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**“Better than we”: landscapes and materialities of race, class, and gender in pre-emancipation colonial Saba, Dutch Caribbean**

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# Chapter 1:

## Friendly and Lovely, Though Small



*Figure 1: Aerial view of Saba, looking north. Courtesy of Saba Tourist Bureau.*

### **Background and approach**

This research strives to reveal how ideologies of race, class, and gender manifested in the the social, physical, and material landscapes of pre-emancipation colonial Saba, Dutch Caribbean. Race, class, and gender serve as facets and vectors for ideology. By viewing them as processes, their capacity to express such through their social and material environments inextricably tied to their particular temporal and spatial contexts. Through comparisons of the social and material environments of multiple, contemporaneous social contexts within Saba, common social and material vectors among these ideological facets can become apparent. This work diverges from similar, previous research in that it undertakes a post-colonial approach to study the dialectics involved between locally-based, culturally-derived abstractions of class, race, and gender, and the materiality which resulted from these relationships. Dialectical studies emphasize an accountability to the totality of a given social environment. As a single researcher, tracing the processes of ideological abstractions such as class,

race, and gender while accounting for the whole can be a daunting task. It is facilitated, however, by studying social environments that are bounded through geographical limitations with small populations, but with sufficient cultural similarities to the region to permit insightful contextualization of similar and divergent processes within their respective ideologies. Saba is a Caribbean island just 13 square kilometers in area, with a population that never exceeded 1,877 residents by the time of emancipation. It saw very little immigration to the island after 1700, and remained a Dutch possession for most of its colonial era. Saba never developed into a full plantation economy characterized by a large majority of enslaved Africans relative to free European-descent residents; rather, the population of white residents compared to enslaved Africans and free Sabans of African descent fluctuated mildly around fifty per cent respectively. The island of Saba is therefore an ideal environment to demonstrate the utility of dialectical archaeology when employed at the ground level in a whole-society context. To date, a dialectical archaeology involving a whole-society approach has not been undertaken in North American or Caribbean historical archaeology, in part due to the sheer volume of research data that it necessitates. Fortunately, the social and geographic realities of Saba make such an approach feasible, and the social and material database derived from this research permits insights into a range of issues of concern to historical archaeologists. In particular, this concerns:

- How tensions between the “incomplete hegemony” of colonial authorities and plantation agriculture with Saban residents resulted in a dialectic between local landscapes, materiality, and ideologies of race, class, and gender.
- Differentiating between slavery, free poverty, and low class in the archaeological record.
- The dialectic between scale, locality, and perspective in defining and situating class and poverty.

### **The problems with connecting landscapes to materiality, and ideology to materiality**

Landscape archaeology has provided a means of connecting ideology to geography through the partitioning, use/disuse, and organization of lands in the colonial Caribbean (Pulsipher 1977, 1994; Handler & Lange 1978; Armstrong 1990; Delle 1998, 2014; Hicks 2007; Armstrong, Hauser et. al 2009; Ryczewski & Cherry 2015; Singleton 2001, 2015). This approach is ideal in the colonial Caribbean within plantation archaeology for identifying locations of structures and activity areas by viewing plantation landscapes as organized places structured in part by power and economic-based relations. This has facilitated the identification of enslaved African housing areas on plantations (Armstrong & Kelly 2000), and within the whole-society landscape of plantation colonies on small islands, has been

used to locate maroon sites on St. Croix (Norton & Espenshade 2007). The problem, however, arises in attempts to correlate materiality to landscapes. This has been accomplished in some part with studies involving locally manufactured ceramics specific to certain islands, such as Jamaica (Hauser 2006), St. Eustatius (Heath 1988), St. Kitts (Ahlman, Schroedl, & McKeown 2009), Antigua (Handler 1964; Nicholson 1994), St. Croix (Gartley 1979), Montserrat (Petersen & Watters 1988), the Bahamas (Wilkie 1998), and the British Caribbean islands (Higman 2014), with respect to a broader scale of material culture. James Delle has argued that plantation landscapes represented “a class of material culture... used to manipulate human behaviors” (Delle 1998:37; Hauser & Hicks 2007:256). Delle’s work has been criticized for a limited engagement with Jamaican coffee plantation material culture, as the bulk of his data was drawn primarily from map collections (DeCunzo & Ernstein 2006). Hauser & Hicks (2007) have suggested that “archaeologists of colonialism need to find ways to place the study of *materiality* – both the permeabilities between humans, objects and places, and also the contemporary sense of what ‘matters’ – at the heart of their studies, rather than using objects and landscape to illustrate historical accounts, elite ideas or political observations already developed elsewhere” (Hauser & Hicks 2007:267-268). This involves the additional step of tying materiality recovered from specific locations within powered landscapes to those recovered from other contexts within a given locale and region, and an understanding relative to how residents of these landscapes perceived and employed materiality in their own terms. This is not a straightforward task. The multiple sets of social relations which characterize an enslaved African plantation assemblage will not, for example, mirror those that produced a low class white household assemblage within a nearby village. This necessitates an understanding of the dialectic between landscapes, ideology, and materiality for the area and period concerned. Drawing relations between materiality and ideological landscapes requires identifying common ideological processes that were implicated in the production of materiality between the given contexts. Within the colonial Caribbean slave societies, three pervading elements of ideological social relations include race, class, and gender.

Archaeological and historical studies that concentrate on notions of class, race, and gender during the colonial period have been pursued in some Caribbean contexts, including gender roles in plantation societies (Howson 1995; Pulsipher 1997; Delle 2002; Reilly 2014a); class and race as implicated in poverty (Reilly 2014b), the roles and implications of race, class, and gender concerning the emergence of free African residents and creolization on the island of St. John’s (Armstrong 2003a, 2003b). A transdisciplinary historiography of studies regarding race, class, and gender could well fill this volume alone. An excellent synopsis relative to North American historical archaeology has been articulated by Jaime C. Brandon (2009), though it does not delve into specifics as to how such approaches can be applied towards identifying these ideological abstracts in material things.

Identifying race, class, and gender in the material record is not a straightforward process, and has been subject to several approaches throughout the last forty years. Some of the first attempts to correlate materiality with race and legal status in plantation contexts were made by searching for vestiges of African-derived cultural practices that could be expressed materially, whether referred to as “Africanisms” (Fairbanks 1983) or “retentions” (Mintz and Price 1976). This has come under a common critique in that it searches for something pre-determined to exist by the archaeologist (Orser 1998; Orser & Funari 2001). Predetermination has extended to other avenues of research, including assuming a three-tiered capitalist class structure upon plantation-based enslaved Africans (Otto 1975, 1980), and projecting middle class ideologies of dignity and aspiration to interpret low class archaeological contexts and social relations (Yamin 1998; McGuire 2008; Symonds 2011; Wacquant 2002). Theresa Singleton (1985:1) compiled the first edited volume on the archaeology of slavery on colonial plantations, and followed with a large volume of work relative to the archaeology of African-descent people and African slavery in the Americas (1991, 1995, 2001a, 2001b 2001c). In particular, Singleton advanced analyses centered on the “historical and cultural processes that made the African experience unique in the Americas” (1999:17). Connecting cultural-historical processes to the material record at such a broad level, while assuming their relevancies at regional and local levels, however, is a problematic task. Shortcutting this approach by identifying slavery through singular artifacts common to the experience of all or large groups of enslaved Africans in the Americas, save arguably through shackles in ideal contexts, is very difficult to determine archaeologically. Jerome Handler and Frederick Lange (2006) have rightly emphasized that identifying the presence of African descent individuals within a given colonial context does automatically indicate that these individuals were enslaved. Indeed, “one problem in identifying the physical remains of slaves and artifacts indicative of slave culture is that slave status did not give people distinctive phenotypes or genotypes; nor did it give them material goods that were not found among other segments of the society” (Handler & Lange 2006:7-8). Others have gone one step further and claimed that slavery is “archaeologically unrecognizable” (Alexander 2001:56-57). The use of the documentary and oral history records have consequently proven invaluable towards identifying sites associated with slavery and enslaved Africans, especially as to how materiality is implicated in slavery at local scales through time. Archaeologically, attempts to tie materiality to ideology have extended into the organization of space, especially upon plantations, the archaeology of poverty, and archaeologies of class formation and racialization.

One of the first concerted attempts correlate class and race to materiality in colonial contexts was done by John Otto (1975, 1980). Otto postulated that “with documentary and chronological controls, differences in housing, artifacts, and food remains at plantation dwelling sites can be

explained by differences in known status during the same period in time. Since the inhabitants differed in racial and social status, the archaeological evidence can be used to test hypotheses about status differences and their reflection in the archaeological record” (Otto 1980:4-5). Otto identified some of the nuances associated with this approach: “...status positions and access to material rewards are not perfectly associated in complex societies... frequently, people occupy relatively high status positions which have only symbolic rewards or material rewards that are not commensurate with their standing. Conversely, other people occupy relatively low positions but accumulate material rewards that are not commensurate with their true status... it is even possible that the archaeological remains from many sites will not reflect any status patterning” (Otto 1980:4). Otto employed a caste-class dichotomy to differentiate the plantation residents: “racial/legal, social, and elite/subordinate”, with each status further subdivided into three groups, comprising “upper-caste upper class planters, upper-caste middle class overseers, and lower-caste lower class slaves” (Orser 2004, Orser 2007:17). One fatal flaw in Otto’s approach concerned his consideration of social status as a “thing”, and by extension, he could not consider the general relevance or irrelevance of facets of social status relative to particular social environments. Status, therefore, cannot be regarded as a constant. “Since status and chronology were held as constants, the differences and similarities in the archaeological remains at all three sites could be explained by differences and similarities in known status” (Otto 1980:7). Rather, by studying an abstract such as status as a process rather than a constant, whose relevancy is intimately tied to particular social contexts rather than all social contexts groups and individuals will find themselves in throughout their lifetimes, nuances beyond rigid binary social categories among similar and dissimilar assemblages can become apparent.

Frederick Lange and Jerome Handler (1985) undertook a similar study to Otto on Barbadian plantations, and concluded that there are so many overlaps in archaeological assemblages between planters, overseers, and enslaved Africans, that it is easier to infer class than race in the archaeological record, especially regarding an imposed, racialized legal status such as African slavery. Further attempts to disentangle race from class occurred with the excavation Lucy Foster’s household, a free, single African descent woman from the mid nineteenth century U.S.A. (Baker 1980). It was concluded that the assemblage present, without recourse to other regional contextualizing assemblages, was indicative of poverty rather than race. This conclusion is unsurprising given that the assemblage was considered a “first” for a readily-identifiable free African descent household.

Identifying the materiality of ideology advanced in the past 15 years by de-centering the emphasis upon material things alone, with further emphasis on the processes which contributed to produce the assemblages themselves (DeMarrais 2004). This can be seen in archaeologies of consumption and consumerism within the context of full-fledged capitalism of Western Europe and

North American during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Paul Mullins (1999a) studied the materiality of African Americans in the post emancipation period of the U.S.A. through the limitations imposed upon them as racialized consumers in the American economy by white America. By unveiling the processes through which African Americans were systematically excluded and discouraged from white consumption habits, it was inferred that this would constrict and pattern the range of goods present among African American material assemblages from this time. This study is important in that the material goods acquired by African Americans was due to the consumption processes they were uniquely subjected to relative to white Americans. It is here that an important distinction is made relative to the situation of material culture and the person: the focus is centered on the processes that result in the object rather than the object itself. Mullins (1999b) argues that material things were purchased in this racialized American economy by African Americans to “reflect” their race. This occurred while their resultant “African-American” materiality existed in a dialectic with racialized processes which facilitated, encouraged, coerced, or forced African Americans to obtain these material things over others. The “conspicuous consumption” which characterized the identity-building purchasing practices of consumers in fully capitalist North America and Western Europe (McGuire & Wurst 2002; Veblen 1899), however, does not readily lend itself to their contemporary Caribbean contexts, especially in earlier epochs that were not characterized by capitalism or yet fully-capitalist social relations.

Charles Orser (2004, 2007) has been perhaps the most recently explicit among historical archaeologists to outline an archaeology of race and racialization as a means to infer these social abstracts in the archaeological record. Orser (2007:66) calls for “a conscious recognition of the social inequalities constructed within the system of... production and distribution has the potential to allow archaeologists to see the relationships between racial categorization and artifact consumption”. This approach requires an intimate understanding of the processes involved in racialization and racialized materiality in a given social context. While Orser (2007) outlines the processes involved in the racialization of the Chinese and the Irish in the U.S.A, his scope was a Pan-American racialization of these groups, which does not allow for regionalized and localized nuances to understand if and how this occurred at these levels. Jaime C. Brandon points out that attempts to disentangle race from class within social relations is problematic in that they are too intimately related, and as such “an explicitly holistic cultural analysis may be a fruitful alternative to analyzing competing categorical registers (i.e., class and race). If applied in a non-reifying manner, a cultural analysis may reveal the complex linkages between different, but often simultaneously manifested, identities” (Brandon 2009:12). Indeed, one must understand the locally-situated particularities of class, race, and gender as they were adopted and enacted in the social organization of a given area before these can be responsibly inferred in



material assemblages, which is the approach taken throughout this research. Failure to account for culturally-specific nuances can lead the researcher to unconsciously impose non-native ideologies upon interpretations of material culture histories, such as applying North Americanist diaspora experiences as assumed equivalents to those in the Caribbean (Armstrong 2008). Despite the utility of the theoretical frameworks presented by Orser and Brandon, their calls have not been applied and tested archaeologically in the field upon the “totality” of a given culture as dialectical archaeology encourages (Wurst 1999; 2006).

Poverty has been a topic that has only recently begun to attract concerted attention by historical archaeologists. It has been suggested by some that the study of poverty in particular removes the comfortable temporal boundaries that separate subject from researcher, which is particularly relevant in studies of poverty and capitalism, whereby the researcher operates as a critic of an economic system from which they personally benefit, and which simultaneously creates and sustains poverty (Symonds 2011; Orser 2011). This has an effect of “politicizing” archaeology, which Randall McGuire argues is misleading, since all archaeology is inherently political, “which is ignored at our own peril” (2008:11). Spaces designated as poor have been excavated by archaeologists, such as poorhouses (Garman & Russo 1999), poor farm cemeteries (Bell 1993), and almshouses (Baugher & Spencer-Wood 2001), as a means of assessing the materiality of poverty. The intersections between race and poverty have been discussed in length by Charles Orser (2004; 2007), with particular reference to the processes of racialization and poverty’s production among Irish and Chinese immigrants to the U.S.A. during the nineteenth century. Sarah Chicone (2011) argues that the degree of emphasis of process relative to the resultant materiality must not necessarily assume elements of intentional identity-construction among the owners. This runs counter to Mullins’ assertion that African Americans actively constructed a racialized identity through consumerism. To Chicone, among the poor white coal miners striking at Ludlow in the early twentieth century, their materiality was co-constitutive of the production of their poverty, rather than reflective of their poverty; “...because working-class poverty is not a thing... changes in materiality alone did not fundamentally alter the reality of its lived experience” (Chicone 2011a:78). This occurred despite attempts by the company to “mask” the poverty of certain employees deemed as “deserving poor” through housing assistance and other benefits. Chicone’s consideration of poverty as a process rather than a “thing” was echoed by Ann Stahl (2008) relative to slavery. This reorients the focus of slavery from a social dichotomy between owner and enslaved, to how “slaving transformed not only targeted groups but also slaving societies themselves” (Marshall 2015:7).

Several problems have been identified within the short historiography of studies centering on landscapes as powered social environments, and the materiality of ideology. Firstly, as noted by

Hauser & Hicks (2007), landscape studies in colonial Caribbean contexts have not accounted for how powered landscapes are implicated in the construction of their associated materiality. The author has proposed that the construction of materiality across diverse powered landscapes within a given, bounded society can be understood by first identifying contemporary sets of ideological social relations that were shared between them. In colonial Caribbean slave societies, three common ideological vectors include race, class and gender. Previous attempts to correlate race and class to materiality on plantations such as Otto have followed a “top-down” approach, whereby a set of expectancies from the researcher are sought and imposed upon the assemblages without regard for how local and regional ideological processes were implicated in their creation as well. The calls for understanding the materiality of ideology as a series of processes have been followed either with regional and national case studies of singular facets such as race, or at local levels with regard to poverty. To date, no research has been undertaken which explicitly links common ideological vectors in the colonial Caribbean to powered landscapes as a means of understanding how they are implicated in the construction of materiality across the whole of a given society. Not surprisingly this can be a daunting task, but facilitated when applied to the study of small islands that did not develop into full-scale plantation societies. The island of Saba, Dutch Caribbean, is therefore an excellent landscape for such an endeavour.

This research is situated in line with Orser’s (2004) and Chicone’s (2011) call to view the materiality of race and class in terms of processes, rather than a collection of “things” which innately reflect these ideologies upon their own accord, either through their location in space or according to the expectation of the archaeologists; and Hauser & Hicks’ (2007:268) desire for a landscape archaeology that maps the “permeabilities between human and object movements, and the roles of landscapes... in imagining and bringing out a diversity of Atlantic worlds”. The social, material, and spatial data derived from archaeological and documentary research on Saba are viewed as result of processes that are co-constitutive of locally-manifested ideologies of class, race, and gender on the island’s pre-emancipation colonial period. Secondly, this research is ideally structured as a means to respond to Orser’s observation that “it may very well be the case that the archaeological analysis of class may have greater analytical merit than the archaeological investigation of race. At present, historical archaeologists have yet to resolve this important issue” (Orser 2007:69). Resolving this begins with the premise that there is no social context where one is engaging in just one set of ideological relations (McGuire & Wurst 2002), which is especially pertinent when dealing with multiple landscapes.

This work begins with an overview of Saba’s geography as an entry point to landscape analysis. Saba is a small and steep island whose topography imposes practical limits towards its utility for

domestic settlement and colonial-period economic development. Furthermore, the island was divided into foreign plantation and non-plantation landscapes. From the last half of the seventeenth century to 1778, all plantations on Saba appear to have been owned in absentia through government officials, planters, and merchants in St. Eustatius, while Sabans, upon non-plantation, locally-owned landscapes were engaged largely with subsistence agriculture, shoe and textile manufacturing, fishing, and seafaring. A variety of sites have been excavated throughout Saba's pre-emancipation colonial period, targeting contexts whereupon particular aspects of ideological social relations were more prominent over others, as a means to compile a comparative database of spatial and material data that were implicated in them. Domestic-oriented contexts were targeted in particular. As a result of these efforts, overall, it is expected that the certain facets of ideology will lend themselves towards archaeological analyses with more ease than others in these contexts. What will become apparent in the application of dialectics to archaeology as part of this research, however, is the problematic nature of pursuing research that is centered upon identifying singular ideological abstracts without accounting for others. This is especially notable given the deep divisions fostered by class and race in colonial slavery contexts. Another difficulty is encountered in differentiating between disparate groups through material things that employed more or less identical material culture. How can archaeologists distinguish the materiality of free poverty from slavery, or "white poverty" versus "free black poverty"? This difficulty is compounded when ideological identities, such as poverty, are imposed upon groups based on perspective or by legislation. How can poverty be archaeologically visible when poverty is a class bestowed upon certain households by governing officials; by extension, who is deserving and undeserving of this kind of poverty? On Saba, which was widely regarded as being inhabited by "poor people" by others in the region, to whom are differences in materiality on the island even ideologically relevant when an entire people and their belongings are homogenized in such a fashion?

Saba's geography and basic social landscape will be discussed Chapter 2, followed by a historiography of relevant archaeological research between Saba, St. Eustatius, and Dutch St. Maarten. A discussion as to how powered ideas foster inequality, commonly through common social abstractions designated as class, race, and gender is presented in Chapter 3. The primary source materials employed and historical methodologies are discussed in Chapter 4, followed by a discussion of the historical processes rooted in the continued conscious and unconscious application of these powered ideas in Saban social relations. The methodology and results of archaeological excavations which formed the spatial and material databases are discussed in Chapters 5 and 6. Chapter the 5 concerns the plantations that were excavated as part of this research, while Chapter 6 discusses the

relevant non-plantation sites on Saba. Chapter 7 synthesizes the data from the previous three chapters relative to the research questions articulated at the beginning of Chapter 1.