Facing society : A study of identity through head shaping practices among the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean in the ceramic age and colonial period

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1 INTRODUCTION

'No man is an Island'
John Donne (1624)

It is a truth universally acknowledged that humankind – and perhaps Western culture in particular – has always been fascinated by the abnormal and odd, especially when it comes to the human body. Exemplified by the Victorian interest in freak shows and human oddities, it is in this light that the enduring historic fascination with deformed and warped head shapes can be considered. First mentioned in the classical works of various Greek and Roman scholars and further explored by the medieval and early modern works on human anatomy, the subject of cranial modification continues to fascinate and divide scholars in equal measures to this day.

It should be emphasised that both the perspectives on the subject and the objectives of research have shifted significantly – some might even say dramatically – from what could essentially be considered as describing abnormalities and oddities to an attempt at understanding the full social relevance of these important and lasting cultural traditions. Head shaping, as an intentional cultural practice undertaken by social agents, can provide valuable insights into past societies and identities. This ties in with the fact that human bodies are no longer understood as merely a biological construct, but viewed as the nexus between biology and culture (Buikstra and Scott 2009; Sofaer 2006). Deliberately altered crania thus represent the vital intersection between the biological human body, the cultural perceptions of an individual, and their social relationships, which are so often inaccessible to archaeologists dealing with past societies.

Accordingly, head shaping practices offer a rare window into past embodied identity formation and expression on many different levels, ranging from the individual to the social. Identity and the process of identification are central to human social life and yet – or perhaps rather therefore – difficult to define. For now, identity can be seen as a dynamic and situational social construct describing who a person is, especially in relation to others. This will be expended upon in a review of the topic in Chapter 2, where the intricacies of the issues can be explored. Applying these latest theoretical perceptions into identity to studies of intentional cranial modification has yielded vital insights into the formation and expression of past social identities, boundaries,

and structure as well as early socialisation processes and personhood (Blom 2005a,b; Duncan and Hofling 2011; Geller 2004, 2006; Hoshower et al. 1995; Tiesler 2012, 2013; Torres-Rouff 2003, 2009).

The altered head shapes produced by intentional cranial modification among the indigenous inhabitants of the Caribbean archipelago were noticed by Columbus and his crew, who records it in his accounts of the first voyage (Dunn and Kelley 1991). Despite five centuries of interest and investigation into the history of the Caribbean, the full potential of investigating the practice of cranial modification and its social relevance in the mosaic of communities that comprised the Caribbean before and after contact has not been fulfilled. By moving beyond cranial shapes to investigate the social values and ties of head shaping practices in the Amerindian communities of the Caribbean, this study will contribute to our understanding of social identities in these societies.

1.1 CONTESTED IDENTITIES

Reconstructions of past indigenous identities in the Caribbean that are based on archaeological proxies for social identification and differentiation, information gained from historic documents, or a combination of the two, have so far proven complicated and contested. One of the founding fathers of Caribbean archaeology, Irving Rouse, created a culture history framework of the region that remains dominant to this day. In his own words, Rouse forms 'styles or complexes of pottery and other artefacts, each of which is indicative of a single people and culture, and plot their distribution on chronological charts in order to determine their units in time as well as in space' (Rouse 1990:59). The resulting homogeneous bounded cultures do not match our current understanding of the dynamic communities and ethnic groups leaving traces of their existence in the archaeological record. Furthermore, Roussian styles are often incorrectly correlated with ethnic identity and accordingly critiques of the Roussian system have been abundant in Caribbean archaeology in the last few decades (e.g. Curet 2003; Oliver 1999; Pestle et al. 2013; Rodríguez Ramos 2010; Wilson 2007).

Recent investigations have moved beyond the seriation of ceramics as a proxy for a singular group identity by studying various aspects of material culture, languages, settlement patterns, social organisation, mortuary practices, and food ways to provide a more holistic and diverse picture of Caribbean communities (see Keegan and Hofman 2017 and Keegan et al. 2013 for an overview of the current state of affairs). Each of these aspects provides important building blocks for understanding past communities and implies human actions, yet the social agent is often lost and little attention is paid to notions of personhood or individual identities. By studying the intentional modification

of individual social bodies, this study will be able to address identity and society from the personal perspective of the social agent as well as on various collective levels providing a novel approach to the (re)construction of Caribbean identities.

On the other side of the historical divide, issues around ethnic identities are equally complex starting with Christopher Columbus, who contrasts the peaceful and noble Taíno or Arawak living on the Greater Antilles with the savage and cannibalistic Carib of the Lesser Antilles. This dichotomy was perpetuated in other early colonial European writing and eventually formalised by Rouse in 1948 (Hofman et al. 2008; Patterson 1991, Whitehead 1995). This false dichotomy is based on a misunderstanding of indigenous sources, and such confusion, errors, inherent biases of the writer, and attempts to fit indigenous social structure into the mould of European social organisation familiar to the authors, plague the historic sources of the colonial period. This complicates attempts to understand past social processes such as group identity formation and expression in the Caribbean despite what at first glance appears to be convenient historic documentation. The notion of the Taíno as a homogeneous ethnic group living on the Greater Antilles has, for example, been refuted based on archaeological evidence of heterogeneous material cultural assemblages and social processes (Curet 2003; Hofman et al. 2008; Keegan 2013; Wilson 2007). By combining osteo-archaeological evidence on head shaping practices with a critical approach to historic sources, this investigation can enhance our knowledge of indigenous identities and their role in the cultural mosaic of the early colonial period.

Though the insights into identity that can be gained from investigating intentional cranial modification are paramount to understanding and contextualizing the archaeological and historic record of the region, they will also contribute to modern issues. The current identities of the inhabitants of the Caribbean are based on the early colonial melting pot with influences from Amerindian, European, African, and Asian ancestors. This amalgamation can be seen quite literally by studying the DNA of modern islanders (Martínez-Cruzado et al. 2005; Moreno-Estrada et al. 2013; Schroeder et al. 2015), but is also intimated through more intangible social concepts that shape what it means to be Caribbean. Past indigenous identities have left enduring traces in the modern social fabric of the region, illustrated by the recent Taíno revival movement on Puerto Rico. Reconstructing past identity practices using intentional cranial modification will improve our understanding of the rich cultural mosaic of current Caribbean people and reconnect modern islanders with their ancestors. Such community outreach is vital to efforts to protect the threatened cultural heritage of the region before it is destroyed by natural disasters or human actions (Hofman and Hoogland 2016; Siegel and Righter 2011).

1.2 FACING SOCIETY

The principal aim of this investigation is to study the creation, embodiment, and transformation of personal and collective identities in indigenous Caribbean communities through a reconstruction of head shaping practices. A multidisciplinary approach combining archaeology, anthropology, history, and sociology will be advanced to investigate the social entanglements of intentional cranial modification against the backdrop of the wider social, cultural, and political developments before and after the pivotal intercultural contact of 1492.

Fundamental in approaching these objectives is the (re)analysis of skeletal material from the region in order to reconstruct cranial modification patterns in Caribbean communities at local and regional levels. Such patterns include the prevalence of head shaping and the cranial shape(s) found in different communities. Other social variables that may serve as proxies for elements of identity, such as biological sex, geographic origins of individuals elucidated via isotopic analysis, and various aspects of mortuary practices, will also be taken into account whenever available. However, understanding the full social relevance of intentional cranial modification requires moving beyond skeletal remains towards an understanding of living people and their dynamic social setting. This will be done by combining the osteological data on human crania with a theoretical approach that connects a social constructionist view of identity formation and expression with agency and practice and incorporates social and cultural elements of appearance and early socialisation processes recovered from historic sources.

The patterns of modification produced by this investigation, complimented with additional data from archaeology and history, will be studied in a multiscalar fashion using a twofold approach incorporating the complementary spatial and diachronic dimensions of the practice. After all, head shaping unites the individual and the social through cultural practice and therefore allows the exploration of identities at numerous levels ranging from individual personhood to communal identities at various scales. The potential social boundaries demarcated by altered cranial shapes will be explored within and between communities, as head shaping practices may be tied to internal differentiation between social actors or groups of individuals within the community or serve as an external distinction between different social collectives at scales ranging from villages to regional interaction spheres.

Trends in Caribbean head shaping practices are also investigated from a diachronic perspective. The embedded nature of intentional cranial modification suggests that broader social and cultural changes will impact the identities expressed

through altered head shapes and by extension the practice itself. Patterns of cranial modification will be evaluated against the dynamic social history of the region characterised by interaction and exchange. Particular attention will be paid to shifts in social structure and political organisation seen during the transition from Early to Late Ceramic Age, as well as the intercultural interaction and social transformations seen in the Early Colonial period.

1.3 DISSERTATION OUTLINE

Chapter 2 introduces the concept of cranial modification from a biological and anatomical perspective. Insight into altered cranial shapes starts with an understanding of the biological processes of cranial development and the ways in which humans have adapted these to suit their own needs. Human anatomy dictates both the possibilities and limitations for cranial alterations and establishes the framework in which the practitioner operates. Human head shaping practices are explored to illustrate both the variety of cranial shapes and the manner in which these are achieved.

Chapter 3 presents the heuristic framework developed to elucidate the social ties of intentional cranial modification in indigenous Caribbean communities. Social constructionist perspectives on identity and social boundaries are combined with motivations for modification extracted from historical and ethnographical sources to provide potential rationales for shaping the heads of infants and inform an understanding of how these altered head shapes function in society.

Chapter 4 deals with the history of Caribbean societies from the first explorers to set foot on the islands to the European colonisation of the region after 1492. The current knowledge regarding cranial modification in the region, obtained from archaeological, historical, and ethnographic sources, is reviewed and placed in its social context to present an integrated view of the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean. From a social and cultural perspective, head shaping practices are embedded in a series of cultural decorations and modifications of the human head and body as well as a host of other early socialisation processes aimed at creating a social person. These customs generally leave little to no evidence in the archaeological record due to their immaterial or ephemeral nature, but will be reconstructed using information gathered from historic or ethnographic accounts.

Chapter 5 presents the methodology used throughout this investigation into Caribbean head shaping practices. This includes a discussion on the criteria for sample selection and the osteological methods employed, including the classification of cranial

modification. Information on the manner of documentation, consisting of forms, photographic protocols, and a database will be presented followed by a section on the statistical methods employed to analyse the data.

Chapter 6 introduces the skeletal collections that form the basis of this study of identity and intentional cranial modification. The spatial and temporal distribution of the entire sample is discussed. This is followed by a presentation of the contextual information for each of the 76 sites that comprise the sample.

Chapter 7 presents the results of the analyses carried out on the data collected from Caribbean skeletal assemblages. This chapter has been divided into four separate sections discussing the demographic composition of the sample, the cranial metrics, the cranial modification patterns and various social variables, and the temporal patterns.

Chapter 8 discusses the results presented in Chapter 7 through the lens of the heuristic framework developed in this study: a multiscalar approach from individual experiences to regional connections embedded in the broader social and cultural context of Caribbean societies. A chronological overview will discuss the rise, decline, and revival of cranial modification and the implications for social identities as a result of social, cultural, and political transformations before and after 1492.

Chapter 9 presents the conclusions of this research and discusses three themes that emerged during the study of Caribbean head shaping practices. This is followed by an exploration of future avenues of investigation.