

Women Potters? A Preliminary Examination of Documentary and Material Culture Evidence from Barbados

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Introduction

The technology of the sugar industry in Barbados, from the mid-17th to mid-19th centuries, involved a type of ceramic, known as a sugar pot, which was pivotal in the processing of sugar cane to sugar. Documentary evidence suggests that local pottery production of sugar wares which began in the mid seventeenth century had by the late seventeenth century replaced wooden moulds on the plantation (Handler 1963a, 1978). Barbadian ceramic production, with its use of wheel technology and enslaved male potters, is atypical in a region dominated by hand built ceramics manufactured by enslaved women. This paper introduces new documentary evidence that indicates for the first time both occupational roles, as well as female participation, in the pottery industry during the period of slavery. The new evidence has serious implications for the interpretation of the Barbadian pottery industry.

History of Ceramic Technology in Barbados

From the late 1600s through the mid 1800s, sugar wares were imported to Barbados from London, Bristol and Liverpool. However such importation was supplemented by local production on the plantation pot houses. The early technology utilised in the local production of sugar wares is unknown from the documentary sources, and as such we are unsure of precisely what aspects of European ceramic technology were transmitted to the island and to enslaved Africans. What is known of the technology is that it comprised a wheel and kiln, of almost certain English origin. Enslaved people possibly modified this technology overtime. Nevertheless, by the 1700s enslaved Africans, instructed by European potters, were engaged in ceramic production in Barbados.

The transmission of European ceramic technology to enslaved Africans resulted in the creation of a local tradition of pottery production amongst descendents of the enslaved. Training of the enslaved is illustrated in the accounts of the Codrington estates, willed to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in 1710. These documents note the loss of the enslaved master potter in 1713 before he was able to fully instruct his enslaved apprentice. Documentary sources also indicate both the presence of an enslaved potter and the practice of such master potters to instruct other enslaved men in the techniques of ceramic production.

Enslaved men would have been initially trained in pottery production by indentured potters (Handler 1963a). This instruction continued into the mid-eighteenth century, for in 1784 Isaac Delevan was contracted by the Codrington estate to instruct enslaved men following the death of the enslaved master potter on the estate. Delevan's work embodied the transmission of European technical knowledge to enslaved men who in turn taught their skills to other enslaved men. Thus, a deliberate policy arose of transferring these pottery skills to enslaved men that over time established a master /apprentice system amongst the enslaved (Bennet 1958; Hartley 1949).

The labour force, engaged in pottery manufacturing on the plantation, also contributed to the owners' profits, as surplus ceramics were sold to neighbouring estates. Consett estate is an example where there was profitability from the peddling of surplus ceramics. In 1715, a profit of 117 pounds was registered at Consett, following the sales of wares to neighbours (Bennet: 1958, 12, 16). Unfortunately, little evidence exists to detail the technological and manufacturing output of such pot houses. Documentary sources are neither exhaustive nor comprehensive. However, extant documentary evidence provides useful information on location, ownership and taxes, which in turn has helped to reconstruct the nature of Barbados's pottery industry.

During the period 1710-1760, an average of some 25 pot kilns are noted in the tax records of the island (Handler and Lange: 1978, 142). Most of these kilns were located in the Scotland District parishes. The number of kilns gleaned from the available documentary evidence highlights the apparent robustness of the industry, with kilns located in various parishes.

In his 1766 will, John Frere bequeathed to his son Henry one of his estates in the parish of St. Philip. The estate included a "Pot house, Pot kiln and other buildings." The will also directs that another estate bequeathed to another son, Applewaithe, should always "be supplied with Pots, Jars and Bricks and all sorts and all such other ware as they shall stand in need of until he shall arrive to the age of twenty one"(BDA, RB6/ 17/427). Frere's will, while detailing the nature of his bequest, also provides information on the types of wares produced at the pottery works. A search of the Barbadian records also showed that a William Addison owned a pot kiln and thirty slaves in the parish of St. Philip in 1729 (CO28/40). Importantly, these documents have revealed female involvement in the pottery industry during the period of slavery.

Females in the Pottery Industry?

In tracing the ownership history of the Freres,' the author located a 1787 deed transferring their property to the Lascelles family. The deed outlined the lands to be transferred to creditors and recorded the plantation of Thickets and its assets. Thickets estate was located in the eastern parish of St. Philip. It comprised 544 acres with 244 enslaved persons. In detailing the names, occupations, places of origin and ages of the enslaved, the deed specifically noted the gender of the pot house workers.

NAME	AGE	PLACE OF BIRTH	OCCUPATION
NED POTTER	41	BARBADIAN	POTTER
JAMES/JAMEY	39	AFRICAN	FIELD & POTTER
GEORGE	38	BARBADIAN	CLAYER
JUAW	38	AFRICAN	FIELD & POTTER
WINBAH	38	AFRICAN	FIELD & POTTER
WILL	43	AFRICAN	POTTER & FIELD

FRANK	38	BARBADIAN	CLAYER
BACCUS	41	AFRICAN	BOSON & FIELD
PRINCE	38	AFRICAN	FIELD & POTTER
QUASHY	38	AFRICAN	FIELD & POTTER
JOE	33	AFRICAN	FIELD & POTTER
SUE	33	AFRICAN	FIELD & POTHOUSE
LITTLE BENNEBAH	29	AFRICAN	FIELD & POTHOUSE
MOLLY	43	BARBADIAN	DRIVER
MULLINDER	35	AFRICAN	FIELD & POTHOUSE
GREAT BENNEBAH	33	BARBADIAN	FIELD & POTHOUSE
THOMZIN	24	AFRICAN	FIELD & POTHOUSE

Table 1: List of workers on the Thickets estate (compiled from Barbados Department of Archives). (compiled from BDA: RB1/193)

This deed is the only known one of its kind that provides information on the scale of plantation ceramic production in Barbados. Its analysis allows for the identification of occupational roles, sex and origin of the enslaved. It thus provides insight into the operations of the various plantation pottery works. Table 1 indicates that approximately 17 persons, both male and female, were employed in the pot house. The gender and place of birth of the workers indicate that women comprised 41% of the workforce, whilst the African-born constituted 86% of the female workforce (see Table 1). The workforce is comprised 7% of the total enslaved workforce on the plantation. Its size suggests that a considerable workforce was employed in the Thickets pottery works.

In comparison, the 17 persons assigned to the pot house at Thickets outnumber the entire workforce of the Codrington pot house in 1775, which had only 3 potters amongst an entire artisanal labour force of 21 (Handler 1963a, 138). The size of the Thickets workforce illustrates the scale of the pottery works on the plantation as being substantial. Its scale is duplicated in another Frere property pot house. The pottery works at the pot house, located in St. Philip, comprised 72 acres and included 3 kilns. It should be noted that a substantial outlay of capital and buildings were required to maintain such pottery works. Also of note are its 3 kilns. This number is considerable when viewed against the documentary evidence of 9 taxed kilns in the parish of St. Philip in 1716. To have owned at least 44% of those known kilns in the parish indicate a substantial outlay of capital, and by extension a considerable need for both productive and profitable pottery works. That need might have resulted in the rearrangement of the

traditional male/ female skill roles on the plantation, especially in light of the workforce composition, as described by the Thickets deed. According to documentary evidence, plantation workforces were sharply divided between skilled and unskilled labour. Within that division of praedial and non praedial labour on the plantation, women dominated the praedial labour force while men dominated the non praedial (Mair 1986). The focus of this study is on the non praedial labour force, where gender division allocates men to the artisanal class, with women providing specialised labour within the household, as well as occupying those roles deemed by male patriarchy to be ‘women’s work.’ It is this gender division within the artisanal class that the deed allows us to interrogate.

Naming and Determining Biological Sexes of the Enslaved

Names are normally associated with gender, however, and therefore in reviewing the deed, it cannot be assumed that a person’s name denotes their biological sex. Naming practices amongst the enslaved took on multiple variants ranging from adaptation of African day names to Anglicised names to persons having multiple names used to differentiate their status in an increasingly creolised world (Handler & Jacoby 1996). These naming practices are important as we seek to discern the biological sex and occupations of persons on the list. As the enslaved population on the island became more creolized, it appears from the documentary evidence that the incidence of African names increased perhaps due to the reversal of the earlier trend where the “low incidences of African names may reflect the refusal of plantation officials to use and record African names or may result from misunderstandings of African pronunciations” (Handler & Jacoby 1996: 700). This was to change by the 1780s when “about 37 percent had African names during the 1780s and 1790s, when approximately 90 percent of the island’s slaves were creoles” (Handler & Jacoby 1996: 700).

Such naming practices, inverted the gender of African names, in some instances, whereby some male African-derived names were utilised by women. For instance, “Cubenah, a male name in West Africa, occurs several times as a female name, and never as a male name in the Barbados sample, and Quashy, although mainly a male name occasionally appears as a female second name (Handler and Jacoby 1996: 698). This name inversion can lead to the inference that two persons, Juaw and Winbah, noted as Africans who laboured as Field and Potter respectively, might have been women. Though the evidence is inferential for both the gender and occupations of Juaw and Winbah, the gender of the other listed people can be accurately inferred, in keeping with the known naming practice for the island. The women are Sue, Litte Bennebah, Molly, Mullinder, Great Bennebah and Thomzin. All together, the list indicates that some nine men and six women laboured in the pot house on the Thickets plantation.

Naming and Occupations in the Pot House

Having identified their biological sexes, we now turn our attention to identifying the occupations and roles of the enslaved in the pot house. In so doing, the ability to understand occupational naming is relevant to our discussion, for without it, we are at lost as to what job is assigned to which individual on the estate.

Artisanal roles on plantation carried with them status. One way of inferring status from the documentary records can rest with the actual name given to the person. Another method might be the placement of that person’s name on the roll of the plantation. The name and order in

the list of the person called Ned Potter perhaps shares both of these methods of denoting status amongst the enslaved. His name is first on the list, which might not be indicative of status, However, its placement coupled with it being the only name to carry a suffix, Potter, in announcing his occupation, clearly demonstrates status. His name is in keeping with naming practices that sometimes indicate a particular attribute about the person (Handler & Jacoby 1996). If one is to accept these criteria, then Ned Potter can be reasonably assumed to be the master potter on the plantation.

From the order in which job titles are listed, one may discern the dominant occupation of the individual. Therefore, the primary place of occupation of the person designated as 'Potter & Field' is to be found in the pot house, whilst that of the 'Field & Potter' is the field. Such ordering of the job role might be based on skill levels. The fact that such division of occupations is necessary, might be due to the task system at work on the plantation coupled with the seasonality of some jobs. The lack of documentary evidence at this time allows us only inferential analysis of the main job roles assigned to the enslaved. Given the deliberate ordering of occupation role by the recorder, then Will as the only person designated as 'Potter & Field,' is primarily a potter trained in the art of throwing clay to make pots. The other men Prince, Quashy and Joe are primarily assigned to the field, and when needed are removed to the pot house. Their specific roles are unknown but can be inferred as perhaps being not as skilled as the person designated 'Potter & Field', given their designation of Field & Potter'.

Two persons are designated as "Clayer," George and Frank. Within the sugar manufacturing process, there exists a technique called claying in which white clay is mixed with water and then poured into the sugar mould, with its mixture whitening the sugar as it percolates. The person involved in claying may have in time been called a clayer. It is uncertain as to whether the person might have actually been involved in the processing of clay for ceramic manufacturing.

The other occupation is that of Boson & Field. On sugar estates where the mill is driven by wind power, the operator of the sails of the windmill is known as the boson. Baccus's designation as Boson & Field is indicative of the seasonality of work on the plantation. When not engaged in their primary work, the enslaved can be shifted, as work output demanded. These labour demands best explain the multiple job roles assigned to the enslaved men on the list.

Job Roles of Women

The job roles of the women were equally intriguing. We can speculate about the job roles of the following six women identified in the deed: Sue, Litte Bennebah, Molly, Mullinder, Great Bennebah and Thomzin. Of the six, one woman, Molly, had a fixed occupation of driver. Drivers on the plantation oversaw the work field gangs, from first to third with the fourth gang comprised of young children supervised by a superannuated female. Molly's role in the pot house might have been to oversee the five women, whose jobs were noted as Field & Pot house. Their work, if we are to infer ethnographically, consisted of preparing the clay, stacking the kiln, cranking the hand driven wheel, preparing and applying the glazes to pottery, similar to the work undertaken by women in mid-twentieth century Barbados (Handler 1963a,b).

Their presence in the pot house poses multiple questions. What jobs might have been assigned to them? What influence did they exert on the pottery forms being created? Did they

know how to throw? Ethnographic evidence indicates that women at Chalky Mount, the contemporary traditional home of Barbadian pottery, knew how to ‘throw pots’ (Handler 1963a). It may therefore be possible that the women in the Thickets pot house also had this knowledge. This is an area where research efforts should usefully be invested.

Despite this, the evidence clearly suggests a female presence in the pot house. This raises the possibility of these women being directly involved in pottery production. There is the possibility that work force shortages forced the training of women in ceramic production on the plantations. Outside of formal instruction, these women could have learned to throw on the wheel by observing their men folk. Another possibility is that some of the women retained knowledge of African hand building ceramic techniques and with access to clay began to manufacture pottery. What is known is that pottery manufacture took place at the Thicket pothouse, what is unknown is whether industrial and domestic ceramic manufacture took place simultaneously. Such is possible although documentary evidence is lacking.

The material culture indicating female production of earthenwares in Barbados is tentative at best. Approximately, 6 handbuilt low fired earthen wares have been noted by Handler and Lange at Newton (1978), Loftfield at Codrington (2004) and Stoner at the Jewish Synagogue in Bridgetown (personal communication, 2010). These earthenwares are in keeping with traditional female manufacturing techniques found elsewhere in the Caribbean (Peterson, Watters and Nicholson 1999, 164; Crane 1993, 17; Heath, 1991a:34; Hauser 2008:120). It is possible that wares might have been manufactured by women, especially those with access to raw materials found in a pottery works. Since the Thickets deed provides no specific information on how work was organised in the pot house, we are left to speculate on the precise role of the women within Barbados’s plantation pottery tradition.

Conclusion

Given the limited documentary and material data, the full extent of female influence on Barbados’s pottery tradition cannot be firmly established at this point in time. Despite this, the documentary record from Thickets suggests that females had some level of influence on pottery production, given the presence of enslaved women in the pottery factory. This causes us to seriously rethink the popular assumption that Barbados’s pottery tradition was exclusively male-dominated. Female presence in the pot house might have exerted some influence on the pottery forms created. The “unknown gender” of two members of the workforce might have in fact been female. It is hoped that new evidence will emerge to reshape our understanding of this critical element of Barbados’s ceramic industry.

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