of the coffin, in Perry, Howson, and Bianco, *New York African Burial Ground*, 1: 420.



FIGURE VIII

A monument to the memory of slaves, African Burial Ground. This memorial was designed by architect Rodney Léon. The sankofa symbol is accompanied by these words: “For all those who were lost/For all those who were stolen/For all those who were left behind/For all those who were not forgotten.” Courtesy, Carol M. Highsmith Photography, Inc., for the U.S. General Services Administration, New York City.

Africa[n] approach to the design . . . mixed with the symbolism of the Sankofa.” Another was more reserved but still praised the use of the sankofa: the proposed memorial “doesn’t depict African experience except for the Sankofa symbol.”<sup>32</sup>

If the sankofa symbol works as art, it works less well as history. The sankofa symbol has become the defining image of the African Burial Ground, featured prominently in popular and scholarly literature alike. This symbol, with its suggestion of the unmediated transfer of African cultural forms, stands in for the more complex story of adaptation and hybridity that defines how Africans became African Americans.

<sup>32</sup> See [http://www.africanburialground.gov/Memorial/ABG\\_Memorial\\_Comments\\_03\\_Leon.htm](http://www.africanburialground.gov/Memorial/ABG_Memorial_Comments_03_Leon.htm). In 2007, the first full calendar year in which it was run by the National Park Service, the African Burial Ground received 68,085 visitors (Park Ranger Douglas Massenburg, personal communication, Aug. 14, 2008).