

RETHINKING ETHNIC MARKERS IN MATERIAL-CULTURE ANALYSIS

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Inherent in studies of ethnicity is the assumption that ethnicity is somehow visible in the material culture and can be read from the archaeological record. While beliefs, cultural attitudes, and value are not directly exhibited in material culture, symbolic expression of ethnicity, in an effort to maintain cultural identity, may be. Artifacts then, at least theoretically, can reflect cultural identity. Such "ethnic markers" can be used to isolate ethnicity, interpret changing cultural values, and analyze the process of acculturation. Recent Æ investigations have revealed ambiguities in isolating "ethnic markers." This paper explores the strengths and weaknesses of relying on such markers to reveal the ethnicity of site occupants.

As summarized in Edward Staski's 1990 article, anthropologists, historians, social scientists, and archaeologists alike have pursued a wide range of issues relating to the study of ethnicity. Historical archaeologists have contributed substantially to this research and have shown that patterns of ethnicity are visible in the material culture, particularly amongst certain ethnic groups. Notable are Chinese, African-Americans, and Hispanics, who "exhibit the behavior and cultural distinctions of their ethnic identity, as well as the physical distinction of their race, and as a result are easily recognizable minorities" (Staski 1990:125). Because they are faced with discrimination and prejudice, they are frequently segregated from the mainstream culture within the community and, correspondingly, tend to be highly visible in the archaeological record.

Yet other groups, particularly European immigrants (Staski 1990:125) have received little attention from archaeologists. In 1982, McGuire noted this potential when he wrote that "The history of the United States is in large part a chronicle of ethnic relations. This history reveals that American society has served not so much as a melting pot, reducing ethnic differences to a bland soup, but more as a crucible separating groups and creating an enormous diversity." He concludes that "All ethnic groups have changed in this crucible but not in the same way" (1982:159).

We do not intend to explore all aspects of research relevant to ethnicity but would like to focus on the visibility of "ethnic markers" among Euro-American immigrants in the archaeological record. During the CalPERS Headquarters Expansion Project in Sacramento, the Æ team researched a middle-class community occupied from the 1870s through the 1910s. Although this neighborhood was ethnically diverse, the artifact assemblage was surprisingly homogeneous. The most visible ethnic markers derived from faunal

and botanical assemblages. In stark contrast, Æ staff also analyzed artifacts from San Bernardino Chinatown. Here ethnicity was clearly visible in gaming pieces, opium paraphernalia, imported ceramics, and Asian coins. It is around these collections that our discussion will focus.

We posited in the research design for CalPERS (Nettles et al. 2002) that first-generation immigrants would resist change in certain segments of their daily life – notably family, social, national, ethnic, and religious aspects. These immigrants would hold steadfast to traditional values and practices, while selectively adapting to segments of modern society. Theoretically at least, symbols of ethnicity would be visible and would enable analysts to isolate expressions of ethnicity through the study of material culture.

It was hypothesized that ethnicity influencing consumer selection would be revealed in the artifact assemblages. It was further speculated that visible ethnic markers would be closely linked to consumer behavior and social status. Our findings are in direct contrast to Cheek and Friedlander's (1990:34-60) conclusions about urban land use by freed slaves who moved to Washington D.C. between the 1880s and the 1940s. They conclude that "ethnic-based differences" in the movement of former slaves could be isolated archaeologically, "while economic-based differences could not." Cheek and Friedlander found that "where the economic variables can be controlled, difference based on ethnic behavior rather than income will characterize archaeological assemblages from [these] black households" (Cheek and Friedlander 1990:34). Little and Kassner (2001:63), in re-evaluating the movement of these same freedman, challenged that conclusion when stating: "Consideration of 'ethnic processes' forces the realization that there is a great deal of variability within the creation and maintenance of ethnic groups. Group structure and history vary

according to cultural context and economic, political, social and religious circumstances.”

They stressed the importance of considering the local historical context. Little and Kassner (2001:63) challenged that “Ethnicity, like ethnic groups themselves, is a changing construct,” and that archaeological methods must change as well, if there is any hope of identifying ethnicity in the archaeological record.

Similarly, Staski (1990:132) concludes his article with the hypothesis that “consumer behaviors correlate with degrees of ethnic identity.” He proposed that “The acquisition of certain forms and styles of materials, and not others, occurs because of complex interaction of numerous variables besides ethnicity. Included are economic level, status, the availability of goods, family size and life cycles, religious and political affiliation, and individual preference.”

Recognizing this complex interrelationship, it is imperative when evaluating artifact collections for “ethnic markers” that evidence of symbolic expression of social status and economic level also be considered. The clear contention in this literature is that archaeologists can successfully identify ethnicity, cultural values, and degrees of acculturation by studying ceramics, architecture, faunal assemblages, and land-use patterns.

Further, we suggest that ethnic markers are variously expressed in the archaeological record depending on the clarity of boundary between ethnic group(s) and the social mechanism in play. At the risk of over-simplifying this discussion, it appears that where boundaries are clearly defined, ethnic markers are highly visible. Where acculturation and or assimilation has occurred, boundaries blur and ethnic markers become less distinct.

Because the Chinese were faced with discrimination and prejudice, they were frequently segregated from the mainstream culture. Ethnic markers are potential signifiers of this isolation. In looking at the artifact assemblages from San Bernardino Chinatown, “ethnic markers” are visible for all to see. Present were traditional ceramic patterns, as well as imported food containers and dried fish (Costello et al. 2004). Here, the boundary between dominant culture and the Chinese appears to be forced through segregation, limited job opportunities, and restricted immigration. Chinese immigrants elected to limit interaction with the mainstream culture. Until nearly the mid-twentieth century, Chinese immigrants had no intention of residing permanently in the US. They successfully maintained a traditional lifestyle and were

active in an import trade with their homeland. Some participation in the mainstream market is, however, apparent at San Bernardino, where non-traditional meat cuts and medicine products were acquired locally (Costello et al. 2004). In contrast, at CalPERS, an ethnically diverse community occupied largely by first-generation immigrants, ethnic markers are blurred, suggesting rapid acculturation.

The CalPERS project involved the development of two blocks within Sacramento (Nettles et al. 2003). This city possesses a particularly diverse ethnic heritage because of the role it played in the California gold rush. When gold rush dreams went unrealized, would-be prospectors were forced to seek employment in the city. These immigrants did not concentrate in the urban ghettos as occurred on the east coast (Brienes et al. 1981; Pierini 1984), but settled in mixed neighborhoods. By 1900, this trend reversed as newly arriving immigrants settled in isolated enclaves. Two such neighborhoods, a Portuguese district and a Japanese community, bordered the project area (Hardwick 1986:54-55).

Even though ethnic neighborhoods lay nearby, the study area featured a diverse ethnic population. Hardwick (1986) characterized this portion of Sacramento as amongst the most heterogeneous in the city in the 1900s. Historical research demonstrates that this cultural mixing occurred as early as the 1880s, when the project area was home to immigrants from at least 10 different countries (Ireland, Portugal, Germany, Italy, Canada, Mexico, Chile, England, Austria, and Hungary). Furthermore, American-born residents lived side-by-side with these groups throughout the history of the area. This mixture of ethnic populations provides an opportunity to explore group dynamics in a diverse ethnic environment and to determine if ethnic markers are visible in individual artifact assemblages, in an effort to examine changing cultural values and the degree of acculturation.

Today we re-evaluate three of the recovered features. Feature 1024, a barrel privy, was used by the Italian Lombardis, who lived in the project area from 1870 to 1906. The privy has a “TPQ” of 1891 (TPQ, short for terminus post quem, is the point in time after which a deposition must have been made, as determined by the production dates of artifacts present in the archaeological feature). The Martins, a large immigrant family from Portugal, arrived here between 1895 and 1906. Their privy, Feature 1001, yielded a TPQ of 1905. Finally, Feature 1025, a privy used by the Henderson family was closed around 1906. Henderson, an American, lived in the neighborhood with his Mexican wife from 1900 to 1906.

Documentary and artifactual evidence suggests that each of these families were at approximately the same social and economic level, and while not wealthy, they aspired to be fashionable and retained Victorian trappings. Upon analysis and interpretation of the recovered artifacts, we realized that we could not answer many of our ethnicity-based research questions. Surprisingly, the features attributed to ethnic households looked almost identical to those of their American and foreign-born neighbors.

The exception to the homogeneity of artifact assemblages were the faunal and floral remains. Staski and McGuire, as well as other researchers, have identified foodways as one of the most sensitive and enduring indicators of ethnicity. There was evidence to support this theory in the CalPERS neighborhood. Examination of the artifact assemblages indicates that the primary meat consumed by all three families, as well as neighbors of American descent, was beef (Gust 2003). They also consumed about the same amounts of chicken and fish. However, differences appear when other, minor meat constituents are examined. The Lombardis consumed jackrabbit and deer, and the Hendersons ate quail, suggesting that these families were either hunting to supplement their diet or were selecting favored foods at the market. The Hendersons' diet was composed of more than 20 % pork, far more than the other families. Pork is a staple in the Mexican diet, and its prominence in this case may indicate that Mrs. Henderson continued the traditional use of this meat. The Martins and Lombardis consumed more mutton than the Hendersons, possibly in favorite dishes from the Mediterranean.

The Lombardis' and the Martins' privies also yielded botanical data (Popper 2002). Both features contained seeds from figs, strawberries, tomatoes, blackberries, elderberries, and grapes, although not in similar frequencies. The Lombardis' privy contained more fig, tomato, and grape seeds. The abundance of tomatoes may be linked to the Lombardis' preference for Italian cuisine, while the greater quantity of grapes most certainly was evidence of Lombardi's operation of his winery. The Martins' privy contained a much greater variety of fruits and vegetables, including cucumber/melon, winter squash, cherries, and blueberries, as well as those mentioned above. This difference may be explained in various ways. The Portuguese were well known for gardening, and these vegetables may all have been home-grown, as canning supplies were abundant in this assemblage. Another possibility is that the Martin daughters, who held jobs at a local cannery, had access to surplus fruits and vegetables. Additionally,

the Martin and Lombardi privies were the only sources of chili-pepper seeds in the neighborhood. The Martins' privy contained 14 seeds, while 220 such seeds were recovered from the Lombardi feature. The presence of this spice likely is related to preparation of ethnic foods. Further differences are seen in the condition of the seeds. While 87 % of the Martins' chili seeds were fragments, all of the Lombardis' seeds were whole, indicating differences in traditional food preparation or culturally based taste preferences (Popper 2002). Although these families were mainly consuming what their American neighbors ate, including large proportions of beef, cultural preferences may be reflected in alternate meat choices and selection of spices and fruits.

The homogenizing of culture was also reflected in archival records. The interconnectedness of the neighborhood is visible through intermarriages and legal-age children boarding with parents and neighbors. Another socializing factor in the community was the Lincoln School that operated between 1856 and the 1960s adjacent to the CalPERS project area. A dominant local institution, the Lincoln School curriculum introduced children of diverse ethnic background to American values and lifestyle, and at the same time taught the native-born pupils to accept those from other cultures. One student recalled:

The school was not so much a melting pot as a griddle where Miss Hopley and her helpers armed knowledge into us and roasted racial hatreds out of us. At Lincoln, making us into Americans did not mean scrubbing away what made us originally foreign [Peak 1999].

Despite the variety of ethnic groups residing in the Lincoln School neighborhood, ethnic markers, as well as ethnic boundaries, appear to be blurred, if not invisible. This is likely the result of many forces at work reforming the lives, attitudes, values, and preferences of these residents. Most had come to America with the intention to stay and establish better lives. Enrollment in the Lincoln School taught children of immigrants to accept each other – lessons likely talked about at home. In this neighborhood there was no dominant culture to which to acquiesce, and no need to establish stark boundaries between ethnically different neighbors. It is only through a combined research approach including material-culture studies that groups dynamics can be examined to better understand the contribution each ethnicity made to the “crucible” in creating the enormous diversity observed by McGuire (1982:159) and others.

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