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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SUMMARY FACING SOCIETY

'and all of them very wide in the forehead and head'
Columbus (translated by Dunn and Kelley 1991:69)

In one of his first descriptions of the inhabitants of the Americas, Christopher Columbus introduces the practice of intentional cranial modification. This permanent and visible alteration of the human skull shape has been a topic of academic and popular debate ever since. This research uses such head shaping practices to investigate matters of identity among the indigenous Caribbean communities in the pre-colonial Ceramic Age and Colonial period. This is achieved using a multidisciplinary approach combining archaeology, anthropology, history, and sociology to study the social ties of intentional cranial modification against the broader social, cultural, and political developments in the Caribbean both before and after the crucial intercultural encounters of 1492.

Intentional cranial modification is a practice that produces a permanent alteration of the shape of the skull through the application of pressure in early infancy, usually executed by the mother or midwife. Different shapes and degrees of alteration can be achieved through variations in the location and duration of pressure, as well as the materials used to construct the modification apparatus. The permanence and high degree of visibility make it a convenient marker of social identity that has become embodied by the transformation of the human body. Identity is considered here as a dynamic and situational social construct that describes who a person is, particularly in relation to other individuals and collectives. There is no singular identity, but rather overlapping elements of identities. These processes of identification are central to human social life.

Fundamental to the study of identity in Caribbean indigenous communities was the (re)analysis of skeletal material from the region. In total, 556 individuals from 76 different sites in 15 countries from the Caribbean archipelago and mainland region were studied. The size of the skeletal assemblages and available contextual information varied considerably, though the majority of the material can be dated to the Late Ceramic Age (AD 600 – 1492). The data produced by this study can be used to reconstruct patterns of modification in Caribbean communities, such as the

prevalence of head shaping and the cranial shape(s) encountered. Other variables such as biological sex, geographic origin of individuals, and various aspects of mortuary traditions have been taken into account wherever possible as these may serve as proxies for elements of identity.

To study such a diverse sample, a twofold multiscalar approach was developed incorporating the complementary spatial and temporal dimensions of intentional cranial modification. The spatial analysis ranged from local to regional, as the social boundaries demarcated by modification may be found within or between individuals and communities at various scales. Patterns of modification, consisting of prevalence, head shapes, and relations between head shaping practices and other social indicators from the archaeological record, were also assessed against the everchanging social backdrop of the Caribbean characterised by interaction and exchange throughout its history. The embedded nature of the practice implies that broader social and cultural changes will impact the identities expressed through altered head shapes.

The first evidence of head shaping practices in the Caribbean was found in the skeletal remains and material culture of the Early Ceramic Age, particularly in the north-eastern Caribbean. This is where a new wave of immigrants from the mainland of South America interacted with the first Archaic inhabitants of the islands. The emergence of cranial modification, in this respect, seems to be linked to processes of interaction and exchange across social boundaries, where frontiers between social collectives serve as important places for interaction and innovation.

In the Late Ceramic Age, head shaping practices were present in communities throughout the Caribbean and mainland, yet different regional patterns of modification can be distinguished. A high prevalence and relatively homogeneous pattern of cranial modification was found in the Greater Antilles with an emphasis on flattening of the forehead. These shared head shaping practices indicate a collective group identity. As communities and political networks expanded during the Late Ceramic Age, such an identity would have tied people and communities together. These communal practices extending across seas also connected the communities in the Greater Antillean interaction sphere and facilitated interaction and exchange between distant communities.

In the Lesser Antilles and on the mainland, a much more diverse pattern of cranial modification characterises the Late Ceramic Age reflecting the divergent social developments in the region. The Leeward Islands become part of the Greater Antillean interaction sphere, whereas the Windward Islands orient themselves towards the

South American mainland. The exogamous marriage practices also contribute to the variety of head shaping practices found in the skeletal collections from the region.

The arrival of Columbus in 1492 marked a turning point in indigenous Caribbean history. The intercultural interaction and resulting processes of colonisation, acculturation, and resistance had profound repercussions for indigenous societies and identities, thus impacting head shaping practices. Direct evidence of this can be found at the early colonial site of El Chorro de Maíta in north-eastern Cuba. A decline in cranial modification in the non-adult individuals buried in the cemetery was the result of significant changes to indigenous identity in the early Colonial period. Such transformations of deeply embedded social practices took place at different rates across the Caribbean depending on the local circumstances.

A decline in head shaping practices was not the only potential response to colonial processes in the dynamic social setting of the early colonial Caribbean, as is illustrated by the Black Carib of the Lesser Antilles. This group of free African descendants living on the island of St. Vincent adopted head shaping practices from neighbouring indigenous communities likely, at first, to differentiate freeborn African children from enslaved Africans. The altered head shapes may also have served to facilitate internal community cohesion as a symbol of group identity. The deportation of the Black Carib after the Carib Wars against the British at the end of the 18th century caused an abandonment of the practice and cut short the renewal of intentional cranial modification in the Caribbean. Even so, modern ethnographic and medical studies still find traces of head shaping practices in the form of mild moulding as well as other elements of indigenous socialisation processes in modern Caribbean communities. This longevity, even after centuries, is a demonstration of the deeply embedded nature of early socialisation processes and shows how indigenous social practices still effect the current multi-ethnic and multi-cultural Caribbean.