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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9 FACING SOCIETY

The colourful communities of the Caribbean present the contrasts and conflicts that lead one to compare the area with a continually changing kaleidoscope
Mathews (1965:32)

Ever since the first settlers set foot ashore some eight thousand years ago, the Caribbean has been a cultural kaleidoscope characterised by an ongoing tension between similarity and diversity (Keegan and Hofman 2017; Mathews 1965). Identification processes, based simultaneously on such connecting and differentiating cultural features, take place at numerous spatial and temporal scales creating social collectives of varying composition and size. Intentional cranial modification is part of the suite of cultural practices shaping, expressing, and transforming the social identities of past Caribbean peoples. As a cultural custom that uses the human body as its canvas to create an embodied social signal, a study of head shaping practices provides a unique perspective for the analysis of past identities embedded in the individual human body.

Building on these ideas, this research aimed to elucidate the social connections of head shaping practices though a framework combining social constructionist perspectives on identification and early socialisation processes with information on head shaping practices gained from osteological data as well as ethnographic and historic sources. Such an approach bridges the divide between natural sciences and the humanities,

The study was guided by the main research question:

> What can the study of head shaping practices contribute to a better understanding of identities in the indigenous communities of the Caribbean in the Ceramic Age and early Colonial Period?

This overarching question was approached by a multiscalar investigation of two complementary dimensions of head shaping practices in indigenous Caribbean societies: 1) the spatial distribution of the custom investigated to determine whether patterns of cranial modification varied between individuals, communities, and larger social collectives, and 2) a diachronic perspective used to determine whether social and cultural developments throughout time impacted head shaping practices and by

extension social identities. Taken together, these components form an integrated social history of head shaping in the Caribbean that contributes to a better understanding of past indigenous identities in the region.

9.1 SHAPING CARIBBEAN IDENTITIES

The practice of head shaping is first found among Caribbean communities in the Early Ceramic Age at the social boundary between new immigrants from the mainland and Archaic Age communities already present in the north-eastern Caribbean. This frontier led to social and cultural innovations, including the emergence of the Huecoid (Boomert 2014; Oliver 1999) and the appearance of head shaping in Huecoid and Saladoid communities present in both human remains and material culture. At this point, there is insufficient evidence to determine whether head shaping was part of the cultural customs brought into the islands by mainland communities or an innovation emanating from the social exchange across boundaries between different peoples. Regardless, the Early Ceramic Age was a dynamic period in Caribbean history that shaped its inhabitants for centuries to come.

After the introduction and subsequent spread of intentional cranial modification, altered head shapes were likely used to express in-group differentiation and localised identities in the Early Ceramic Age. The transition to the Late Ceramic Age was marked by a shift in social organisation that emphasised local communities and their ancestral ties (Curet and Oliver 1998; Torres 2012). These emergent developments impacted social structure and identities and therefore both head shaping practices as well as the composition and scale of communities.

In the Greater Antilles, these developments formed the basis for the *cacicazgos* and increased social stratification encountered by European colonisers in the early colonial period. The Late Ceramic Age Taíno communities of the Greater Antilles were embedded in a regional network of mobility and exchange that crossed geographical and social boundaries (Hofman et al. 2008). Here, a homogeneous pattern of cranial modification emerges with similar prevalence rates and cranial shapes throughout the region representing a collective social identity. As communities and political networks expand, such a shared feature ties people and communities together and facilitates social interaction across larger distances. The altered cranial shape of infant KR337 from Kelbey's Ridge 2 on Saba, a trading post on the edge of the Greater Antillean interaction sphere (Hofman and Hoogland 2011; Hoogland and Hofman 1999), demonstrates the importance of maintaining social connections between communities and individuals across the Caribbean Sea.

A similar reorientation in kinship structures towards ancestral lineage and local community was seen in the Lesser Antilles at the beginning of the Late Ceramic Age, but leadership and social status differentiation remained more flexible and transient in these communities (Boomert 2014; Hofman and Hoogland 2011). Cranial modification patterns show a great deal of diversity in prevalence and shape, reflecting the local developments of the Lesser Antilles: the Leeward Islands becoming part of the Greater Antillean interaction sphere and the Windward Islands orienting themselves more towards the South American coast. The exogamous marriage practices of Caribbean communities contribute to the variety in head shapes found in the skeletal assemblages from the region. Partners born in another village may have a different cranial shape as a result of diverse local child care practices in this region.

In tandem with these developments in social organisation seen during the Ceramic Age, there is an increased focus on depicting human faces in the material culture of the entire Caribbean region (Mol 2014). These anthropomorphic heads are found in a variety of media, from two-dimensional representations in rock art to three dimensional sculptures in stone, ceramics, or shell, and sometimes including references to head shaping such as a portrayal of the altered head shape or modification device. These depictions serve to reiterate and reinforce cultural ideals and underscore the growing importance of the head in Caribbean culture and society.

The arrival of Columbus in 1492 marks the beginning of intercultural interaction in the Caribbean on a global scale between the Amerindian indigenous inhabitants, the European colonisers, and later the enslaved Africans (Hofman et al. 2014). Processes of colonisation, acculturation, and resistance impacted indigenous social organisation and in turn head shaping practices. This is seen in cranial modification patterns from the early colonial *encomienda* settlement of El Chorro de Maíta, Cuba. A decline in cranial modification seen among the non-adult individuals buried at the central cemetery in this village can be attributed to a significant transformation in the group identity expressed by the altered head shapes as a result of profound changes to indigenous social structure. These adjustments to cultural practices took place at a different pace across communities and islands as a result of variations in local context and the expression of individual agency by indigenous people.

The case of the Black Carib in the Lesser Antilles demonstrates that a loss of head shaping practices was not the only possible outcome of the dynamic social situation in the early colonial melting pot. This community of African descendants on the island of St. Vincent adopted intentional cranial modification from their indigenous neighbours (Kerns 1977). At first, the altered head shapes may have functioned as a mark to distinguish freeborn African descendants, but they likely transformed into a symbol of

group identity that facilitated internal group cohesion. However, this revival of cranial modification in the Caribbean was short lived as the deportation of the Black Carib after the Carib Wars against the British, at the end of the 18th century, resulted in the abandonment of the practice (Conzemius 1828).

This marks the end of intentional cranial modification in the Caribbean, though ethnographic and medical studies conducted on modern inhabitants of the region have shown that traces of head shaping practices in the form of moulding and more general elements of early socialisation processes remain to this very day (FitzSimmons et al. 1998; Herskovits 1964). The longevity of components of these cultural practices, despite centuries of social interaction and transformation, is testimony to their embedded nature as a result of integration into early socialisation processes and their inherent resistance to change.

9.2 THEMES AND FUTURE RESEARCH

During this research, three main themes emerged with broader social and cultural implications for the study of Caribbean indigenous communities that represent key directions for future research. After a discussion of these themes, this chapter will close with some remarks on the technological advances that may assist the study of intentional cranial modification and the promising aspects they provide for the dissemination of scientific results to a wider audience.

Becoming Human

This study has shown that intentional cranial modification, which commences almost immediately after birth, is part of the cultural customs surrounding childbirth and early child care in Caribbean societies. As such, it is a component of early socialisation processes aimed at creating a social person from the newborn infant and represents an important passage rite. Despite the importance of early socialisation processes for developing personhood, it is – like most social and cultural customs – not rigidly adhered to in all cases but open to a certain degree of flexibility. Slight variations in head shape may, for example, represent different ways of executing head shaping by practitioners that do not necessarily affect the underlying social connotations of the altered head shape. Ill health of the infant in the first months of life, the window in which cranial modification must commence, may be reason to postpone head shaping or opt out of the custom altogether. This may also help explain absence of cranial modification in certain individuals in communities where cranial modification is used to express

a shared notion of group identity. Therefore, head shaping practices are perhaps best viewed as a cultural and social ideal that may be trumped by circumstances and influenced by choices made by social agents.

The early colonial sources documenting the Lesser Antillean Carib provide glimpses into other cultural customs executed at this crucial period in the infant's life, such as the naming of the child by a chosen relative or friend or the piercing of ears, lower lip, and septum. This is an important reminder that cranial modification does not exist in isolation, but is part of a suite of cultural modifications and decorations of the human body related to social and cultural ideals. The importance of moving beyond crania to living faces and people, integrating all aspects of physical appearance, has been stressed throughout this study. This may be achieved by investigating other elements of body modification and decoration, for example body painting using ceramic body stamps, decorative shell or stone beads and pendants, or the binding of female calves mentioned in early colonial sources on the Lesser Antilles (Allaire 1997). A study of historic documents may yield information on additional aspects of physical appearance or cultural practice, as not all human behaviour leaves traces in the archaeological record. Such a multifaceted approach may yield complementary insights into embodied identities in the Caribbean.

The human body is an excellent canvas for signalling social identities, but past and present communities use all available means to display social affiliations. A holistic approach to identity practices must move beyond the body and incorporate all types of material culture recovered from the archaeological record, such as ceramic styles (Hofman 1993; Hofman et al. 2007; Ulloa Hung 2014), shell faces (Mol 2014), or lithics (Knippenberg 2006). The divergent patterns produced by such a study will be a more accurate reflection of past social collectives existing simultaneously on various scales and move beyond the neat bounded cultural units produced by previous archaeological investigations. The latest views on social organisation and kinship structure will inform such explorations, but because of the dialectical relationship and entangled nature of social webs, new insights into identity practices will simultaneously influence and transform our understanding of indigenous societies.

Boundless Interaction

The role of boundaries between different social collectives as loci for interaction and innovation, essentially and perhaps counterintuitively connecting rather than dividing, is seen throughout Caribbean history. Bridging social borders brings about new ways of thinking and doing and these processes are reflected in the development of head

shaping practices in the region. The rise, decline, and revival of intentional cranial modification all occur at peaks of interaction between different social collectives.

Head shaping practices in the Caribbean appear at the start of the Ceramic Age in the north-eastern Caribbean at the peak of interaction along social boundaries between different communities, including Archaic Age peoples and new immigrants from the mainland. Direct evidence of these pioneering practices is scarce, complicating the intriguing question concerning the origin of the practice. Was cranial modification a local innovation or a cultural custom originating on the mainland that was introduced by the newcomers? A twofold approach would be able to shed more light on this matter: the incorporation of Lithic and Archaic Age skeletal material as well as a refinement of the chronology of Early Ceramic Age skeletal assemblages through radiocarbon dating of each individual.

Recent investigations have demonstrated that the exchange networks of the indigenous Caribbean communities, and by extension the social boundaries of these communities, spread far beyond the adjacent coastal regions of the South American mainland (Hofman et al. 2010; Hofman and Hoogland 2011; Laffoon et al. 2014; Rodriguez Ramos 2011). A geographical expansion of the societies under investigation incorporating the Lower Orinoco and Amazonian interaction spheres and Central America using the heuristic framework and integrated multiscalar approach advocated in this study, may yield better insights into the social ties represented by cranial modification on both an individual and community scale as well as past indigenous Caribbean identities as a whole.

Between Unity and Diversity

The tension between diversity and homogeneity, a defining feature of the Caribbean kaleidoscope of peoples throughout its history, is visible in the development of head shaping during the Ceramic Age. A homogeneous pattern of cranial modification is found in the Greater Antilles communities of the Late Ceramic Age, representing a collective identity that tied the various Taíno communities together. However, this overarching display of similarity in head shapes does not in any way diminish the local heterogeneity in language and material culture found among the Taínos (Curet 2003; Keegan 2013; Hofman et al. 2008). Rather than returning to the old vision of a singular homogeneous culture proposed in the early decades of Caribbean archaeology based on the writings of Columbus and other early chroniclers, this study has instead elucidated one of the social mechanisms that integrated these varied social collectives on a larger regional scale. Fostering a feeling of shared cultural and social ideals through similar

and clearly visible altered head shapes would have facilitated interaction and exchange between distant communities and supported the growing scale of social and political organisation due to the expansion of the *cacicazgos*.

Dealing with this tension between uniformity and diversity, exemplified well by the case of head shaping practices among the Taínos yet present in most archaeological studies, will require archaeologists studying past social worlds to consider scale and context as crucial aspects of their investigation. Identification processes as understood in the social constructionist paradigm, which underlie many different elements of the archaeological record, will always create multiple semi-overlapping patterns with mismatched boundaries. Distribution patterns of languages, pots, flint, architectural features, house plans, or personal adornments, for example, will not necessarily correspond neatly to one another. This must not be considered a difficult nuisance to be dealt with by smoothing over differences to create convenient categorisations or homogeneous units, but seen as a realistic multifaceted representation of ancient social worlds that presents new opportunities for studying and understanding the past.

Bringing Head Shaping into the 21st century

Recent technological advancements in three-dimensional (3D) imaging and digitisation have opened up new opportunities for the study, documentation, and preservation of human skeletal material. Portable and relatively inexpensive 3D laser scanners allow researchers to produce high resolution digital models of specimens. These models can be used to obtain measurements and coordinates, virtually reconstruct fragmented bones, or apply more sophisticated analytical techniques (Kuzminsky and Gardiner 2012; Tocheri 2009). In addition, their use will limit the necessity of handling of fragile human remains and thus aid in the preservation of skeletal collections. Online archives of digitised skeletal collections will improve access for investigators and encourage collaborative efforts (Algee-Hewitt and Wheat 2016; Kuzminsky and Gardiner 2012; Sumner and Riddle 2009).

Digital imaging techniques have already been applied to study intentional cranial modification through two-dimensional landmark and outline data and three-dimensional geometric morphometric approaches (e.g. Friess and Baylac 2003; Kuzminsky and Gardiner 2012; Ross and Ubelaker 2009). These approaches have changed and improved our understanding of the effects of cranial modification on anatomical metrics and non-metrics and provide new means of analysing and quantifying altered head shapes.

The scope of recent advances in 3D imaging techniques reaches beyond academia into the public domain and has profound implications for scientific outreach and valorisation. Digital models can be used in the construction of interactive museum exhibits and even virtual expositions in an online environment leading to improved access to, participation in, and knowledge of scientific studies and insights. In the case of human remains, virtual imaging can also partially solve the moral and ethical issues regarding the public display of skeletal material.

The life histories of KR337 and CDM72B sketched in this investigation could be brought to life using these techniques. Virtual facial reconstructions based on 3D models of their crania would bring the public face-to-face with their ancestors and provide a powerful tool for interacting with the past. This experience could be enhanced with digital reconstructions of the burial context and the village in which they lived. Incorporating these new developments in such a manner would strengthen the distribution of knowledge gained by academic studies to the general public, certainly the core task of archaeology and science as a whole.

The archaeological past can also be tied to the present using the theme of identity, surely as important in bygone communities as it is in today's increasingly globalised world. This investigation has, through a multidisciplinairy approach to processes of identification, illuminated various matters of identity in indigenous Caribbean communities and in doing so has underlined that identities matter.