1

Introduction

1.1. Preface

Symbols abound in this world. Each culture creates, manipulates, retains or discards symbols over time. When cultures evolve, symbols can evolve as well, either in their form, or perhaps more significantly, in their underlying meanings (Robb 1998). This study examines one overarching symbol and its variants – the cross, or the cross within a circle. This symbol is invoked throughout the world, from antiquity to the present day, and contains a myriad of meanings, though some interpretations are shared by many different cultures around the globe. In part, this is due to it often representing the four sacred directions – North, South, East, West – the rising and setting of the sun, within which is embedded for many societies a core cosmology. In short, it is often a sacred symbol.

In the field of historical archaeology, which examines the world from the 15th century onwards (Deetz 1996:5), when the cross motif would be encountered in Europe or its colonial reach, it could easily be recognized as a signifier of Christianity. However, within African Diaspora archaeology, the symbolism of the cross has experienced a very different theoretical underpinning, and became a key focus of research and speculation beginning in the 1970s.

I began my archaeological career in the late 1980s as an undergraduate at the University of Texas at Austin, and was started in African Diaspora archaeology when I joined the Freedman's Cemetery Project in Dallas, Texas, in 1992, at the age of 24. Freedman's Cemetery was founded during Reconstruction in 1869, and was the primary place of interment for African Americans in the city until 1907. When the Texas Department of Transportation began planning the expansion of North Central Expressway in the late 1980s, the eastern boundary of the cemetery property was discovered to lie within its right of way. Further, nearly one acre of the four-acre site was paved over in the late 1940s, and this crime was not rediscovered until the early 1990s. To mitigate these past transgressions, between 1991 and 1995 a team of archaeologists and osteologists exhumed and scientifically documented 1150 unmarked burials, containing 1157 individuals. The Freedman's Cemetery Project is the largest African-descended skeletal population derived archaeologically in the world (Condon et al. 1998; Davidson 1999; Davidson et al. 2002; Davidson 2004a; Davidson 2004b; Davidson 2007b; Davidson 2008; Davidson 2012b).

On the morning of December 2, 1993, archaeologists Joy Becker and Laura Talbot began the excavation of Burial 913, which contained the remains of a baby (a little less than a year old) who died circa 1901. In the process of excavation, a perforated 1878 Liberty Seated dime was found at the infant's neck. Beyond the small hole that had been punched through it, which allowed the coin to be worn as a necklace on a piece of string, the dime had been additionally altered with the scratching of crude cross marks on both of its sides. In researching the meanings behind these modifications, I discovered the notion of coins used as physical amulets, to heal or prevent evil from harming the wearer, which was a belief prevalent in the British Isles at least from the 1500s onwards. Simultaneously, personal charms of many different forms but with analogous powers were employed by several West African societies that were later caught up in the transatlantic slave trade from the 17th through the 19th centuries. During daily interactions between British indentured servants and enslaved Africans in the American colonies, an exchange of belief systems and their material expressions occurred. In the process, by the 18th and early 19th centuries, African Americans routinely began to wear these British types of coin charms (Davidson 2004a) (Figure 1.1).

However, of the 21 perforated coins from 15 graves at Freedman's Cemetery, the one with Burial 913 was the only example to have such cross marks. Shillings, sixpences, and other British minor silver coinage (from the Anglo-Saxon Period to the 18th century) were all minted with an unmistakable cross on their reverse, and in large part it was this cross, along with the symbolic purity of silver,

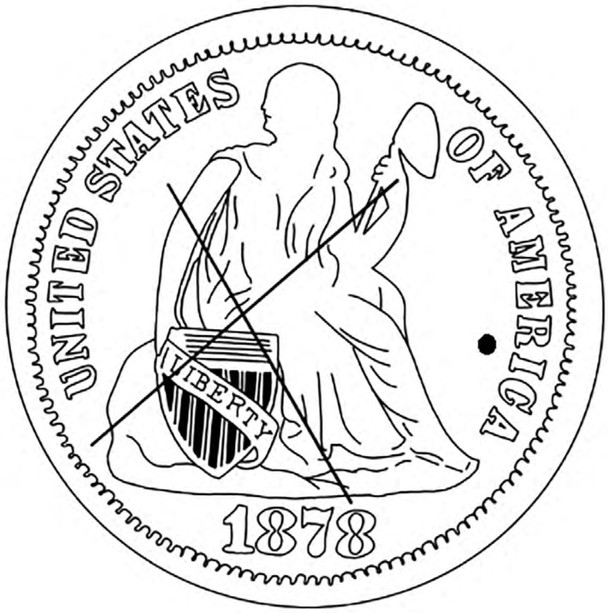

Figure 1.1. 1878 Liberty Seated dime with cross marks, from Burial 913, Freedman's Cemetery, Dallas, TX (Davidson 2004a).

that allowed these mundane currencies to be transformed into sacred talismans. While the introduced cross marks on Burial 913's coin were evocative of British crossed coinage, there was also the possibility that what was being invoked instead was a West African cosmology (Davidson 2004a). Although this little cross marked dime was my entry point into this research problem, it was far from the first artifact with these types of markings recovered archaeologically in the United States. Rather, between the 1970s and early 1990s, historical archaeologists were increasingly recognizing the phenomenon of cross marked objects, recovered from several different African American contexts (e.g., Ferguson 1992; Young 1996; Russell 1997).

The heritage of African cultures, and their unique transformations on foreign shores, is the very basis for the concept of the African Diaspora (Gordon and Anderson 1999:285). Given that, there is value in understanding some of the processes by which these cultures were transformed, and these legacies retained. For over three centuries, Africans on the slaving ships were almost inevitably stripped of everything tangible. Arriving in the New World, what then remained? Memories, and the mental templates of their former homes, villages, and societies. For our purposes what also was retained was a sense of their cosmology. How Africans perceived the world could not be beaten out of them; it could not be brushed aside by the will of a White enslaver. Historically in West Africa, one's cosmology literally defined how you perceive yourself and the wider world; it would give shape to the origins of the universe; it could also help explain the color of the topsoil, how the crops could grow, and where the rain came from (e.g., Parrinder 1961; Ray 1976; Buckley 1985:55–57). It further provided the rationale for the human soul, from birth to its retention after death, and its transition into the next world. These cosmologies were originally contained within an overarching religious hierarchy, a formal belief system of creator gods, lesser deities, and a robust and active spirit world. In Eastern North America, as first-generation Africans aged within enslavement, and had children, these formal belief systems were retained only in fragments, and the many religions of West Africa and their gods were continued instead as a looser system of beliefs and folk practices (Raboteau 1978).

Documenting African American culture has a long tradition that begins with journalists, folklorists, historians and cultural anthropologists of the 19th and early 20th centuries (New York Evening Post 1879; Hearn 1886; Pendleton 1890; Handy 1891:739; Robinson and Walhouse 1893; Cross 1909; Parsons 1923; Puckett 1926; Hurston 1931; Hyatt 1935; Herskovits 1941a; Hyatt 1970a, 1970b, 1973, 1974, 1978). For a century, from the 1870s to the 1970s, the two primary cultural retentions recognized in the United States and believed to be directly derived from the West Coast of Africa were folktales, such as the Br'er Rabbit stories, and music (e.g., "Negro spirituals") (Jackson 1967; Moore 1971; Blassingame 1972:25-32, 49; Smith 1984).

In the introductory remarks to a 1941 acculturation study of the Gullah people of Georgia and South Carolina, William Bascom identified the basic problem that researchers in the African Diaspora have been grappling with since the beginning of the field – the difficulty of identifying specific African cultures in their descendants in the United States (Bascom 1941:43):

> "In dealing with the Negro cultures in South America and the West Indies, the African traits that have been retained are specific enough and numerous enough to make possible the identification of the tribes whose cultures have been involved. But even among the Gullah in the coastal regions of South Carolina and Georgia, where the Negroes have been as isolated as anywhere in the United States, resemblances to specific African tribes are very rare. For the most part the similarities are to those elements which are common to West Africa as a whole – to the common denominators of West African culture – and not to those aspects of culture which are distinctive of the tribes within that area. It is therefore extremely difficult to determine what particular West African cultures have contributed to the present situation."

The White folklorist Newbell Niles Puckett, in the introduction to his 1926 book, *Folk Beliefs of The Southern Negro*, also addressed this problem (Puckett 1926:6-7):

> "In this African hodge-podge the precise ancestry of particular Negro groups is almost irretrievably lost. We know that such tribes as the Mpongive and the Iboes furnished many of the American slaves, at times leaving survivals of their language and customs in the New World. There are many indications that the same is true of the Yorubans and Kroomen and other tribes, but we have no guide as to the quota of slaves furnished by each…For this reason we shall merely indicate some of the more universal African characteristics, putting especial stress upon those which seem to have survived under American contact."

Beginning in the 1970s and 1980s, earnest attempts were made within African Diaspora archaeology to link material objects recovered from North American contexts to African parent cultures. Since archaeologists cannot dig up fragments of folk tales, or the echoes of songs, the focus was directed towards only those actions that could leave a material residue in this world – an object, in its context. One symbol recovered archaeologically on a variety of objects was the cross or X motif, sometimes placed within a circle. Originally recognized on enslaved African made ceramics in South Carolina called colonoware, initial interpretations suggested that the symbol was derived from cultures of southern Ghana (Ferguson 1977). However, after a series of publications by art historians documenting the Bakongo Culture of West Central Africa in the 1970s and 1980s, subsequent archaeological interpretations shifted to this singular African culture (and its underlying belief system) as the exclusive source for these symbolic expressions

(Thompson 1977; Thompson and Cornet 1981; Thompson 1983; Fennell 2000, 2003, 2007a).

The cross symbol is one of the most universal and oldest expressions of cosmology and belief, throughout the world (Healy 1977). How this symbol, in its expression within African American contexts, came to be attributed to just one West Central African cultural system is the focus of this study. First, I want to illuminate the underlying rationale as to why objects, marked with crosses and found in the United States in association with Africans and people of African descent, were routinely attributed to Bakongo culture almost exclusively. Next, I will establish the prolific use of cross symbolism in British Isles folk belief, which itself has roots in pagan traditions that thrived for millennia prior to the arrival of Christianity. The conceptualization and ubiquity of both Christian and pagan cross marks in 17th and 18th century British North America were key syncretic means which aided African cross mark symbolism to take root under enslavement. I then examine the validity of this symbol (and its several variants) within historic Bakongo culture, as well as its questionable reimagining in the late 1960s. After demonstrating the problematic nature of this singular attribution, I will document not one alternative, but rather dozens of pertinent African cultures, belief systems, and their symbolic expressions which can readily serve as explanations for the presence and performance of these cross marked objects in New World contexts.

There is also the potential for Native American interactions with enslaved Africans in the 1600s and 1700s, where native traditions could have influenced the formation of African American beliefs. Although a minor influence overall, compared to the contributions of Euromericans and other West African ethnicities, elements of Eastern tribes did interact with enslaved people in these colonial contexts. Further, many Native American belief systems incorporated the cross as a sacred symbol (e.g., Hally 2007; Mooney 1891:335, 386). While not elaborated upon in this study, these moments of potential cultural syncretism should not be discounted in a larger discussion, and within specific contexts, Indian cultures may have played key roles (e.g., maroon societies; Kokomoor 2009; Weik 2009; Dixon 2020).

1.2. Archaeological Background

Prehistoric archaeology, i.e., the archaeology of Native Americans prior to European contact, has been pursued in North America since the early 19th century (Willey and Sabloff 1980). In contrast, the discipline of historical archaeology has a more recent origin. The first formal archaeological investigations of historic Euromerican sites were undertaken at Colonial Williamsburg in the 1920s, and beginning in 1934 at the site of Jamestown, Virginia – the location of the first sustained English colony in the New World (Ferguson 1992:5; Pykles 2008). Despite these early 20th century explorations, the widespread study of historic period sites through archaeology was slow to occur in the United States. Indeed, the Society for Historical Archaeology, the international organization dedicated to these endeavors, was not founded until 1967.

From the 1930s through the 1960s, most historical archaeology research was focused on Native-American villages or trading posts from the time of European contact (Kelly 1939; Garth 1948; Caywood 1948; Meighan and Heizer 1952; Mattes 1960), or were associated with famous White men (Hagen 1951; Jensen 1968; Singleton 1990:70) and linked with America's colonial past (Ford 1937; Gebhardt 1955; Mounger 1959; Swauger and Hayes 1959; Harrison 1960; Maxwell and Binford 1961; Rutsch and Peters 1977).

As the discipline began to formalize in the 1960s, a focus on the Black experience in the United States was explored initially through enslavement. The first archaeological attempt to find African culture in North America was conducted by Charles Fairbanks at the Kingsley Plantation on Fort George Island, Florida, in 1968 (Fairbanks 1974; Davidson 2017). Inspired by the work of the cultural anthropologist Melville Herskovits (1941a), who documented the retainment of African heritage in the Americas, Fairbanks' 1968 goal of excavating within two of the Kingsley slave cabins (W-1, E-1) was to find evidence of these "Africanisms," or material elements of African culture and belief (Davidson 2017, 2021b, 2021c). However, Fairbanks left the field believing that he had failed at his goal, despite the fact that the majority of Kingsley's enslaved were African born (Fairbanks 1984:2).

In 1969, one year after the Kingsley Plantation excavations, the first archaeological attempt to correlate African American life with African parent cultures did occur, however tentatively, through the interpretation of a singular object – a blue hexagonal-faceted glass bead. It was recovered from a slave cabin at the Rayfield Plantation on Cumberland Island, Georgia, by Robert Ascher and Charles Fairbanks. In the first formal publication on an African American focused plantation archaeology (Ascher and Fairbanks 1971:8), the authors attempted to correlate the Georgia bead with similar examples used in Southern Africa by the Shona people (of modern Zimbabwe, Mozambique, South Africa), the Nsenga people of Petauke (Zambia), and the Mangwato people (South Africa) (Laidler1937:35-36; Schofield 1938:353). Having made these oblique associations, however, Ascher and Fairbanks (1971:8) do not further argue for any direct correlation between the Africans who resided in the Cumberland Island cabin and these *specific* African cultures, saying only that similar blue beads were used "…from the west to the East coast of Africa."

By the 1970s, other explorations of African American culture through archaeology began to increase in frequency. In 1972, John Combes surveyed acreage at the Charles Towne Landing site in South Carolina, and discovered a 19th and 20th century African American cemetery, with individual graves covered with bottles, pressed glass objects, oyster shell, ceramics, kerosene lamps, and other household items. Noting that these decorations were historically associated almost exclusively with Blacks in the South (citing Parsons 1923), Combes recognized that this method of grave decoration had African roots, but considered the matter sufficiently studied within cultural anthropology: “Many of these practices clearly have African origins which is in itself of interest but an area already studied extensively most notably by Herskovits” (Combes 1974:59).

Five years after the initial plantation archaeology research was first published (Ascher and Fairbanks 1971), Samuel Smith made a tentative association between a small, stamped brass object in the shape of a hand within a circle – recovered from enslaved contexts at the Hermitage Plantation in Nashville, Tennessee – with “…African-oriented spiritualist cults” that were present among the enslaved in 19th century Brazil (Smith 1976:210). While Smith erred in his identification of the hand-shaped object as a *figa* associated with creolized African and Catholic belief systems (see Davidson 2014, for a discussion of these so-called “hand charms”), the point is that American archaeologists in the 1970s were beginning to seek out African root cultures to help interpret their archaeological findings.

Similarly, during James Deetz’s excavations at the early 19th century Parting Ways (Massachusetts) site in the 1970s, he and his students uncovered a cobblestone paving area near the remains of the Turner-Burr House, an African American home. At one end of the cobblestones was an assemblage of broken ceramics, while at the other, bottle glass. Although not present in the original 1977 edition of his book, *In Small Things Forgotten*, between 1977 and 1996 (and the book’s revised edition) Deetz consulted with the folklorist John Michael Vlach (1978), who interpreted it either as material used to mark African graves, or as a possible ceremonial space analogous to features among the Akan people of Ghana (Deetz 1996:209).

Deetz (1996:201) in his Parting Ways excavations, also uncovered evidence of a “mud-wall-and-post” structure dating to the late 18th and early 19th centuries, which he believed was reminiscent of West African construction techniques. Similarly, in 1979, Wheaton and Garrow documented wall trench and mud wall construction within the 18th century slave structures at the Yaughan and Curriboo Plantations in South Carolina, and compared this building tradition with architectures that were “...common throughout Africa” (Wheaton et al. 1983:193, citing Guidoni 1978).

In his 1987 overview of the Kings Bay project in Georgia, William Adams (1987:14) speculated that blue beads from slave sites may be linked to a belief in the Evil Eye, carried by Arab traders “...across Africa, and indirectly to America”; while in a contemporaneous study, Eric Klingelhofer (1987) analyzed material from a slave cabin at the Garrison Plantation in Maryland, including a modified glass tumbler base and decanter stopper, interpreting them as possible ritual objects. While not specifying any particular African culture as their derivation, the Garrison cabin also contained two pewter spoons with rectilinear decorations carved into their bowls. Klingelhofer noted their similarity to decorated spoons made by African Maroons in Guyana, South America.

By the early 1990s, archaeologists were no longer content to speak of generalized African traditions found in the New World, but instead were increasingly making correlations between American archaeological material and *specific* African cultures. For example, Anne Yentsch (1991), Douglas Chambers (1992, 1996), and Patricia Samford (2007) hypothesized that the practice of constructing subfloor pits in the earthen floors of slave cabins, ubiquitous in the 18th and 19th centuries in Virginia and other regions of the South and Mid-Atlantic, was a tradition of the Ibo people of southern Nigeria which later took root in the United States (though see Davidson 2021a for an alternative explanation of the subfloor pit phenomenon). Other examples of material culture derived from African American or Afro-Caribbean contexts include tobacco pipes compared to examples from Ghana, Mali and Gambia (Handler 1983; Emerson 1999). Increasingly by the 1980s, a singular African culture – the Bakongo of West Central Africa – became the dominant comparative for American archaeologists interpreting these artifacts and contexts (Figure 1.2). The underlying inspiration for this Bakongo connection did not spring independently from historical archaeology, but rather, archaeologists were directly influenced by the work of African art historians (Thompson and Cornet 1981; Thompson 1983).

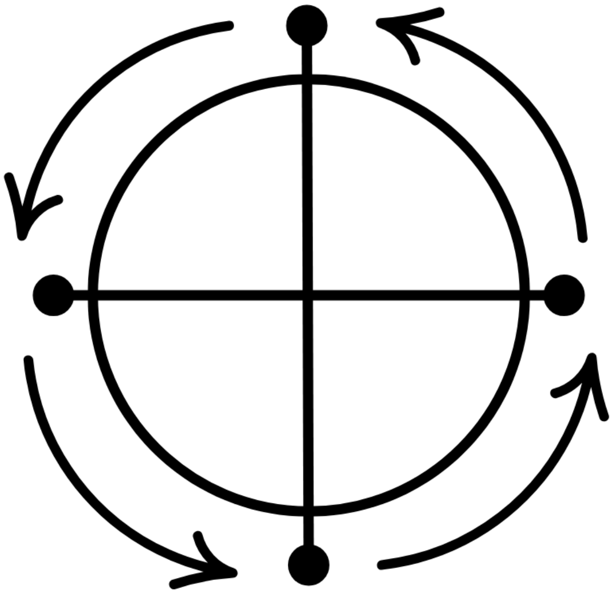

Figure 1.2. One version of the Cross and Circle symbolism associated with the Bakongo Culture of the Congo River Basin, referred to variously in the late 20th century as the “dikenga dia Kongo,” “Tendwa kia Nza-n’ Kongo,” or the Bakongo Cosmogram (Fu-Kiau 1969; Thompson and Cornet 1981:43; Thompson 1983:108).

The Bakongo (Kongo, Kongo-Angolan) people speak variations of the Kikongo language and historically inhabited portions of West Central Africa emanating from the Congo River Basin, in what is now Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Republic of Congo, and Gabon. The greater Bakongo people share not only a language, but also cultural traditions including a system of religious beliefs. Unlike some sub-Saharan cultures (e.g., the Yoruba, Akan), the traditional Bakongo religion did not contain a large pantheon of gods or divinities, but rather a remote creator of the cosmos, Nzambi Mpungu, and lesser spirits (bisimbi) that could be controlled or mediated via rituals performed by priests or spiritual specialists known as banganga (nganga in the singular) (Weeks 1910; Janzen and MacGaffey 1974:1, 34-37; Thompson 1983:103-107).

One aspect of Bakongo culture emphasized by 20th century researchers was its cosmology, symbolized in various forms: “coded as a cross, a quartered circle or diamond, a seashell’s spiral, or a special cross with solar emblems at each ending” (Thompson and Cornet 1981:28). Specifically, the cross (and cross in circle) symbolism has been interpreted to represent key aspects of Bakongo religious belief, and was subsequently mapped onto a number of objects marked with crosses or X’s, and recovered archaeologically from several African and African American contexts in the United States. These objects will be discussed in Chapter 4 (Thompson 1983; Brown and Cooper 1990; Weaver et al. 1993:280; Brown 1994; Thomas 1995:121-122; Young 1996; Franklin 1997a:222-225; Franklin 1997b:85; Russell 1997; Ferguson 1999; Galke 2000; Davidson 2004a; Fennell 2007a; Brown 2011; Furgerson et al. 2011:404; Weaver et al. 2011:200; Agha et al. 2012:369-370; Cole 2013; Botwick et al. 2014:399-400; Brown 2015; Trinkley 2017:19-20; Lucas and Kirk 2023).

1.3. The Bakongo Interpretation

Two arguments have been made to account for the manifestation of possible Bakongo connections in the Western Hemisphere – the demographic realities of the transatlantic slave trade, and specific artifact motifs, attributes and assemblages that could correspond to similar practices and underlying belief systems found historically within the greater Congo River Basin.

The demographic argument (Cosentino and Thompson 1992:60; Ferguson 1992; Fennell 2003) is grounded in the inventories of human cargoes held within specific slave ships of the transatlantic trade – their embarkation points, their final destinations in the Western Hemisphere, and the percentage of enslaved people who arrived in these New World ports specifically from West Central Africa. Fennell cites secondary scholarship of the late 20th century to bolster this argument (e.g., Richardson 1989; Gomez 1998:29), stating that “approximately 26% of enslaved Africans brought to North America came from West Central Africa” (Fennell 2003:11-12). An important point is that 95% of all enslaved in the transatlantic trade were destined for the Caribbean or South America; only approximately 4% of the total number of African captives arrived directly in North America (Eltis and Richardson 2010:17). Similarly, while a vast number of West Central Africans were enslaved overall (circa 5,695,000 individuals), most were exported to South America (Eltis and Richardson 2010:18-19).

The first attempts to calculate the number of Africans who were enslaved and transported to the Americas occurred in the 18th century as the slave trade was ongoing (Edwards 1793:257-262), and in the 19th and early 20th centuries by historians (DuBois 1911; Kuczynski 1936; Curtin 1969:6-7). In the 1920s and 1930s, Elizabeth Donnan (1928, 1930, 1931, 1932, 1935) documented with some precision the number of Africans arriving in the American colonies during the Colonial Period. Melville Herskovits also examined the problem of transatlantic slave importations (Herskovits 1936, 1941a).

The earliest modern comprehensive survey of the human cargo of the transatlantic trade was completed by Philip Curtin in 1969. Curtin (1969:150) calculated that English slave trading efforts between 1690 and 1807 directly transported to North America and the Caribbean approximately 468,000 Africans from “Angola and Mozambique,” which represented 18.2% of the total English efforts. A subsequent 2010 study by David Eltis and David Richardson (2010:13, 15, 17) offers additional refinements to the raw numbers, embarkation points (with implied ethnicities), and destinations of Africans enslaved between 1501 and 1867.

Focusing on just British North America and later the United States, Eltis and Richardson (2010:205) using the Transatlantic Slave Trade Database calculated that 473,000 Africans were directly exported there between 1619 and 1860. Of this number, 23% (n=109,000) were from West Central Africa (some portion of which were Bakongo), while 23.73% were derived from Senegambia (n=112,000), 11.44% from the Sierra Leone region (n=54,000), 5.51% from the Windward Coast (n=26,000), 14.16% from the Gold Coast (n=67,000), 2.33% from the Bight of Benin (n=11,000), and 17.55% from the Bight of Biafra (n=83,000). Finally, just 11,000 individuals (2.33%) are estimated to have been abducted and transported to North America from Southeast Africa and Madagascar. While it is well established that some Africans were originally disembarked in the Caribbean, only later to be relocated to North America (e.g., Herskovits 1941a:43; Berlin 1980:59), those individuals are not enumerated here.

The Transatlantic Slave Trade Database, hosted by Rice University, has continuously updated and refined these data. Accessing the database in 2023, the estimated numbers of Africans imported to North America have not varied; 473,000 is given by Eltis and Richardson (2010:205), while it is rendered as 472,383 in the latest database calculation. Additionally, the gross percentages of regions of embarkation have also not changed.

Although the latest demographic information confirms that West Central Africans (which would include Bakongo people) made up as much as 23% of the total enslaved population which made direct landfall into North America during the slave trade, it must be emphasized this means that three quarters of the Africans were ethnicities other than Bakongo. For example, one study documenting the ethnic identity of Africans in early 19th century Texas found that nearly half of those born in Africa were Yoruba or Ibo (47.2%), while only 4.2% were positively identified as West Central African, which could include Bakongo people (Kelley and Lovejoy 2016:227-228). Similarly, Virginia in the first half of the 18th century was dominated by Africans derived from Calabar in the Bight of Biafra (Ibo, etc.) (Chambers 2005:82). This point was made by Stanley Elkins as early as 1959, in his groundbreaking study on slavery: "Although slaves from many parts of Africa did ultimately find their way to Virginia and the Carolinas, it appears that the greatest numbers of them were drawn from the area that included the Niger Delta, the Gold Coast, and Dahomey" (Elkins 1963:93).

The art historian Robert Farris Thompson was one of the principal architects of the Bakongo model for African derived belief systems in the United States (as discussed in Chapter 5). In a wide-ranging interview with Donald Cosentino, when the possibility of Bakongo cultural expressions having taken root in South Carolina during the slave trade was brought up, Thompson stated (Cosentino and Thompson 1992:60):

> "Numbers are evidence. If we know that 70% of Black South Carolina at a certain time was Kongo-Angola in origin, that is an important point of scholarly entry. I cannot start studying something unless I have a good feeling about numbers. And I would never compare an African item with another item in the New World out of context of known preponderance of numbers."

However, that estimation was erroneous. From the early 1730s to the end of the slave trade in 1807, just 39.6% of Charleston's African captives were derived from "Angola" or "Mozambique," ethnic and regional terms that would have included Bakongo, among other West Central African groups. Additionally, this also means that a majority (circa 60%) of Africans arriving at Charleston's harbor in the 18th century were from other West African cultures (Curtin 1969:157; Eltis and Richardson 2010:216). In a published study that accompanied a Bakongo art installation in 1981 (Chapter 5), Thompson cites a 1977 lecture by Philip Curtin that "…fully one-third of United States Blacks are of Kongo and Angola ancestry" (Thompson and Cornet 1981:32). However, later calculations put that rate at just 23% (Eltis and Richardson 2010:205).

The second set of rationale that allowed the Bakongo culture to be associated with African American contexts by art historians and archaeologists are specific elements of material culture recovered archaeologically, that can resemble objects and contexts within the traditional Bakongo culture and belief system. This is based within three, at times interconnected, symbolic expressions. First is the concept of minkisi (in the singular, "nkisi"), which are objects (usually an assemblage of materials placed together) that can be imbued or inhabited by spirits that help or harm the living (Thompson 1983; MacGaffey 1991:4; Thomas 1995:119-122; Russell 1997; Jones 2000; Baumann 2001; Leone 2005; Boroughs 2013:212-213). As Wyatt MacGaffey (1991:4), an expert in Bakongo traditional religion, explains:

> "There is no good translation for the KiKongo word *nkisi* (pl. minkisi) because no corresponding institution exists in European culture. In Kongo thought a nkisi is a personalised force from the invisible land of the dead; this force has chosen, or been induced, to submit itself to some degree of human control effected through ritual performances."

MacGaffey (1991) continues in this vein, describing how the nkisi expresses itself in the living world through material elements in a ritual involving a spiritual practitioner or "nganga," who evokes it: "the material apparatus includes the musical instruments, the bodies of the nganga and the initiate or patient, articles of costume, cosmetics, and (though not invariably) a focal object, a composite which is, in a narrow sense, the nkisi itself, embodiment of the spiritual entity."

So, while the nkisi may be a spirit engendered into the world of the living, its dwelling place in this human world is also referred to as a nkisi, or as MacGaffey (1991:5) calls it, the "nkisi-object." These physical objects can take various forms, and it is this focal point – an object or group of objects – that many historical archaeologists argued have been recovered in various guises and from numerous sites of African enslavement and emancipation in North America (Brown and Cooper 1990; Young 1996; Wilkie 1997). MacGaffey's (1991:5) definition is the closest to the source of the matter:

> "The nkisi-object is thought of as a container for the nkisi-force. Often its "body" (nitu) is a gourd, a bag, a bark box, a pot or a snail shell, but it may well be a wooden figure to which "medicines" (bilongo) have been added. Without the medicines the container is nothing; if they fall off, the nkisi has been neutralized, polluted or desecrated (swnuka). The composite as a whole contains the following elements. Material such as grave dirt, kaolin (white clay) or stones, taken from the place where the spirit in question abides, metonymically incorporates the spirit in the nkisi."

The second set of cultural practices that have been associated with Bakongo culture are objects placed on graves in the American South, such as shells, bottles, and ceramics; or bottles placed in trees, which are typically interpreted as charms (often traps for evil), and reminiscent of West Central African (and often specifically Bakongo) practices (Puckett 1926:105; Combes 1974; Thompson 1983; Fenn 1985; Creel 1988:316-317; Nichols 1989; Creel 1990:88-89; Thompson 1993; Jamieson 1995:51; Heath and Bennett 2000; Davidson 2004b; Davidson and McIlvoy 2021).

One of the earliest descriptions of these types of objects on graves in the United States is traced to Telfair Hodgson, who was the daughter of a Georgia planter. In 1907, she remembered what was occurring on her father's plantation in the 1850s, which included how the enslaved, whom she stated were straight from Africa and spoke only "Gullah," marked their graves: "Negro graves were always decorated with the last article used by the departed, and broken pitchers, and broken bits of colored glass were considered even more appropriate than the white shells from the beach nearby" (Torian 1943:352). E. J. Glave, a White explorer who worked with Henry Morton Stanley in Central and East Africa in the late 19th century, noted versions of this mortuary practice among the Bakongo (Glave 1891:835): "In other localities the natives mark the final resting places of their friends by ornamenting their graves with crockery, empty bottles, old cooking pots, etc., all of which articles are rendered useless by being cracked or perforated with holes."

The third and final cultural tradition believed to be derived from the Bakongo is the practice of cross mark symbolism, and for this study in particular, those objects found in African American contexts and marked with a cross, or a cross and circle, motif (Thompson and Cornet 1981; Thompson 1983; Ferguson 1992; Brown 1994; Thomas 1995:119-122; Young 1996; Russell 1997; Ferguson 1999; Fennell 2003; Davidson 2004a; Fennell 2007a; Ewen 2011; Joseph 2011) (discussed in Chapter 4; Table 4.1).

Within West Central Africa and among the Bakongo, the use of the cross (and cross and circle) symbolism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was documented by several different writers, with this use often grounded within a religious or supernatural milieu. These symbols could be employed in a variety of contexts: crosses were painted on houses (Johnston 1908b:811; Johnston 1910b:811); painted, tattooed, or scarified on their bodies (Reade 1873a:230; Schweinfurth 1873a:544-545; Schweinfurth 1873b:105; Johnston 1910b:562, 567, 570); carved or painted on portable objects (Schweinfurth 1873b:9; Johnston 1910b:770; Weeks 1914:292, figure opposite 188); marked on the ground with dug trenches, or marked in chalk, and placed in front of altars and shrines, or marked on the ground for the taking of oaths (Dennett 1906:225; Bittremieux 1936:37; Thompson and Cornet 1981:28). Crosses were also incorporated into personal charms (Tucker 1940:190); placed on funerary mannequins (Thompson and Cornet 1981); and copper ingots in the shapes of crosses were used as currency (Livingstone 1858:357; Johnston 1910b:796; Burton 1961:160). Variations of the symbol also appear within rock art in the Congo area dating back centuries (Thompson and Cornet 1981:28; Heimlich 2016).

While cross marks were documented within Bakongo culture of the late 19th and early 20th centuries and explained in general terms, the underlying rationale for their specific meanings were only delineated by late 20th century writers, to symbolize, among other things – the crossroads as a nexus for the supernatural, the four moments of the sun (sunrise, noon, sunset, midnight), and a metaphorical map depicting the locations of god, mankind, and the spirit world. Unnamed in 19th century accounts, this symbol is later described by various terms, including the Bakongo cosmogram (Chapter 5) (Fu-Kiau 1969; Thompson and Cornet 1981:27-28; Thompson 1983:108-110).

It is certainly possible that Bakongo people and their New World descendants invoked aspects of their belief system under enslavement, and in so doing created some of the features or isolated artifacts that have been described archaeologically. However, many cultures of Central and West Africa, also caught up in the transatlantic slave trade and transported to eastern North America, maintained similar beliefs and identical symbols, and shared many of the same material elements towards analogous goals of manipulating supernatural forces to aid the living in this world (Parrinder 1961; Pobee 1976; Ray 1976; Mbiti 1990; Anderson 2008:31). To better understand the context for these and later interpretations, however, it is first necessary to offer a thorough grounding for the historical basis of the retention of African belief in the United States generally.