Archaeology and resistance history in the Caribbean

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Abstract

Archaeological and ethnological evidence from the site of Efutu in Ghana is used to indicate the African cultural background of people imported into the Caribbean for enslavement in historical times. Historical, oral and ethnographic data are cited as bases for identifying the characteristics that enabled the enslaved people in the Caribbean successfully to establish independent communities and to put up a prolonged resistance against colonial powers. The heritage of Maroon communities in Jamaica is then discussed in order to identify continuities and discontinuities in African traditions among Caribbean societies.

Résumé

Les témoignages archéologiques et ethnologiques du site d'Efutu au Ghana servent à donner des indications sur le passé culturel africain des gens importés aux Antilles comme esclaves aux temps historiques. Des données historiques, orales et ethnographiques sont citées comme bases pour l'identification des caractéristiques ayant permis aux esclaves des Antilles de parvenir à établir des communautés indépendantes et d'opposer une résistance prolongée aux puissances coloniales. L'héritage des communautés d'esclaves marrons en Jamaïque est ensuite discuté afin d'identifier les continuités et discontinuités des traditions africaines parmi les sociétés caraïbes.

Introduction

This paper identifies the character of the cultural backgrounds of resistance groups in the Caribbean using archaeological, historical and ethnographic evidence from the ancient site of Efutu on the central coastland of Ghana in West Africa and from the sites of Nanny Town and Accompong in Jamaica. It is recognised that traditions associated with 'Maroons', the popularly acknowledged main resistance groups in the Caribbean, display strong cultural continuities with African and Amerindian societies while at the same time forging new cultural forms through what has been termed 'creolization'. A much stronger generalization is that Maroon reliance on African traditions and their adaptations to
cultural elements from Europe, Asia and the Americas enlivened their resistance to plantation slavery and enriched their independent communities. The evidence of Maroon heritage in the Caribbean confirms that both accommodation and conflict characterise processes of cultural continuity and innovation.

The evidence from Efutu, as well as historical reports, presents characteristic features of African traditions from which the enslaved came, while sites in the Caribbean provide evidence for identifying continuities or otherwise in those cultural practices. It is this identification that determines the linkages and transformation processes as well as newly established lifeways. Although this line of analysis and interpretation will be followed in this paper, it is impossible to discuss here all the issues involved. The paper will end by emphasizing that cultural continuity and innovation are more complementary than has generally been acknowledged. The paper emphasizes the need for collaboration between scholars in order to identify the processes involved in the cultural transformations that characterize Caribbean cultures.

The quincentenary of Columbus's voyages has attracted a disproportionate attention towards recent Caribbean history. In fact, archaeological research confirms that Caribbean prehistory dates back several thousand years (Kozlowski 1974, 1980; Rouse 1992; Rouse and Allaire 1978). However, the Caribbean past continues to be plagued by a lack of objective analytical and chronological schemes through which we might build a meaningful picture. Added to this deficiency is the uneven coverage of elements involved in Caribbean cultural evolution. For example, the achievements of freedom-fighting groups such as the Maroons are either ignored or, where mentioned, are viewed negatively or branded as isolated behaviour of rebel groups. Similarly, the roles of women are relegated to the background with women considered as supporting rather than actively participating groups (Bush 1990; Goveia 1965). Furthermore, analytical approaches that attempt to identify roots, continuities or transformations are as yet too simplistic to support any meaningful conclusions.

In recent years the emerging complexity of the archaeological record in the Caribbean (Rouse 1986, 1992; Drewet 1991; Singleton 1985) has generated the need for an improved chronological resolution (Agonsah 1993), as well as for analysis and interpretations based on a wide variety of material. Archaeological and historical evidence shows the mosaic pattern of cultural transformation in the Caribbean both before and after Columbus. This cultural complexity originates from both sides of the Atlantic.

Of the many issues studied or analysed by researchers on the African diaspora, the search for roots or origins, cultural identity, continuity, and resistance stand out prominently. However, owing to the need to obtain more objective as well as cross-culturally applicable results (Cruxent and Rouse 1969), the strategies for collecting data are not limited to one side of the Atlantic for any one period of time, giving such studies a two-face character which looks simultaneously at both the past and the present. Similarly, all factors contributing to Caribbean cultural development should be considered on an equal basis. Refined technological means are now available which facilitate use of complex data. This paper demonstrates this new outlook.

Almost two decades ago, Merrick Posnansky introduced me to both African and Caribbean archaeology and emphasized the importance of the latter in the study of African culture. In 1984, he wrote: