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The Name of the Game: *Oware* as Men’s Social Space from Caribbean Slavery to Post-Colonial Times

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ABSTRACT
In Europe, North America and the Caribbean many museums have acquired Oware (Warri), which are elaborately carved wooden game boards. As museum objects, they represent a curiosity of a place, time, and art form, but Oware boards have never before this analysis been considered as a central component of male agency during slavery and under colonial rule. This paper illustrates how overlooked or misunderstood aspects of Caribbean material culture can be studied to re/position slave activities into contemporary heritage dialogues. In this case, we argue that when males played Oware they collectively engaged their African cultures and organised themselves in opposition to the slave plantation and colonial systems in Barbados and elsewhere in the Caribbean. The study uses documents and contemporary ethnographic interviews to argue that slave plantations and the colonial suppression of male activities and interactions were circumvented when men played an apparently innocuous game of Oware. When men played this game, they were re/creating the activities and structures of important African male groups, and thus facilitated the production of male creole social space. For more than 200 years Barbados was among the most controlling of Caribbean slave societies, and from 1834 to 1966 Barbadian society continued to be harshly dominated by English epistemologies, this therefore is an appropriate case by which to better understand the use of Oware for male agency building and the subsequent persistence and cultural importance of Oware into the 20th century.

Keywords
West Africa, Caribbean, Barbados, Creole Social Space, Oware (Warri) Game, Male Agency, Slavery, Herskovits
So although apparently innocuous to Europeans, it is argued here that the widely shared cultural meanings of Oware in pre-colonial Africa provided the foundation for new forms of creole social organisation among enslaved men of African ancestry in the Caribbean. Responding to continual suppression, this creole resistance process, based in part on the Oware game, began during slavery and continued during the harsh period of English civil domination from the end of slavery in 1834 until national independence in 1966 (Browne: 2012).

This essay asserts that during slavery in the Caribbean, men of African ancestry achieved agency [defined as personal and group power to control their lives] through a sub-rosa activity associated with playing an apparently innocuous game called Oware. The essay argues that while African men did use this game for recreation, it had the more fundamental social and cultural functions of enabling them to organise themselves illegally and plan for efforts that served their collective purposes. The game was a likely choice for these agency-building functions because any West African man who was brought into a Caribbean slave-based plantation would know of it. It is further argued that for some West African peoples, such as in Ghana among the Fante, the game was used for male social bonding, and functioned to integrate socially-key, non-kin-based groups like the Asafo (Datta: 1972, p. 110). Some data records that the game was associated with spiritual activities and that the game board itself was sacred [Plate 4] (Herskovits: 1932, pp. 34-35). Later in the analysis we discuss a number of African observations that document the spiritual interpretation of Oware.

Games are among the least suspect elements in the behaviour of a subject people and therefore no stringent measures are taken to suppress them. (Herskovits: 1932, p. 23)

This analysis extends our previously published two-part discussion regarding how women of African ancestry in Barbados and the Bahamas achieved personal and community agency by participating in the sub-rosa activity called Rotating Savings and Credit Associations (Stoffle et al.: 2009 and 2014). More broadly, together this, and those two essays now widen the dialogue regarding how captured African people wrested control of their lives away from the colonial managers of the industrial agriculture plantations where for 340 years they lived and worked as unfree labourers (Williams: 1944).
Today the Caribbean is a crucible of heated ethnic identity debates that derive from the cultural domination of colonial powers who for hundreds of years defined and enforced compliance with European national identities. During the colonial period Barbados was called Little England, and Bajans were seen as English Rustics in Black Skin (Greenfield: 1966). Since independence from their European colonial owners began in the late 1960s, the people of the modern Caribbean have had the freedom to engage in discussions about who they are, who they will be in the future, and whether or not their actions during slavery and afterwards during the colonial period are to be considered as a positive or negative heritage foundation for emergent national identities. After hundreds of years of public suppression by colonial powers, these identity debates are both essential and hostile (Reilly: 2014, pp. 10-15).

The following are a few examples of already debated, and now socially constructed, heritage symbols. One is the Black Carib Chief Chatoyer who was an early leader of the Garifuna people and who now has been officially designated as the #1 National Hero by the government of St. Vincent. Similarly, reaching into their resistant slavery past, the people of Barbados have debated and in 1998 designated ten individuals as National Heroes, including the Right Excellent Bussa, who led a slave revolt in 1816 (Craton: 1982). Jamaica has officially made public a list of their own national heroes composed of men and women who resisted British colonial slavery and colonial society (Jamaica Information Service: 2015). Active social movements focused on new ethnic identities include the officially recognised Carib social societies in Trinidad (Forte: 2005), the Taino-Arawak social societies in Puerto Rico (Barker: 2005; Haslip-Viera: 2001), the Kalinago in Dominica (Kalinago Barana Aute: 2006), and the Garifuna of Central America who now conduct pilgrimages back to St. Vincent (Charlotte: 2015).

Oware can become a positive symbol of African ancestry in the contemporary Caribbean. To do so however, it must become socially constructed by joining current heritage debates about other heritage symbols. Oware, which we argue was a men’s game first played in Africa and then in the earliest periods of slavery, had the potential of creating a unique and positive creole social space (Stoffle et al.: 2014, p. 47). The social space concept was first suggested by Olwig (1985, p. 227) who observed for St. John, U.S. Virgin Islands, that drawing on cultural resources brought with them (emphasis added), enslaved
Africans built an Afro-Caribbean culture in an attempt to create their own autonomy and an independent existence. Burrowes (2015) argues that in Barbados post-slavery communities combined their African-Caribbean heritage into their immediate lived experience and created what may be seen as a third space of existence which granted them access to the world of the intangible, the spiritual, as they learnt to walk/sail good in their day-to-day existence. Landships, for example, were designed to counter the immediate harsh lived environments and create constructs of sailing freely on land. Matthew Clarke, a contemporary Barbadian graphic artist has imaged this third space of existence with a ship composed of ancestors’ bodies that are being sailed by a Landship group (Lynch and Clarke: 2014). [Plate 4]

Similarly, it is argued here that Oware was re/conceptualised as a foundation of a new creole social space for men during slavery: a space that physically occurred in the yards of slave quarters and nearby ‘talking’ trees, but actually permitted the participants to be, for a while, in an alternative dimension. As such, Oware, like Landships, is potentially a component of new heritage discussions of ancestral persistence, agency and identity.

While in contemporary discussions of African ancestral behaviour, males seem to dominate the new identity, upon closer inspection, most of these men failed in their resistance to the colonial system and were killed without the system being modified. They are honoured today because they tried to change the colonial system and paid the ultimate sacrifice. Still needed, however, are discussions of men’s successes. These could be modelled on the efforts of women of African ancestry who used the African system of Rotating Savings and Credit Associations to accumulate and redistribute resources and thus ultimately dominate most aspects of local markets throughout the Caribbean (Stoffle et al.: 2009 and 2014). Such successes were incremental, eroding the power of the colonial system and shifting it to thousands of women, their families, and communities. It is especially critical to discuss how men achieved success and what those successes entailed so they too can be considered in a more accurate and positive perspective. Probably the best analysis that highlights male successes from slavery to today is Browne’s study, discussed later in this essay, of male creole economic behaviour in Martinique (Browne: 2004).

We argue here that together, males and females successfully resisted the slave system by small actions. These acts constitute what Bob Marley [1973] sang about in his song The Small Axe:

If you are the big tree, let me tell you that
We are the small axe, sharp and ready
Ready to cut you down (well sharp)
To cut you down.

We use his words here and interpret them to mean a thousand small cuts bring the largest tree down. In this way he avoids the reality that one big chop was rarely effective. Revolts generally did not succeed, the outstanding exception being the Haitian national revolution of 1791 (Murdoch: 2009, pp. 70-71). Instead, small scale revolts and unruly slave behaviour pushed the colonial system to formalise and harden its slave and servant regulations (Rugemer: 2013). Women, by contrast, withdrew their local and regional markets from the colonial system, thus shifting agency to themselves and redistributing the profits of everyday commerce to their communities. So what did men do during this time?

Cultural background

It has been argued that the events of slavery from capture, to sale, to transportation, to re-sale, to forced incorporation into an industrial plantation workforce in the Caribbean, were sufficient to eliminate African cultural and social patterns among those who would become the creole people of the Caribbean (Yelvington: 2001). This theory was termed by Herskovits The Myth of the Negro Past (Herskovits: 1941) in the title of his important book. This argument assumes that the process of moving and making New World agricultural workers out of former African citizens was explicitly designed to reduce their capacity to talk to one another and subsequently to organise in ways they perceived as beneficial to themselves. Slaves in all French colonies were forbidden to gather or assemble, whether by day or night; violations were punishable by lash, branding, and death according to the Code Noir that was passed by the king in 1685 to govern the activities of people of African ancestry (McCloy: 1657, pp. 15-34). During re-sale, African citizens were often culturally and socially mixed to reduce their capacity to communicate and organise based on common languages and cultures (Ligon: 1657,
A primary contrast is between the relatively homogeneous culture of the Europeans in the initial settlement of any New World colony and the relatively diverse cultural heritage of the Africans in the same setting ( Mintz and Price: 1976, p. 3).

From a colonial perspective, it was necessary to remove the African workers from experiences they understood and valued and replace these with experiences that were completely unfamiliar (alien), so as to place them in a totally subservient role. These colonially-designed, forced acculturation experiences (Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits: 1935; Graves: 1967) were intended to create a psychologically dependent workforce who would be easier to control. These alien experiences were then expected to leave the now more docile workforce with a general lack of agency. There would be no hope of a different and better way of life and so they would not resist the system of production. The unexpected outcome would be social anomie or ontological insecurity, a phenomenon that often results in individual and group suicide ( Hall: 1971, pp. 20-23).

Counter to this analytical position, it is argued here that despite the forced acculturation experiences of the colonial industrial plantation system, the former African citizens acquired agency in their lives by bringing African cultural elements into the context of Caribbean slavery. Transferring and establishing African cultural elements and experiences to plantation society would (from the perspective of the plantation slaves) mitigate colonial efforts to create a totally alien environment and a psychologically dependent workforce. Colonial fears of workers retaining and using African cultural elements as a foundation for organisation caused these to be formally outlawed and physically suppressed whenever possible. There would be, for example, no legal use of the African talking drums, and even apparently positive activities, such as the women’s role in the markets, were outlawed (Stoffle et al.: 2009 and 2014). Laws against both the use of drums and women’s marketing activities, however, would prove impossible to enforce (Burrowes: 2013). So the emergence of a Caribbean counter-culture (Browne: 2004; Wilson: 1973) during the early periods of slavery depended on the African peoples being able to use old African cultural traits as a common foundation, quietly, and out of sight of plantation managers. This was especially important because the plantation workers had been separated by ethnic group and language and thus needed to find some universal African common ground.

This essay argues that during slavery, Caribbean society was specifically designed to restrict African men, thus for them to retain any African cultural traits was especially problematic for their European managers. Any surviving African cultural traits would have had to have been almost invisible to outsiders, and if observed, considered non-threatening. It is critical to understand that all forms of self-initiated social organisation among the workforce were discouraged out of fear of the workers planning revolts against the plantation owners. So any gathering that occurred among men would have to be considered trivial to European eyes. This essay argues that just such an apparently trivial cultural activity could potentially become the almost universal foundation of social organisation among men of African ancestry during slavery. Playing the game Oware may have been that activity.

Oware as it is played in Barbados is a mancala game that goes back at least a few hundred years in western Africa. It involves a game board or platform, usually made of wood, which contains playing cups and optional game piece holder cups [Plate 1], which are filled with identical counters, commonly pebbles, cowrie shells, or seeds, in Barbados known as ‘nickerbeans’ (Caesalpinia bonduc). Two opponents play, often while others watch, kibitz, and wait for their turns. Today, this game is played throughout West Africa and the Caribbean. People in the Caribbean often attribute the game’s origins to the West Africans who were brought against their will to work on colonial slave plantations. Herskovits (1932, p. 35 and p. 37) said that Oware arrived during slavery in the Caribbean and derived from one form of the game found among the Ashanti of the Gold Coast. So based on his first hand ethnographic fieldwork in Africa and the Caribbean, he concluded that Oware was an African cultural retention throughout the Caribbean. Also key to the present analysis is that the game of Oware is documented as having been a foundation for the formation and perpetuation of social relationships between men in West Africa itself (Datta: 1972, p. 110).

Board games such as Oware serve as ‘social lubricants’ ( Crist, de Voogt, Dunn-Vaturi: 2016); they facilitate interaction between different cultures and/or language groups in ways similar to feasting and drinking alcohol. The abstract rows of holes and identical playing counters, as well as the playing rules, do not carry immediately recognisable, culturally-specific traits,
instead the game is and has been appropriated by diverse
groups of people both in West Africa and the Caribbean.
In each community, playing Oware may become part of a
sacred or religious experience or contribute to social
organisation. This is important in our understanding of
Oware’s meaning in the Caribbean, but it can only be
understood with bits of observation. The closest positive
example of such an appropriation comes from Ansu
Datta’s [1972] study of the Asafo groups of the Fante on
the southern coast of West Africa. Asafo groups, or
executioners, provided warriors when needed, police in
times of peace, ceremonial leaders at funerals, and
served as corporate units who could allocate land. Asafo
were religious-based groups sharing a number of
patrilineal inherited cults. In times of external conflicts
primary groups within the Asafo were reinforced by
playing draughts, ludo, Oware, drinking palm wine, and
gossiping. The Asafo was the most important social
framework for recreation, which also included group-
singing, drumming, and acrobatics. Clearly these
important social units were centred around, maintained,
and were continuously reinforced through activities that
acted as ‘social lubricants’.

In the Caribbean, Herskovits [1932: pp. 33-35]
observed the sacredness of Oware in various societies. A
single common form of Oware called Djukas (after a
language group on the Guiana coast who speak a
language similar to Ashanti and peoples of the Gold
Coast of Africa including Dahomey, Togoland, and
Nigeria) was observed in Barbados, the Lesser Antilles,
and the north coast of South America. He observes that
the game has a semi-religious significance and is often
connected with funerals. The making of boards is
regulated and different styles of Oware boards have
different functions after death. In one case he observed
that the holes in a new board were left rough so when
splinters get into player’s fingers the game elder said
that their blood and playing the game makes the holes
smooth. Herskovits did not offer an interpretation of this
practice, but it could be construed to be a flesh and
blood offering to the Oware board.

In the case of Barbados, competitive play has been
recorded since the 1930s, an activity that is neither a
sacred nor a religious experience but that again
highlights the facilities of a social organisation.
Dockworkers engaged in the game while waiting for
ships to enter the harbour. The battling [dock]
workers, who had been forbidden to form unions, had set their
mind on a strategy utilising the game of warri [de Voogt:
2005, p. 99].

Methods
This analysis is based on historic documents,
previous ethnographic observation, and contemporary
informal discussions with African and Caribbean citizens.
The analysis builds upon, and in some respects
reinterprets earlier ethnographic descriptions and
analysis of Oware. New data used in this analysis largely
derives from first-hand observations and the family
knowledge of the Oware game of African and Caribbean
citizens.

Discussions of this game conducted by the authors
generally were guided by the following topics:

1) Do you know of the game of Oware?
2) By what other names have you heard it called?
3) In what country do you know that it is played?
4) Is it played by men or women or both?
5) Do the people who play the game together have a
special relationship?
6) Are there any religious or spiritual aspects of the game?
7) Is this a pre-colonial African game? Or [for the
West Indians] did this game come from Africa
during slavery times?
The authors have discussed Oware with friends and
acquaintances. The people they interviewed were either
from Africa or the Caribbean and had personal
knowledge of the Oware game as it was played in their
home countries. All the people who shared their
knowledge of Oware did so voluntarily and without pay.

Oware: African and Caribbean observations
This section documents the spatial distribution of the
game over the past hundred years or more. Documents
and interviews [N=17] selected and presented in Table A
support the argument that in Africa, many people identify
it as an old game that was traditionally played before the
European conquest and disruption of African societies. It
continues to be played in Africa in part because it is
traditional and still useful, but also because it represents
African culture before Europe disrupted it.

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Documents and interviews (N=20) selected and presented in Table B support the argument that in the Caribbean, people take a somewhat similar view of Oware as being a traditional cultural pattern that arrived from Africa. While Caribbean societies based on industrial plantation agriculture emerged in the 1600s to serve the economic interests of European colonial powers, the people who worked as unfree labourers during slavery and afterwards, today largely identify themselves as coming from Africa or Asia. When people today talk about heritage they often ignore their obvious colonial roots and speak instead about themselves as resisters of slavery, rather than its victims.

Mapping Oware over the past hundred years is essential because this establishes that it was played throughout the Caribbean and Africa with the first description of Oware rules for Barbados dating back to 1893 [de Voogt: 2005, p. 101]. The mapping observations go with descriptive text, only a few bits of which can be included here. People generally saw playing Oware as a part of their ancient heritage. Together, these observations document an argument that African men brought to slave plantations in the New World would have known about Oware, valued it as a culturally important activity, and engaged in activities centred on the game, some of which were not for the purpose of recreation.

### Africa

There are dozens of sources that document Oware as it was observed across Africa by Europeans during their early expeditions of discovery [Zaslavsky: 1999, pp. 116-136]. Using these observations and his own experiences, Mwale [1996, p. 57] concludes that:

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### Table A

Observations about Oware in Africa.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Cultural Group</th>
<th>Time Frame</th>
<th>Name of Oware</th>
<th>Oware Descriptions</th>
<th>Primary Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Benin</td>
<td>Fon</td>
<td>20th century</td>
<td>Jungkook</td>
<td>Mixed with Vodu practices</td>
<td>E. Reclus 1959</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burkina</td>
<td>Bwas</td>
<td>20th century</td>
<td>Chunca</td>
<td>‘the game of the truth’ [eternal cycle of nature and life]</td>
<td>Hampate Ba 1965</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Africa</td>
<td>Swaheli</td>
<td>20th Century</td>
<td>Bau</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sanderson 1913</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghana</td>
<td>Ashanti</td>
<td>21st century</td>
<td>Oware</td>
<td></td>
<td>Stoffle 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghana</td>
<td>Ghana</td>
<td>21st Century</td>
<td>Oware</td>
<td></td>
<td>Pickering 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghana</td>
<td>Ashanti &amp; Brong Ahafo &amp; Akan</td>
<td>21st Century</td>
<td>Oware</td>
<td></td>
<td>Pickering 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghana</td>
<td>Asafo Fante</td>
<td>historic</td>
<td>Oware</td>
<td></td>
<td>Datta 1972</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guinea</td>
<td>Malinke</td>
<td>19th century</td>
<td>Mankaala</td>
<td>‘the game of planting seeds’</td>
<td>Cheickh Anta Diop 1963</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ivory Coast</td>
<td></td>
<td>21st century</td>
<td>Oware</td>
<td></td>
<td>Stoffle 2014</td>
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<tr>
<td>Liberia</td>
<td>Aissata</td>
<td>21st century</td>
<td>Oware</td>
<td></td>
<td>Stoffle 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mauritania</td>
<td>Serer People</td>
<td>19th century</td>
<td>Wooli</td>
<td>12 holes interpreted by many as the 12 months of the year</td>
<td>Rene Caille 1898</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nigeria</td>
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<td>20th century</td>
<td>Oware</td>
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<td>Mwale 1996</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>Yorubas</td>
<td>20th century</td>
<td>Warri</td>
<td></td>
<td>Muller 1930</td>
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<tr>
<td>Senegal</td>
<td>Serer People</td>
<td>20th century</td>
<td>Nsumbi</td>
<td>Viewed as a divination art for great wizards</td>
<td>Abdoulaye Bara 2015</td>
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<td>Diop 1975</td>
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... in many countries in Africa and elsewhere the game [Bao] has different names and sometimes a different appearance. In Ethiopia the game is called Gabbatta, which has three rows with reserve pots [larger than the main playing holes], at each end of the board. In Nigeria the game is known as Wari or Oware and has two rows with reserve pots on each end. Bao is also known as Mweso and Omiveso in Uganda (Mwale: 1996, p. 57).

It is important to note that the origins of Oware and Bao are disputed and this statement by Mwale represents but one of the interpretations. Other authors such as de Voogt perceive the two types of similar-looking games as being totally unrelated in terms of origin.

Some of the observations used in this analysis derive from co-author Baro who was born and raised in West Africa and now runs an active research programme in multiple countries there. He concludes, from his personal and professional experience, that if the origin of humanity is Africa, it would be true to say that the origin of gaming is also African. Some of the early Arab explorers who came to Africa around the 10th century mentioned a game similar to ‘Awale’ that, according to

<table>
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<th>Table B</th>
<th>Observations about Oware in the Caribbean</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Country</strong></td>
<td><strong>Cultural Group</strong></td>
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<td>Antigua</td>
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<td>Antigua</td>
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<td>Barbados</td>
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<td>British Guiana</td>
<td>Aku, Oku</td>
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<td>British Guiana</td>
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<td>Dominica</td>
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<td>Dominican Republic</td>
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<td>French Guiana</td>
<td>Aluku Maroons</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grenada</td>
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<td>Martinique</td>
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<td>St. Kitts</td>
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<td>St. Lucia</td>
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<td>St. Lucia</td>
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<td>St. Vincent</td>
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<td>Trinidad-Tobago</td>
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</table>
them, had been played on the African continent for thousands of years (see for example the works of Ibn Khaldum, 1332-1406, Ibn Battuta who died in 1377, and other Arab scholars).

Muller (1930, p. 313) observed for Nigeria that:

In the days of slavery a very large number of our negro slaves were drawn from those parts of Africa where Mankala is now being played. In Nigeria it is generally called Warri, a name which may have some local connection with the city of Warri in Nigeria, although in and around Lagos, Nigeria, it is more often called by a name that sounds phonetically like “I-You”. The origin of this word, too, is obscure, though it may have some relation to the pidgin English so commonly used in that part of the colony. The author, while living in Nigeria for a year among the Yorubas, learned from them to play the game as described below. It is played purely for recreation by men, both young and old. (Muller: 1930, p. 313)

Table A presents a summary of the most available references in English and this study’s contemporary interviews regarding the presence of Oware in various parts of West Africa. The most common assessment, regardless of the source, is that Oware is a pre-colonial game played throughout West Africa. [Plates 5 and 6]

Caribbean

Herskovits’ (1932) study of Oware as an African cultural survival in the Caribbean provides firm documentation of its widespread distribution and common use. He provided a map that shows 14 Caribbean countries where he knew of, or observed, Oware being played during his 1928 and 1929 fieldwork expeditions.


His, and a few other published observations and contemporary interviews conducted as part of this study, are discussed below to illustrate the general pattern observed.

Lesser Antilles

In St. Lucia, Mr. Gardiner wrote a letter to Dr. Brown Goode on 2 May 1895:

The game of Wawee was brought in St. Lucia, but I found it in use also in Barbados and Martinique among the negroes. As far as I could ascertain, they
supposed it very old and came from their fathers. I suppose it came from Africa; but no one seemed to know anything about it (Culin: 1894, Footnote #6).

Also in St. Lucia in 1965, in the village of Canaries, Stoffle (who was a Peace Corps Volunteer living in the community at the time) observed each evening the local fishermen sitting under either a small dock and/or, a nearby overhanging balcony, playing an Oware game on a board that contained systematic sequences of holes. During his time in the community it was the only game he saw being played by the adult men in public.

**Greater Antilles**

Herskovits [1971, p. 264], who was an expert on Oware by that time, adds to the complexity of the Oware story. When doing an ethnography project in central Haiti in 1934, he found that Oware was not played in the interior of Haiti. Its absence was a surprise to him because he had observed Oware throughout the West Indies [Plate 7] (Herskovits: 1932). He noted, however, that the game was being introduced in the national capital of Port-au-Prince where it was played by longshoremen who had learned it from the sailors of nearby islands.

**Coastal South America**

In British Guiana, J. Graham Cruickshank [1929, pp. 179-180] writes of his observations of the Oware game which was being played by native Africans, still alive and bearing facial scars, and African Creoles – whom he defines as the first generation descendants of native Africans. He quotes an old man of the Yagba nation as saying ‘the game’s the thing.’ He described it as a ‘sweet game’, meaning one wholly gratifying. His game board was much worn by use. The first generation Africans then in British Guiana, were ‘liberated Africans’ from the Yoruba, Abunu, Ijesa, Egba, Ondo (or Doko) Yagba tribes. Locally, they were known as Aku or Oku, and they commonly played Oware. Cruickshank’s observations support the theory that the value of playing Oware continued to be refreshed in the New World after the end of slavery by liberated Africans (Adderley 2006).

Table B presents a summary of some references in English and the author’s contemporary interviews about the presence of Oware in various parts of Caribbean. Like our findings for Africa, the most common assessment is that Oware is an African game brought over largely due to the forced transportation of Africans as slaves, and now played throughout the Caribbean by their descendants.

**Situating Oware then and now**

According to the foremost scholar of African retentions in the New World, Melville Herskovits [1932, p. 32]:

The place which a given cultural fact holds in the lives of the peoples who possess it is as important as the mere fact of its distribution and details of its form. Indeed, this cultural
matrix in which a social fact is set is indispensable if we are to obtain the entire picture regarding the cultural phenomenon which is being studied.

Thus, following Herskovits’ advice, we proceed to inquire into the social setting of the game of Oware in the lives of the people who play it. Especially important for this analysis was its role in the early stages of industrial plantation slavery when the societies of the Caribbean were being structured by forces formal and informal, but most centrally by a brutal form of capitalism that had little use for the unfree people but their labour (Williams: 1944).

We need to be cautious in our interpretations, however, especially about extrapolating them to other places and times and assuming ideas about Oware and its functions for African men. Always a cautious scholar, Handler (2009, p. 5) says that:

... variations on the game in the Caribbean region suggest that wari could have been introduced separately at various times by different peoples during the era of the slave trade as well as after the abolition of the slave trade; moreover, the game also could have been diffused from one location to another during the post-slave trade era.

Even taking these cautions into consideration (both of which are discussed above for Haiti and British Guiana), Handler does not dismiss the likelihood that captive Africans introduced Oware during the slave trade.

Out of Africa and reborn in the Caribbean

To review, the premise of our argument is that [1] Oware came from Africa during slavery, and since it existed as a common cultural pattern throughout West Africa, any man taken from there would have known the game. Our argument further asserts that [2] the game was commonly played by men in the Caribbean during slavery because it seemed innocuous to Europeans who therefore permitted it to be played. We also assert that [3] while the game clearly was a form of recreation, it was primarily perceived by the players as a way of making a positive creole social space; it created another dimension in which they controlled their own world. Finally, we argue that [4] playing the game served to bind together the men who played it, and consequently it became a foundation for plantation-based social organisation amongst enslaved men.

If our assumptions are correct, then the analysis must turn to what men did with this new creole social space. Given that men were not encouraged to gather, and they were actively discouraged from developing social relationships, any positive social relationships would have had to have been, like the game itself, sub rosa; that is, apparently casual but actually meaningful. Other than the game being largely invisible to colonial society, there are few eyewitness records of men’s secret activities during slavery, except when they became public in a violent event such as a revolt. After such revolts, colonial investigations took place and there was some documentation of men’s activities that had occurred immediately before the revolt happened (Craton: 1982: Handler: 1982). More difficult to document is what men were doing on a day-to-day basis, as the women were doing with ROCsAs.

The results of both these male and female agency-seeking activities can be seen through the archaeology of slave communities and studies of modern male social organisations. On the north shore of Jamaica, an extensive archaeological study of the slave quarters of Seville Estate, a large slave-based plantation, revealed that over a hundred year period the slaves radically altered their living, farming, and activity areas (Armstrong and Kelly: 2000). Beginning in 1670 with barracks-style housing and activity areas located near the main plantation buildings, by 1780 they had moved their homes, activity areas, and gardens far away towards the undeveloped forest. Homes were shifted to block supervision, much larger activity areas were developed behind walls, and the gardens were expanded and moved farther towards the forests. While such activities took generations to achieve, we assume the changes were conscious, involving long term planning, incremental steps, seemingly small in scale and thus innocuous and successful. The members of this slave community eventually acquired more personal, family, and community privacy. We also assume these changes were largely the work of men who built the homes, organised the communal spaces, and extended the gardens closer and closer to the forest.
Evidence of male social formation during slavery can come from extrapolations back through time based on observed contemporary patterns. It is well known that men in much of the Caribbean form strong and useful relationships with each other in small groups variously called ‘crews’, ‘cliques’, or just ‘the boys’ [Smith: 1965, pp. 58-62; Wilson: 1971, 1973, pp. 169-184]. Smith documented such social networks of men in Grenada, where, as elsewhere, relationships are developed early and persist throughout life. Interestingly, in Grenada and Isla de Providencia where Wilson worked, and elsewhere, there seems to be a structural design to crews that assumes men will have different skills, thus resulting in the networks having members in various types of occupations [see especially Wilson: 1971, pp. 26-28]. This means the members of the network can draw on a wide range of resources.

Small-scale informal male associations established during slavery probably conducted activities devoted to the common good, and all of these activities were undoubtedly forbidden by the colonial managers. Browne (2004, pp. 120-122) observes for Martinique that slaves found discreet ways to resist their exploitation by plotting sabotage and devising ways to serve their own interests. Such acts of resistance represented a crucial assertion of self in the midst of its denial within the plantation system.

Relationships between men in Martinique have carried over from the past, so today men conspire to conduct economic activities while neither recording them nor paying taxes on the exchanges (Browne: 2004). Men who engaged in such exchanges saw them as acts of aggression against the French state which had profited from their labours during slavery and kept them suppressed and dependent for generations afterwards. Today, the informal economy of Martinique remains a stage on which cultural history and creole adaptations are expressed and reconstituted (Browne: 2004, p. 152).

Men, significantly more than women, when asked if they would accept a full-time declared job with predictable income and benefits, said no they would not because they needed their freedom. Having clear gender-based differences in basic values, it is not surprising that men spend much of their lives with those of their own sex, thus the differences reproduce gender-specific circles (Browne: 2004, p. 190).

The transition to modern society

The heritage foundation of West Indian societies is industrial plantation production, the profit margins of which were based on unfree, or largely unfree, labour. The indelible influence of industrial capitalism on the formation, operation, and persistence of West Indian societies led Charles Wagley in 1957 to define the region as ‘Plantation America’. Unlike other cultural regions in Africa and Asia that became colonies of European nations, the aboriginal inhabitants of the Caribbean were rapidly destroyed, permitting Europeans to establish sui generis the exact export production-based societies they desired. These are technically termed ‘plural societies’, which means there are sharp differences in culture, status, social organisation and race between the controlling minority and the rest of the population – what Smith calls for Grenada the ‘elite’ and the ‘folk’ (1965, p. 234). The dominant minority thus holds the power to make laws that impose distinctive modes of work, religion, and values on the majority. Due to this rigid form of society, the majority of ‘folk’ made their own creole ways of life in opposition to the ‘elite’. This dual social system [one colonial, one creole] is what Wilson (1973) called ‘reputation and respectability’.

When European colonialism in the West Indies ended, beginning in the mid-1960s, the people of these societies had no pre-colonial social forms and foundational values to which to return. Lacking clear ancestral cultural models to draw upon after colonialism, the Caribbean is almost unique in the intensity and complexity of its heritage debates. Setting aside the few expressed heritage ties to pre-colonial Native American populations, the people of most of the contemporary nation states look for, and debate the authenticity of creole heritage ties deriving from the actions (and the actors) that resisted the abusive system of slavery.

Sometimes cultural traits that served a primary social function in the past are brought into modern times as heritage symbols, even though they are no longer culturally central. This was the case with ‘grubbing’, a form of fishing by hand in the central Bahamas, which was essential to provide food when the weather prevented small fishing boats from leaving the community, and when most of the men were away for long periods on wage labour (Van Vlack: 2001). Today, people talk with pride about how they adapted to these social and environmental difficulties, even though
grubbing is no longer needed due to electricity, improved transportation, and imported foods. It is, however, how we survived and thrived, people say today with pride.

We observe that for most Caribbean societies for which the authors have direct data, Oware is now played much less frequently than in the past.\(^5\) In Barbados, de Voogt (2005, p. 204) has argued that the construction of the Deep-Water Harbour in Bridgetown, inaugurated in 1961, removed the primary playing scene of competitive Oware players. This only partly explains a seemingly more general decline of Oware playing in Barbados and other countries such as Jamaica. Today in Barbados many Oware players are considered Masters of the Game and compete in formal competitions. [Plate 8] Oware is even used by Professor Farnum-Badley, at the University of West Indies, Cave Hill Campus in Barbados, to teach his business management students strategic management.

What is clear is that men’s groups continue to be a vital component of social organisation in these two societies, as in most other Caribbean societies. These crews, cliques or just ‘the boys’ groups continue throughout the lifetime of the individual member and are regularly renewed in rum shops, in back yards, and under trees where people gather to talk and play. Today the game of preference is often dominoes, but in fact playing that game still serves to strengthen relationships in the group, just as playing Oware did over the past hundreds of years.

Here we again raise the question of what is or could be the current meaning of Oware as an active and culturally central component of contemporary Caribbean heritage. This question, of course, can only be resolved by the people themselves who will decide what is central in their lives today by drawing on key traits, events, and people from their past. Potentially, however, playing Oware during the early periods of slavery and afterwards could be celebrated as times when agency for men was initiated and facilitated. It could also be centred as a primary heritage foundation for male social organisations that have lasted into modern times. ☸️

Plate 8
Two Barbadian master players of Warri in Speightstown.
Photo: Alex de Voogt, 1996.
ENDNOTES

2. Oware is one of a number of names for this kind of traditional pre-colonial African game including Ayo (Barker: 1979) and Warri (Muller: 1930). Other regional or ethnic terms fall under the broader game category called Mancala (Murray: 1952) and include Bao, Omweso, and several others found in both Africa and Asia.
3. More than 300 years later the owners of the Colorado Fuel and Iron Corporation would deliberately choose and mix workers from different cultures and languages so as to reduce their capacity to organise against the management of the steel making operation.
4. Liberated Africans were taken off slave transportation ships by the English Navy after 1807 when Britain outlawed shipping people from Africa (Adderley: 2006).
5. A first hand observation from Ghana suggests that Oware is increasing in prevalence due to rural people bringing it to the cities.

REFERENCES

Oware as Men’s Social Space, Caribbean
