

5-2009

## Subfloor Pits as Shrines: A Critical Look at the Creation of a Creolized Religious Society by the Enslaved of the Chesapeake During the Colonial Period

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**Subfloor Pits as Shrines:  
A Critical Look at the Creation of a Creolized Religious Society by the Enslaved of the  
Chesapeake During the Colonial Period**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Bachelors of Arts in Anthropology from  
The College of William and Mary

by

Jessica Lee Unger

Accepted for \_\_\_\_\_  
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

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**May 5, 2009**



### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to take this opportunity to show my gratitude to those who helped me with the writing of this thesis, especially my committee members. Thanks to my advisor, Frederick Smith, for his support and patience, and for proposing new and interesting ways to approach archaeological evidence. I would also like to thank Marley Brown III for sparking my interest in historical archaeology and guiding me through the theories and issues in the field today. Special thanks to David Holmes for his instruction in solid writing style and for encouraging me to see the spiritual in the everyday. I would also like to express appreciation to Ywone Edwards-Ingram for her guidance on subfloor pit literature, as well as to Kelly Ladd-Kostro for taking the time to teach me about artifacts of the colonial period. Finally, to all those at Mount Vernon who inspired me to pursue my passions, including Esther White and Amelia Chisholm, thank you for the support.

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## INTRODUCTION

Subfloor pits, the intriguing archaeological features found on countless sites, have proven themselves to be sources of intense debate and discussion. These features are particularly interesting to historical archaeologists of the American colonial period, who analyzed their significance in relationship to the unique social conditions of the time. Subfloor pits have been found on European sites, and the technology used in building those features is reflected in the creation of similar pits in North America by European settlers. Native Americans also engaged in subfloor pit building, filling small shallow holes with personal items. However, it is the use of subfloor pits by enslaved African Americans that has captured the attention of many historical archaeologists. Historical accounts trace the use of pits by African Americans back to African antecedents. In the mid nineteenth century a sea captain, Hugh Crow, documented Africans burying valuables under the floors of their homes (Crow 1830:158). Even though these features are not distinctively African, the ways that enslaved people used them reveal a great deal about a lifestyle that was severely limited both in material and in expression. The prevalence of pits on slave sites (especially in the Chesapeake) is evidence of the centrality of these features to enslaved communities.

Researchers within the field of historical archaeology have turned to sites of the enslaved as sources of an intriguing dialogue on power relations. The perseverance of identity within the dehumanizing conditions of slavery is a tribute to the strength of the human spirit. The presence of subfloor pits shows agency on the part of the enslaved, and their ability to create spaces which were distinctly their own. Even though enslavers were sometimes aware of the existence of subfloor pits and fellow enslaved people almost assuredly knew of their location, the idea of having a private space was still essential. For

these reasons, the study of subfloor pits on African American sites has become an important topic within the discipline of historical archaeology.

Subfloor pits are recognized archaeologically as dark stains within the subsoil, which indicate that dirt was moved under this location. Pits are usually found within larger structures, typically identified through the presence of postholes or other construction methods that have left an architectural footprint (see Figure 1 for image of subfloor pits). Unless the slave quarters burned down or were hastily abandoned for some other reason, any subfloor pits present were often filled as trash pits before residents moved to a new dwelling. Archaeologists determine whether or not pits were filled with trash or “secondary fill” based on the completeness of the artifacts present. If the soil within the pit contained “(a) small, highly fragmented pieces of pottery and glass, (b) small percentages of ceramic and glass mends within and between subfloor pits, and (c) small percentages of reconstructable ceramic and glass vessels,” then it most likely represents secondary fill (Samford 2007: 119). If this was the case, Patricia Samford (2007: 118) noted that “the original functions of most of the pits will be obscured.”

If the artifacts found within a subfloor pit are more intact, they could possibly be “de facto refuse.” Michael Schiffer (1987:89) described de facto refuse as “the tools, facilities, structures, and other cultural materials that, although still usable (or reusable), are left behind when an activity area is abandoned.” In the context of subfloor pits, the presence of de facto refuse suggests that the artifacts found were those which had occupied the space during the span of its use. Therefore de facto refuse is extremely helpful in determining what a pit’s function was, and how residents put it to use in on a day to day basis.

Other archaeologists have carefully considered these challenges in establishing how subfloor pits were used. Their assessments covered a broad scope of interpretations, and each theory contributed to a better understanding of these unique features. The history of subfloor pit analysis includes significant contributions from prominent archaeologists over the last several decades. Patricia Samford's recent publication, "Subfloor Pits and the Archaeology of Slavery in Colonial Virginia," has added to today's understanding of various subfloor pit functions. Samford provided an intriguing new insight into the use of these features as West-African inspired shrines, and her research was well grounded in several examples. However, her analysis was narrowly focused on the manifestation of spiritual practices specific to a certain African ethnic group. Although the Igbo people of Nigeria constituted a significant portion of the population in the colonial Chesapeake, people from many other regions were enslaved there as well. Samford suggested that the large percentage of Igbo people represented in the slave trade would have maintained their traditions, and subsequently would have had a profound effect on the cultural traditions of the other enslaved groups in the colony. The proposal of a virtual one-to-one cultural transference from Igboland to Virginia, based on Herskovitsian models of Africanisms, is outdated and not reflective of many of today's creolization models. In addition, the suggestion that Igbo traditions would dominate other ethnic practices belittles the cultural strength of those groups and fails to give them due credit for their part in the creation of an African American society.

In this paper I will outline the proposed functions for subfloor pits, culminating in Samford's analysis. Then, following in the vein of Samford's work, I will focus on the religious potential for subfloor pits and look at the historical antecedents for shrines in West African cultures. By looking at slave trade accounts I will determine roughly what

percentage of different African cultural groups made up the population of Virginia's enslaved during the periods discussed. Finally, I will analyze these data in the context of creolization theory, and determine if the artifacts found on sites of the enslaved in Virginia reflect spiritual patterns from West Africa, and if these patterns demonstrate the effects of creolization within the context of enslaved life. I believe that Patricia Samford's argument of subfloor pits functioning as shrines is an intriguing new way to look at these features, but by making her research too Igbo-centric she missed the opportunity to explore how different African groups came together in Virginia to create unique cultural communities. It is my intention in this paper to analyze the religious traditions of various African groups, and show how these traditions manifested themselves in the material record of the enslaved peoples of Virginia.

## **CHAPTER ONE: PREVIOUS ANALYSIS OF SUBFLOOR PITS**

The challenge in determining the functions of subfloor pits has led many prominent historical archaeologists to advance their own theories about subfloor pit use. The development of ideas about subfloor pit function mirrored many of the theoretical developments that occurred within the field of historical archaeology as well. From the famed Ivor Noël Hume's initial understandings of subfloor pits to Patricia Samford's recent work, archaeological perceptions about these features have taken many interesting turns over the past fifty years.

One of the first historical archaeologists to locate subfloor pits and comment on their use was Ivor Noël Hume. He acknowledged the use of pits as root cellars by European settlers, ranging from basic subterranean holes to well planned units that were "revetted with

vertical timbers, wooden sheathing to the sides, and with board flooring” (Hume 1968:132). Interestingly, although he was able to identify these features in the context of European settlers, he was unable to recognize the similar application of this technology on sites of the enslaved.

William Kelso, Ivor Noël Hume’s student and one of the leaders of a new generation of historical archaeologists, was one of the first to recognize subfloor pits for their association with the enslaved. Kelso even went so far as to point to any evidence of a subfloor pit as a marker that the location was occupied by enslaved people. Kelso (1984: 105) referred to the features as “root cellars,” but his interpretation of their use was not limited to this sole function. In his initial proposal that they were used as root cellars, he cited the fact that “blacks likely did the cooking and...the cellars were ostensibly for root preservation.” He also maintained that root cellars were built without the knowledge of most enslavers, and consequently were “the only place for a slave to conceal the evidence of pilfered food” (Kelso 1984:201). This suggestion that pits were “hidey holes” fit well with many contemporary theories that arose in historical archaeology proposing that enslaved peoples used space and materials to resist the authority of enslavers. Kelso finally posited that the use of pits might have been guided by superstitious beliefs. He argued that enslaved people might have believed that the possession of personal items by an enemy would enable them to cast spells. Following this logic, people might be hesitant to throw “personal trash out where it might possibly fall into the wrong hands” (Kelso 1984:202). This could be a possible explanation for why so many small personal items ended up in pits. In his analysis of subfloor pits Kelso put forth many different theories for their use, but he was most

groundbreaking in his recognition of these features for their importance on sites of the enslaved.

Maria Franklin, a historical archaeologist working in the 1990's, proposed new interpretations of many of Kelso's theories. Franklin (1997:92) built on Kelso's understandings that subfloor pits potentially served as root cellars for preserving food, as well as "hidey holes," arguing that archaeologists should "broaden root cellar function within African-American contexts to include the storage and protection of personal possessions, and for concealing 'taken' items in some instances." She added to the discussion by theorizing that nuances in archaeological evidence can show the different functions of pits. Size, location, and artifact content helped guide her interpretation of how pits might have been used. For example, she mentioned two features that "seemed too small to be used as space for storing root crops and may have functioned as personal storage 'chests'" (Franklin 1997:92). Franklin (1997:92) also suggested that pits placed near a hearth may have served as root cellars, because "warmth from the fire would keep root vegetables from freezing." As a result, Franklin contended that larger hearth front pits most likely functioned as root cellars, while smaller pits were used as storage units or "hidey holes." Similar theories proposed in the 1990's would come to have a profound effect on how future archaeologists would interpret subfloor pits.

Fraser Neiman developed yet another way to look at these features. By analyzing how people interacted within the context of a quarter, Neiman (1997) concluded that pits were used as "safety deposit boxes." This meant subfloor pits were used to create a personal space for people in a strictly controlled environment. As relationships between members of a quarter changed, the need for private storage spaces changed as well. With the transforms in

plantation economic structures, a shift in housing for the enslaved occurred. As more enslaved people began living with close family members instead of with large groups of unrelated individuals, the presence of subfloor pits dramatically diminished. Neiman (1997) hypothesized that this change shows how personal storage needs decreased when the enslaved began to live with individuals they trusted.

In her recent addition to the corpus of knowledge on subfloor pits, Patricia Samford posited an interesting new approach to subfloor pits: that the enslaved sometimes employed these features as West African inspired shrines. Samford highlighted several sites in colonial Virginia as examples of how enslaved communities might have used subfloor pits as shrines. Her study sites, Utopia Quarter Period II, Utopia Quarter Period III, Utopia Quarter Period IV, Kingsmill Quarter, and Carter's Grove Quarter are all located in the Williamsburg area, and the close relationship between the owners of the land would have facilitated a connection in the enslaved communities as well – with the enslaved workers moving between locations. These conditions created an ideal study group, which Samford used to solidify her argument. The presence of over one hundred subfloor pits between the five sites provided Samford with ample evidence to discuss the significance of these features, as well as to contribute her own theory about their use.

Taking into consideration the previous discussions of subfloor pits, Samford proposed three possible explanations for the prevalence of these features on slave sites. Following Maria Franklin's interpretative method, Samford looked at the sizes of pits, their location inside the dwellings, and the artifact content of the pits in order to determine the function of these features. In addition to the traditional interpretations of subfloor pits as root cellars or personal storage areas, she also suggested that they might have served as West-African style

shrines. The breadth of information available from Utopia, Kingsmill, and Carter's Grove provided Samford with examples of all three types of pits. She observed at the five sites a degree of patterning and "location-based differences in level of pit repair, with hearth-front pits showing more evidence of maintenance through repair and re-cutting than pits in corners or along walls" (Samford 2007:111). She hypothesized that the level of repair required for hearth front pit was due to increased foot traffic over these areas. These types of pits continued to be built, despite their structural weakness, because they served a different function from other pits found along walls or in corners. Samford went on to describe how a pit's placement, as well as the artifacts found inside, could help determine which of several proposed functions a pit might serve.

### **Subfloor Pits as Root Cellars**

Samford, like others before her, acknowledged a practical use of subfloor pits as root cellars. The construction of a subterranean pit for food storage served two purposes: to place food out of sight and to keep it at an appropriate temperature for storage. In the case of African American slave sites in the Chesapeake, the primary food that needed long term storage under these conditions was sweet potatoes. Proximity to a hearth would be advantageous to the storage of sweet potatoes, not only for the temperature regulation, but also for the dryness of air. Samford hypothesized that most hearth-front pits would have therefore been used as root cellars, and used several documentary sources to support her argument. The preferences for sweet potatoes among the enslaved of Virginia, as well as the basic conditions needed for sweet potato storage, lend support to her conclusion. In addition, nineteenth century slave narratives spoke about the use of subfloor pits for food storage. These strong lines of evidence suggested that at least some subfloor pits were used as root

cellars, and that such pits were often located in close proximity to hearths. Data from Samford's study sites supported these conclusions, and these patterns can most likely be applied to other sites of the enslaved across the Chesapeake.

### **Subfloor Pits as Personal Storage Areas**

Samford took another proposed function of subfloor pits and reanalyzed it in context of her study sites. She agreed with many of her predecessors that pits could possibly have functioned as personal storage areas or "safety deposit boxes." In particular, she asserted that pits located along the walls or in corners of slave quarters had high potential to serve this purpose. During the early period of Virginia slavery, individuals lived in larger quarters which were not arranged according to family structures. Samford, drawing on the work of Neiman, proposed that in these situations, "the need for distinct personal storage areas was greater" (Samford 2007: 141). Using this model, she looked at the period of a pit's use as a guide to understanding its likelihood of serving a personal storage purpose. She also used archaeological evidence in order to show what types of items might have been placed within these features. The presence of objects which still would have held value suggests that the deposit was de facto instead of secondary refuse. Therefore, according to Samford, the bottles found at Kingsmill, as well as the pipe bowls and utensils found at Carter's Grove represented personal objects placed in underground storage. The use of subfloor pits for this function would have almost certainly been an essential part of life for the enslaved, and Samford's evidence suggested just that.

### **Subfloor Pits as Shrines**

The final proposed function of subfloor pits posited by Samford is that they were used as West-African style shrines. Samford believed that the creation of shrines reflected agency

on the part of the enslaved as well as cultural continuity with Africa. Samford's method for locating potential shrines was somewhat similar to that used for identifying personal storage. Again, only those artifacts which were fairly intact provided evidence that they were not the result of secondary refuse. But in order to distinguish from personal storage areas, items in these "shrines" had to exhibit some sort of ritual association.

Samford employed several examples from her study sites to demonstrate how subfloor pits could have served a ritual function. A feature from Utopia Quarter Period III contained several artifacts, including a cowrie shell, a tobacco pipe, and oyster shells, which remained in complete form. Samford was hesitant to assert that these artifacts were part of a shrine grouping, but recognized a spiritual purpose for these items. Another feature, from Utopia Quarter Period IV, contained bricks that formed a mound, (significant to the Yoruba and Lobi cultural traditions) as well as several artifacts that had potential ritual meaning, including fossilized coral, a mirror fragment, worked flint, and knives (Samford 2007:166). Samford also suggested that a subfloor pit from Kingsmill Quarter might have been used as a shrine due to the presence of wine bottles, pipe bowls, and objects with cutting edges, bone fragments, a finished block of marble, a cooking pot handle, and several nails which again had likely ritual functions

Other features produced more convincing evidence of their use as shrines. Utopia Quarter Period II contained a feature that held an iron agricultural hoe, a wine bottle with fragments of bone and eggshell inside (interpreted as an offering), as well as a paving brick, a pipestem, a black cobblestone, and a raccoon mandible. Samford (2007:157) claimed that all these items were ritualistically significant, and that the presence of eggshell can be attributed to the Igbo use of eggs as a fertility symbol. A rectangular pit found at Utopia Quarter

Period III contained a soil platform upon which ritually significant items were placed, including “seven complete fossil scallop shells, three large cow bones, two kaolin tobacco pipebowls, and a pipestem” (Samford 2007:158). Samford (ibid) claimed that the placement of bone and shell on a platform was similar to practices found among the Igbo and the Mande (of the Upper Niger Delta). In addition, Samford (ibid) asserted that “the composition of the assemblage bears a remarkable resemblance to objects associated with Igbo spiritual traditions.” Almost every item that Samford claimed has a ritual purpose was traced back to Igbo practice, including the cow bones, the use of the color white, and the presence of seven fossil shells (a ritually significant number for the Igbo). In Samford’s opinion, the most convincing support for this feature’s ritual purpose was the pollen evidence which suggested “the Igbo practice of pouring libations of wine onto shrines” (Samford 2007:160). Finally, two subfloor pits from Utopia Quarter Period IV contained artifacts that suggested their use as shrines. The first had iron tools in the northeastern quadrant, an iron lock and key in the southeast, a brass candlestick and cufflink in the southwestern portion, and a bone-handled knife, clay marble, and iron hook and file in the northwest (Samford 2007:161). Not only are these objects ritually significant, but their relationship in position to one another are enough for Samford to conclude that this feature is “reminiscent of Igbo shrine groupings” (Samford 2007:161). The second proposed shrine at Utopia Quarter Period IV contained a copper frying pan which held a French wine bottle, animal bone fragments, a cowrie shell, wood, and three pipe fragments (Samford 2007:164). Samford (ibid) claims that “the configuration of objects inside a shallow pan is similar to Igbo ancestral and divination shrines.” These examples of potential shrines, as well as the previously mentioned examples, were Samford’s

strongest evidence in support of her belief that some subfloor pits represent shrines, and they demonstrate the existence of ritually significant artifact groupings.

## **CHAPTER TWO: WEST AFRICAN RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS**

Samford's argument for subfloor pits as shrines was based on research of how religious traditions were practiced in the West African homelands of many of the Chesapeake's enslaved. By carefully noting religious practices and symbols within West African cultures, Samford attributed certain artifacts to a ritualized purpose. However, I believe that Samford was overzealous in her desire to trace direct lines of archaeological evidence to specific African ethnic groups. In particular, her Igbo-centric viewpoint encouraged an interpretation of many religious artifacts as Igbo in origin. I believe that by analyzing the complexity of African religion – from the centrality of spiritual beliefs in the African worldview, to the diversity of traditions present, to the creation and use of shrines – we can have a better understanding of the cultural antecedents that came to shape Chesapeake society for the enslaved.

Nearly every source on the broad subject of “African religion” speaks to the inseparable relationship between the spiritual and secular worlds in African cultures. Religious beliefs are entwined in many societal elements, and provide a guiding force in the creation of understandings of the world. Samford (2007:35) claimed that spirituality played a dominant role in African society, “making it impossible to separate spiritual beliefs, social organization, and political authority.” For those Africans forcefully brought to the New World, “the power of the supernatural impinged on the daily lives of slaves and affected their relationships with one another and the world around them” (Raboteau 1978: 275). In spite of

the oppressive system of slavery, the enslaved were able to maintain their religious beliefs as a central part of their understandings and identity.

Certain religious themes and symbols have been observed throughout many different West African regions, but there is danger in clinging to these commonalities and not acknowledging the cultural diversity present in West Africa. In order to see how this religious diversity was expressed in the years directly preceding and during the slave trade we have limited written sources to consult. Most of these accounts are from European travel diaries, and although these sources are clouded by a Eurocentric understanding of the phenomena witnessed, they nevertheless give us a glimpse into how Africans lived at the time. In an attempt to explain the cultural diversity he witnessed, Jean Barbot, an explorer who sailed the coast of Guinea in the seventeenth century, explained: “For although all the blacks of Nigeria and Guinea are, strictly speaking, one and the same when considered together, and in several points resemble each other, yet it will be found that in detail each country and each people has its own peculiarities” (Barbot 1712:220). Another explorer of Barbot’s time, Willem Bosman likewise noted that when dealing with religious practices, “there is no Village or Town, nay, I had almost said, no private Family, which doth not differ from another” (Bosman 1721:Letter 10). Travelers such as Barbot and Bosman would go on to note how these diverse traditions manifested themselves in various forms – including the creation of shrines.

Patricia Samford defined shrines as “places where people can commemorate or commune with ancestral spirits and deities” (Samford 2007:152). It comes as no surprise that the creation of shrines persisted in the Diaspora; these places provided a place for transplanted Africans to express their beliefs. Due to the conditions of slavery, the enslaved

had to create new ways to build and worship at shrines. In order to remain hidden from the enslavers, (who discouraged such behavior) they sometimes had to build their shrines underground. Despite this fact, the shrines constructed in the Diaspora still reflected many African traditions as described in the accounts of European travelers who visited West Africa. For example, during his travels to Sestro, (on the “Grain Coast,” what we consider the Windward Coast) Barbot mentioned a unique experience:

“I found a little hut roofed with leaves under which I saw a badly constructed figure of a man, or rather a lump of dark brown earth, two foot high and as thick as a leg. I saw them [the people of Sestro] go in that direction each night (the king like the others). They washed before approaching the shelter, and then made their prayers to this fetish. Others worshipped the rocks very near the shelter. The same day I saw, around the fetish, many offerings of hens, some dried up, others fresh” (Barbot 1712:275)

This “hut” was clearly a place of important ritual significance to the people of Sestro. By presenting offerings at the shrine, they hoped to appease those spirits which played such a large role in their lives. Samuel Purchas, in his seventeenth century “Description of Guinea” mentioned the presence of a shelter in a local marketplace. He claimed that at this location, the people would “lay Millia with Palme-oile or water, and give their god that to eate and drinke to sustaine him withal, that he should not die for hunger or thirst, thinking that he eateth and drinketh it and lives by it” (Purchas 1625:Vol 6 289).

In addition to the mention of the shrines themselves, European travelers wrote of the activities that occurred at these sites. A common occurrence was the pouring of libations in order to satisfy various spirits. Bosman (1721:Letter 10) observed that “before they [the people of Guinea] Eat or Drink they are accustomed to throw away some, but this is not for the Devil, they won’t oblige him so far; ‘tis for their False God, or sometimes their deceased Friend.” Nicolas Villault, another traveler, likewise noted that in Guinea “the first bit of

whatever they eat, they throw upon the ground in honor of their Gods” (1670:177). These activities apparently occurred at locations throughout Guinea (see Figure 2 for Bosman’s map of this region). Although the manifestation of this practice was undoubtedly diverse throughout different West African regions, the fact that it was noted frequently means that it was not limited to one region.

Although modern descriptions of West African religion might not have the same applicability to the lives of the enslaved as sixteenth and seventeenth century travel accounts, they still add a valuable perspective to the issue. Robert Farris Thompson created an exhibit in the mid 1990’s that highlighted the characteristics of various West African shrines. He explained that while Yoruba shrines “gleam with massed vessels whose fragility demands tact and delicacy in worship,” Kongo shrines are regarded as “the threshold to another world” and employ the Bakongo cosmogram (see Figure 3) as a symbol for the cycles of life (Thompson 1995:50). The frequent identification of the Bakongo cosmogram on artifacts associated with the enslaved has generated archaeological interest in this symbol. The cosmogram represented the meeting of this life and the afterlife – as Thompson described, it is “a symbolic chart of the voyage of the soul” which moves counterclockwise through the different stages of life (Thompson 1995:57). Although not contemporary with the slave trade, these observations aid in understanding the nuanced differences between different modern regions in the creation of shrines.

Samford’s discussion of the elements of West African religion was employed to strengthen her thesis of subfloor pits as shrines. According to the opening pages of Samford’s work, the ultimate goal of the project was to use material culture to “reconstruct meaning in the past, and to look at how “West African cultural traditions were maintained

and transformed in the Virginia Chesapeake” (Samford 2007:3). Despite this claim, Samford’s discussions of spirituality in the material record tend to focus on that which was carried over from West Africa instead of looking at the blending of traditions that occurred in the Chesapeake. Samford’s interpretations of those artifacts from her study sites with a religious function were almost exclusively categorized as Igbo in origin.

In addition, when Samford attempted to create a context for understanding the significance of ritualized subfloor pits, she repeatedly mentioned the Igbo worldviews. While suggesting the significance of ancestor veneration, Samford (2007:179) asserted that, “in Igbo religion, the ultimate goal of every individual is to join his or her ancestors after death and enjoy the veneration of descendents.” In a description of shrine location, Samford (2007:179) maintained that “Igbo ancestral and personal shrines are located in a private part of the home, away from the prying eyes of visitors.” Finally, while discussing the incorporative nature of many West African religions, Samford (2007:183) declared that “one of the defining characteristics of Igbo spirituality is creativity – including the ability to freely incorporate practices and beliefs from other spiritual traditions.” Samford did not take advantage of the opportunity to discuss the presence of similar characteristics in other West African groups - groups who also played a major role in the creation of enslaved communities in the Chesapeake.

### **CHAPTER THREE: GROUPS PRESENT IN THE CHESAPEAKE**

Analysis of the slave trade demonstrated that the enslaved leaving for the New World disembarked from several main regions, mostly along the Western coast of Africa. These regions would later play a role in how the identities of the enslaved were categorized by

Europeans. According to the Transatlantic Slave Trade Database, the major regions which the enslaved departed from included Senegambia and off-shore Atlantic, Sierra Leone, the Windward Coast, the Gold Coast, the Bight of Benin, the Bight of Biafra, West Central Africa and St. Helena, and South-east Africa and Indian Ocean islands (see Figure 4).

Despite the categorization of major West African regions, extremely diverse ethnic groups lived within each of these broad areas. For the sake of this study, the Bight of Biafra holds special importance because the largest percentage of the enslaved in the Chesapeake disembarked from this region. Several cultural groups resided within this generalized region, including the Ibibio, (“Moko”) Ijo, Ekoi, Efut, Ejagham, and Igbo (Chambers 2002:107). Even though the Igbo were more frequently represented in the slave trade than the other ethnic groups from this region, the presence of other groups demonstrates the complexity of analyzing ethnic identity. Such was the case for other areas of disembarkation, which also contained a variety of ethnic groups involved in the slave trade.

As more information on the migration of the enslaved becomes readily available to archaeologists, there has been an increased interest in connecting material culture found in the Americas with that found in Africa. The desire to demonstrate cultural connectivity motivates many archaeologists because they believe that such connections represent cultural strength on the part of the enslaved. Revisionists who follow this model want to examine how the enslaved used their ethnic backgrounds to create a new identity. Although this trend has become increasingly popular, researchers should be wary of drawing direct lines between the New World and Old. The new information on the slave trade provides valuable data, but ethnic identity can not be assumed based on port of embarkation. Often times captured Africans would travel great distances inland before they reached a port. Lorena Walsh

warned that “positing the existence in colonial Americas of identifiable African cultures risks an uncritical acceptance of oversimplified stereotypes applied by contemporary Europeans, inappropriately evokes larger ethnolinguistic units that emerged only in colonial and postcolonial Africa, risks conflation with European connections between self-conscious nationalism and the development of nation-states, and reinforces outmoded stereotypes as African culture as static” (Walsh 2001:3). Speaking in such simplified terms about the complex process of identity formation in African nations perpetuates outdated models for interpreting African society. Archaeological analysis can still benefit from a general knowledge of this topic, but there is danger in making sweeping assumptions about the African origins of the enslaved.

As uncomfortable as it is for modern scholars to imagine, the Africans who were forcefully brought to the Americas were treated the same way that other economic commodities were. The expanding economy of the New World created a demand for manual labor, and slaving companies provided the supply. Planters quickly developed a preference for people from different regions of Africa based on their farming knowledge and their perceived “work ethic.” The tobacco planters of Virginia preferred workers from the forested areas of the Bight of Biafra and the Congo because “in these regions, techniques used for yam cultivation were not unlike those employed for tobacco” (Parent 2003:65). Despite planter preferences, Walsh (2001:12) noted that the presence of groups held in “low esteem” by the planter class demonstrated the minimal influence that planters had on selecting ethnic background. Walsh (2001:13) goes on to claim that the presence of different ethnic groups throughout the Chesapeake is “primarily an unplanned outcome of the marketing strategies of British and African merchants.” Therefore the “waves” of different

ethnic groups that came into American ports had more to do with the economic situations of the slave traders than with the planters' desires.

The different "waves" of importation that took place throughout the course of the slave trade undeniably left an impact on the New World societies created by the enslaved (see Figure 5 for data on the numbers of people arriving in the Chesapeake from different African regions). For example, no Africans from the Gold Coast were imported until the beginning of the eighteenth century, but in the following decades a surge of forced immigrants came into the colonies. A more complicated system of fluctuation occurred in West Central Africa and St. Helena, for during the early years of the colonies this region provided the sole source of enslaved labor. Then, in the last quarter of the seventeenth century, no people from West Central Africa and St. Helena forcibly migrated to the Chesapeake. But by the beginning of the eighteenth century this region again became a major area of exportation, with a surge of migrants leaving in the second quarter of the century. Many other regions of exportation likewise experienced the rise and fall in the numbers of people sent to the Chesapeake.

Samford argued that as the slave trade expanded in the early decades of the eighteenth century, people from the Bight of Biafra made up an increasingly large percentage of the enslaved working in the Chesapeake. This claim was substantiated by Philip Morgan, who analyzed the slave trade and determined that "in the first quarter of the eighteenth century, one region, the Bight of Biafra, supplied about 60 percent of Africans to the York Naval District in Virginia" (Morgan 2000:2). As traders turned their attention towards the Niger Delta region, almost half of the Africans imported to the Chesapeake "were from the Nigerian tribes of the Igbo, Ibibio, Efkins, and Mokos" (Samford 2007:30). As previously

mentioned, it is difficult to ascribe ethnic identities to people based on their port of embarkation; however Samford (2007:32) felt comfortable declaring that “approximately 40 percent of the enslaved brought to Virginia between 1710 and 1760 were from the area around the mouth of Niger River, with members of the area’s Igbo culture numerically dominant in the Virginia trade between 1710 and 1740.” Even if the majority of the people brought from the Niger Delta did associate with an Igbo identity, the number of Igbo people represented in the overall trade during those years most likely would not have been dominant. As the second quarter of the eighteenth century began, the surge of immigrants from the Bight of Biafra dwindled. Morgan (2000:4) noted that “by the 1730s in York Naval District, Virginia, the Bight of Biafra, though still the primary supplier, was providing less than half of the incoming Africans; West-central Africa, Senegambia, the Windward Coast, and Gold Coast provided the rest.” Even though there was a surge of importation during the early years of the eighteenth century, the people from the Bight of Biafra only constituted a majority in the enslaved importations for a few decades.

With this information now available on the slave trade, scholars have even more data with which to understand the heritage of many members of the enslaved community. As evidenced in Figures 5 and 6, a great degree of diversity existed among the enslaved, with people arriving in the New World from Senegambia to West Central Africa. John Coombs claimed that slave trade accounts and contemporary personal records suggested extreme diversity, with the enslaved “fetch’d from severall parts of Africa” (Coombs 2003:104). Several historians have suggested that when the enslaved were exposed to overwhelming cultural differences, they would cling to the similarities they could find. For example, Morgan (2000:3) argued that “many Africans from the Bight of Biafra who had never heard

the name Igbo in their own lands and identified themselves instead by their villages or districts...came to accept – at least to some degree – the term abroad.” According to Morgan, group identities shifted to incorporate broader regions so that cultural communities could be established. Coombs’s initial claim for cultural diversity was later supplemented by his assertion that the people of Africa “were well practiced in the art of overcoming linguistic and cultural differences” (Coombs 2003:107).

Despite the tendency for the enslaved to take on broader group identities and despite the abundance of people brought into the Chesapeake from the Niger Delta, I am unconvinced that the Igbo people made up an overwhelming majority of the enslaved population. Even if all of those who were brought from the Bight of Biafra during the peak years of importation identified with the Igbo culture, their majority in the slave trade only lasted for a few decades. The trend in archaeological analysis to attribute artifacts to a specifically Igbo function is therefore unsettling. Philip Morgan (2000:3) was equally concerned with this phenomenon, claiming:

“The proportion of Igbo speakers among slaves entering the Chesapeake, for example, has been recently estimated at about a quarter. Some recent archaeological investigations that suggest that certain deposits seem similar to Ibo ancestor shrines, or that certain incised spoon handles are similar to the symbols used by Ibo diviners, or that so-called root cellars, but what Fraser more objectively calls sub-floor pits, can be traced to the concealment of valuables under floors, not in cellars or pits, among Igbo groups in Nigeria seems to me to be stretching credibility.”

I agree with Morgan’s hesitancy in drawing direct lines between the Old World and New. While I believe that attempting to trace archaeological evidence back to certain ethnic groups can teach us a great deal, the one to one cultural transfer suggested by researchers such as Samford does not take into account the creolization that almost certainly occurred in the Chesapeake. In addition, the Igbocentric model which has often arisen in these contexts

ignores the presence of enslaved people from diverse parts of Africa. In order to better understand the manifestation of West African spiritual traditions in the New World, creolization theory must be taken into account.

### **CREOLIZATION THEORY**

The relocation of groups of people inspires change among those groups, and the study of that change has produced a variety of theories among anthropologists. Several factors play a part in the creation of new societies, from environmental factors to the presence of other groups. Mintz and Price (1976:1) claimed that “no group, no matter how well-equipped or how free to choose, can transfer its way of life and the accompanying beliefs and values intact from one locale to another.” Although many theorists disagreed with the extent to which Mintz and Price applied this argument, few would argue that groups are able to completely transfer their cultural practices without some adjustments. These changes are likewise important to archaeologists, who investigate “how the material record is evidence of a transformation in the ways culture was expressed” (Matthew 2002:111). The dawn of the colonial era marked the beginning of a particularly extensive relocation of people into different lands - people brought by choice and by people brought by force. Precisely how new societies were created in the Americas has become an area of interest for many scholars. Whether these new circumstances involved bringing cultural forms to the “New World” (the case for Europeans and Africans) or adapting cultural forms in response to the new settlers, (the case for Native Americans) the process undoubtedly contained many complexities.

The unique conditions in which many Africans were forcefully brought to the Americas created a different way to analyze cultural change. Subject to oppression at every

moment, the African immigrants expressed their culture in conditions very different from European immigrants. The harsh situations faced by Africans were many, for those who were brought to the New World had no desire to leave their homelands, and once they were brought to their new “home,” the enslaved often lived with people from different regions. In addition, the enslavers would attempt to dissolve African cultural practices as a means of controlling their labor force. Despite these dehumanizing conditions, the strength of the African spirit persisted. Efforts by the enslavers to “acculturate” the enslaved were at best limited. The enslaved quickly learned how to culturally resist the enslavers, for “African Americans sought to be increasingly unlike them as a way to challenge the claims to universality embedded within white cultural foundations” (Matthew 2002:123). James Scott, (1990:xii) in his analysis of how people react to conditions of oppression, claimed that “every subordinate group creates, out of its ordeal, a “hidden transcript” that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant.” Therefore, the enslaved operated in a system which was simultaneously within the realm of the enslavers’ power, but still separate and critical of that same source of power. (Mintz 1976:39). The new societies created by the enslaved reflected the mixing of various African traditions, much more so than an African and European blending. Despite the oppressive conditions faced by the enslaved, they resisted the enslavers by refusing to passively accept European cultural models, and working to create their own culture within the enslaved community.

Exactly how enslaved Africans manifested cultural forms in the New World continues to be a subject of debate. Some early theorists proposed that basic cultural unity existed among the people of Africa, so that regional differences would not inhibit a sharing of cultural forms. The great degree of travel and trade that occurred between groups on the

African continent encouraged the sharing of ideas, and a “baseline” of cultural understanding soon developed. Although many theorists today still believe that there is a degree of commonality between regions, the overarching assumption that all groups hold similar beliefs has lost validity in recent years. Based in view of African culture as non-dynamic, this (Eurocentric) theory sought to gloss over the complexity of African traditions. Mintz and Price (1976:2) agreed that shared assumptions do exist among various African groups, but they do not feel “that those Africans who were enslaved and transported to the New World can be said to have shared a *culture*, in the sense that European colonists in a particular colony can be said to have done so.” This theory has provided an interesting way to look at the culture of enslaved Africans, but has still has too many flaws to be taken at face value.

Another model for analyzing cultural development in the African Diaspora is the “carry-over” perspective. This model suggested that the cultural forms seen in descendent communities can be traced back to specific African regions. Following this logic, if certain practices in the New World resembled those seen in Africa, and accounts from the slave trade verify the connection, then theorists posited a direct line of cultural transfer. Melville Herskovits, one of the first anthropologists to study African Americans, was an early proponent of this theory. In his study of the Saramaka people of Suriname, he claimed to witness many of the same practices as he saw during his years in West Africa. But, as Price and Price (2003:20) pointed out, “Herskovits wasn’t just “seeing” Africa. He was inducing it and insisting on it repeatedly, through speech and through pictures, instructing Saramakas about the origins of their practices.” There is a tendency among those who follow this model to cling to a one to one cultural connection between the Diaspora and Africa. Although the

carry-over theory did recognize diversity among African cultures, (and attribute cultural resiliency to enslaved communities) the perspective also limited a broader understanding of the issues at hand. These concerns are likewise significant in the archaeological application of this theory. Christopher Fennell (2000:283) was apprehensive about the practice of attributing religious artifacts to a specific ethnic group, for it “implies that a stable, unchanging ethnic group existed which maintained the belief systems that produced those artifacts.” In addition, Fennell (2000:285) claimed that this practice “may impose unintentional stereotypes on that group as the only group one would expect to have practiced such “magic” in colonial and antebellum America.” Although the ultimate goal of the carry-over theory may have been to give strength to descendent communities, if applied incorrectly it served to mark African American communities in static, unflattering terms. This model later led to narrowly focused interpretations which looked at cultural transfers from a specific ethnic group.

Douglas Chambers, in his analysis of enslaved culture in Virginia, argued that many cultural practices of the Chesapeake’s enslaved population demonstrated a direct transfer from the Igbo people of Nigeria. Chambers (1996:409) believed that researchers should “focus on the roles and resources of those groups most heavily represented in various times and places to explain historically the development of distinctive regional slave subcultures.” According to his research, the Igbo constituted the majority of the enslaved population for several years, therefore it was appropriate to look at the ways the Igbo culture affected other populations. Although Chambers (1996:401) recognized the presence of other groups in Virginia, he contended that “the long-term cultural influences of those peoples, however, all pale in comparison to that of Igboized creoles in colonial and early national Afro-Virginia.”

Chambers followed the carry-over model in his search for specific Igbo forms found in Virginia, but also suggested that the Igbo culture was so dominant that it absorbed all other traditions. Therefore, almost any cultural traditions found in Virginia could be linked to Igbo practices due to an “Igboizing” influence on all other groups. Chambers clearly influence Samford’s work, based on her repeated citation of his theories and her application of the Igbocentric model to her analysis. However, to refuse to see beyond the Igbo in colonial Virginia’s enslaved is to deny the cultural strength of the many other groups present. Chambers pursues his Igbocentric viewpoint to an extreme degree, and even argued that the Igbo dominated enslaved communities despite the context:

“In some areas like the Chesapeake piedmont in the second quarter of the eighteenth century, Igbo forced migrants were the “first-comers.” There they set the basic patterns of material, social and ideological culture of enslaved communities to which succeeding waves of saltwater (Western Bantu especially) and creole (Tidewater) slaves acculturated. In other British Atlantic areas, such as in Jamaica and the Lesser Antilles, especially after 1750, Igbo themselves arrived as “second-comers” who then Igboized already existing institutions and cultural patterns” (Chambers 1996:397)

Although the Igbo undoubtedly played an important role in the creation of enslaved society, to posit that their culture would dominate others is insulting and reckless. Some theorists who use this model would claim that Igbo traditions were acquired because the underlying similarities between African groups and the numerical dominance of the Igbo simply facilitated the Igbo culture taking credit for what was universally accepted. This explanation is likewise unsatisfactory, because there is no rationalization for why a generalized tradition would not simply be called “West African.” A better understanding of how African groups interacted in the New World demands different theories.

Sidney Mintz and Richard Price critically analyzed the previous ways of looking at African culture transfer in their groundbreaking 1976 work “The Birth of African American

Culture.” They paid homage to the work of Herskovits and others, but proposed different angles to the unified culture perspective and the carry-over model. Mintz and Price (1976:9) alleged that there is a degree of universality in certain African cultures, but they “believe that it is less the *unity* of West (and Central) Africa as a broad culture area that is called into question by [their] criticism than the *levels* at which one would have to seek confirmation of this postulated unity.” The perceived similarities exist at the level of *heritage* while diversity occurred at the level of *culture*. This means that Africans shared a common heritage that linked certain traditions, but they had extraordinarily diverse cultural manifestations. In fact, Mintz and Price (1976:8) argued that even more diversity existed among African cultural communities than among Europeans. Africans transplanted in the New World communicated through their common heritage, yet expressed cultural forms in unique ways. Because of this phenomenon, the newly created African American culture represented the meeting of distinct traditions.

The carry-over model and Chambers’s Igbocentric theory both avoid looking at how African traditions convened in enslaved communities. Many researchers in the field of African studies have observed the additive nature of African culture. For example, Mintz and Price (1976:45) noted that “most West and Central African religions were relatively permeable to foreign influences and tended to be “additive” rather than “exclusive” in their orientation toward other cultures.” The flexibility and willingness to incorporate other elements speaks to how well these traditions would have mixed. In addition, the immediate needs for certain practices (especially ritual procedures) among the enslaved encouraged a quick adoption of unfamiliar beliefs. Mintz and Price (1976:45) claimed that they “can probably date the beginnings of any new African-American religion from the moment that

one person in need received ritual assistance from another who belonged to a different culture group.” The African cultural adaptability and willingness to incorporate new forms demonstrates how naturally these diverse traditions would have mixed in the Chesapeake.

The unique conditions of enslaved life in the Americas would have undoubtedly facilitated the creation of a new African-American culture. Slave trade accounts attest to the fact that African groups present in the colonies were from diverse regions. In addition, these groups would not have remained disconnected from each other in order to maintain cultural “purity.” Archaeologists Matthew, Leone, and Jordan (2002:123) recognized this fact, and believed that “there has been too little emphasis on the American context in favor of understanding these practices as continuations of West African traditions.” Context is of central importance in understanding how these groups came together. Mintz and Price (1976:18) looked at this collision of societies, and stated that “the fact is that these were not *communities* of people at first, and they could only become communities by processes of cultural change. What the slave undeniably shared at the outset was their enslavement; all – or nearly all – else had to be *created by them*.”

When creolization theory is applied to the data from Samford’s subfloor pits, intriguing new interpretations arise. The findings with proposed Igbo origin suddenly embody a far more complicated narrative on the use of these objects. For example, Samford (2007:160) asserted that the pollen evidence found in the subfloor pit at Utopia Quarter Period III suggested “the Igbo practice of pouring libations of wine into shrines.” However, as evidenced in Bosman and Villault’s accounts, this practice was not limited to the Igbo people, and took place at shrines throughout Guinea. Another one of Samford’s proposed shrines, at Utopia Quarter Period IV, contained a variety of artifacts organized into four

quadrants. Samford (2007: 161) contended that the relationship of artifacts was “reminiscent of Igbo shrine groupings.” Despite this assertion, she also proposed that the presence of wine bottles in the northeastern quadrant connected the feature with the Bakongo cosmogram. As previously mentioned, the Bakongo cosmogram has played an important role in archaeological interpretations of enslaved life, but the origins of this symbol are from West Central Africa. Therefore, to contend that this arrangement of space reflected an Igbo shrine without recognizing the influence of other groups is illogical. The subfloor pits that Samford identified as potential shrines contained artifacts that would have held meaning to many different ethnic groups, not only the Igbo. Creolization theory demonstrates that the transfer and blending of cultural traditions created something entirely new.

## CONCLUSION

Archaeological investigations of enslaved life hold special value to historical archaeologists of the American colonial period. The intriguing ways that enslaved Africans and African Americans created a life for themselves under such dehumanizing conditions is truly a testament to the strength of the human spirit. Subfloor pits provide an ideal setting for this analysis of enslaved life because they embody the creation of separate cultural space. Patricia Samford’s interpretation of subfloor pits as West African inspired shrines has already contributed a great deal to the discussion of enslaved life, and will undoubtedly leave a mark on the field. Nonetheless, I believe that this theory can be strengthened by interpreting these features through the lenses of creolization.

Samford drew heavily from the work of Douglas Chambers, who claimed that the Igbo were culturally dominant in the Chesapeake. Although evidence from the slave trade

demonstrated that the Igbo were prominent among those who disembarked in the Chesapeake, I do not believe that they would have culturally dominated the other enslaved groups. It is not my intention to claim that archaeologists should abandon all efforts to trace practices back to Africa. To simply state that enslaved communities were creolized and not investigate what groups created that creolized society is equally ineffective. Archaeologists should instead investigate the African origins of enslaved communities and see how these diverse traditions came together to create a new, distinctly African American culture.

The application of creolization theory to ritualized subfloor pits can greatly benefit the field of historical archaeology. As Christopher Fennell (2000:284) claimed, archaeologists should look at how diverse ethnic groups created material culture because “a process of blending or creolization may have occurred over time in facets of the belief systems and material culture of multiple groups interacting in geographic proximity.” Reanalyzing Samford’s findings to identify the religious expressions of various African traditions demonstrates not only the cultural strength of the enslaved, but also the inventiveness with which they expressed their cultures in the New World.

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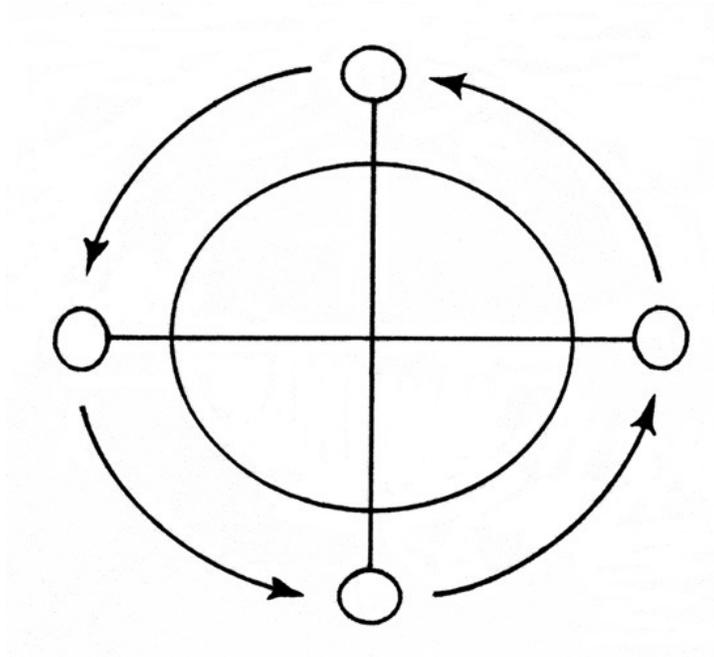
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**Figure 3: The Bakongo Cosmogram**



**Figure 4: Regions of African exportation (for all ports of disembarkation and all years)**



	Sengambia and off-shore Atlantic		Sierra Leone		Windward Coast		Gold Coast		Bight of Benin	
	<i>Embarbed</i>	<i>Disembarbed</i>	<i>Embarbed</i>	<i>Disembarbed</i>	<i>Embarbed</i>	<i>Disembarbed</i>	<i>Embarbed</i>	<i>Disembarbed</i>	<i>Embarbed</i>	<i>Disembarbed</i>
<b>1628-1650</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>1651-1675</b>	2,403	1,642	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>1676-1700</b>	4,884	4,091	0	0	0	0	726	568	573	518
<b>1701-1725</b>	7,000	5,692	735	640	267	226	7,093	5,918	1,373	1,138
<b>1726-1750</b>	14,754	11,752	1,178	897	1,840	1,581	5,214	4,345	963	783
<b>1751-1775</b>	9,390	7,664	2,582	2,212	3,362	3,034	5,166	4,381	1,089	702
<b>1776-1781</b>	537	474	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Totals</b>	38,968	31,314	4,496	3,749	5,469	4,842	18,199	15,213	3,999	3,141

	Bight of Biafra		West Central Africa and St. Helena		South-east Africa and Indian ocean islands		Totals	
	<i>Embarbed</i>	<i>Disembarbed</i>	<i>Embarbed</i>	<i>Disembarbed</i>	<i>Embarbed</i>	<i>Disembarbed</i>	<i>Embarbed</i>	<i>Disembarbed</i>
<b>1628-1650</b>	0	0	141	100	0	0	141	100
<b>1651-1675</b>	1,627	1,116	112	96	0	0	4,142	2,854
<b>1676-1700</b>	5,331	3,802	0	0	355	255	11,868	9,234
<b>1701-1725</b>	17,132	12,997	1,691	1,587	2,549	1,777	37,842	29,975
<b>1726-1750</b>	25,983	21,248	15,906	13,309	0	0	65,839	53,915
<b>1751-1775</b>	7,830	6,024	8,560	7,030	0	0	37,980	31,048
<b>1776-1781</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	537	474
<b>Totals</b>	57,903	45,186	26,411	22,122	2,904	2,032	158,349	127,600

**Figure 5:** Regions of African departure for slaves arriving in the Chesapeake during the colonial period

Figure 6

Regions of African Departure for the Enslaved Disembarking in the Chesapeake

