

Connecting with the Soul of a Community:

An Interactive Study of Gullah Culture

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Abstract

The Gullahs are descendants of enslaved people living in the Sea Islands of South Carolina, Georgia, and northern Florida. As a result of their isolation on islands, the Gullahs have been able to maintain their culture as a distinctive African American heritage. However, this unique culture may be disappearing with the construction of bridges from mainland areas to the Sea Islands. The bridges have introduced land development increasingly directed toward Gullah owned properties. The Gullahs are a rural population with strong economic and emotional ties to their land, and the loss of land ownership threatens the existence of Gullah language and culture. Ethnographic methods of inquiry were used to obtain Gullah perspectives on their culture and the impact of economic development on traditional lifestyles. Field research confirms the fact that economic development in the islands has affected the traditional Gullah way of life. The loss of land ownership places a burden on Gullah leaders to implement effective strategies for preserving their language and culture.

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Introduction

Professional scholars should respect the fact that indigenous communities may prefer to be more than just “subjects” of intellectual debate. Quite often, academicians dedicated to the study of human culture and society do not actively incorporate native persons into their investigations--even though the native population serves as the central focus of research. Researchers are often guilty of constructing a particular paradigm and gathering supporting data for presentations at professional conferences or lecture halls. The intellectual banter and debate that follows may be perceived as merely “small talk” from the native perspective. Indigenous groups may even charge scholars with rarely making a sincere contribution to the preservation of a culture or a community.

Kenneth Clark (1965) describes the researcher as an *involved observer*, one who actively participates with residents of the native community. Jackson, Slaughter, and Blake (1974) argue researchers should be *involved with* and *accountable to* indigenous communities by upholding a philosophy of service to local people through their work. This manuscript describes an interactive study conducted by an involved observer who shares a sense of collective accountability with people living in the Sea Islands of South Carolina. Great care has been taken to ensure local knowledge and the expertise of native people remain a central focus of this investigation.

Historical Overview

The Gullahs are a distinctive group of African Americans who live primarily in the Sea Islands and coastal regions of our southeastern United States. Pollitzer (1999) reports the Sea Islands extend from a northern point of Georgetown, South Carolina through nearly one thousand islands until reaching a southern point of Amelia Island off the coast of northern Florida. Tibbetts (2000) notes Gullah people reside on mainland tidal areas as well, along coastal regions for thirty miles inland.

“*Gullah*” refers to a language spoken by descendants of enslaved Africans brought to the coastal regions of South Carolina. Gullah is a ‘Creole’ language that combines elements of West African dialects with English pidgin bases characteristic of the languages spoken by 17th and 18th century colonists (Pollitzer 1999; Tibbetts 2000). Williams (6-24-01) reports, “Plantation owners required a means of communication with their diverse group of enslaved Africans. So, Gullah language was born in the holding pens of Africa’s slave coast and nurtured on the plantations of coastal Carolina.”

The term Gullah is generally used among scholars in the Sea Islands of South Carolina. The word *Geechee* describes descendants of enslaved Africans living in the coastal regions of Georgia and northern Florida. “Queen Quet,” Marquetta L. Goodwine, Chieftess of the Gullah/Geechee Nation (7-6-02) states, “The word ‘Geechee’ exists as a transliteration of the name ‘Gidzi,’ an ethnic group from the Windward Coast of Africa. Geechee derived from the interactions of non-Gullah speakers with Gullah speakers. Thus, a dialect of sorts, or a ‘pidgin language’ was created. *Gullah* and *Geechee* should be considered synonymous, as a reference to the language and people who use the language. We know we’re all of the same culture, heritage, and legacy.”

Gullahs are descendants of enslaved people captured from Senegal, Sierra Leone, Angola, Liberia, and other places along the western coast of Africa that resembled the marshland regions of coastal Carolina. Plantation owners literally went *slave shopping* for Africans with the knowledge and agricultural skills required for the cultivation of rice, indigo, and cotton (Diop 2001; Joyner 1999; Pollitzer 1999; Smith 1996; Tibbetts 2000). Bettye (Mbitha) Smith (1996:1) reports, “Africans known as the Gullahs were refined indigo tillers, superior rice producers, and skilled farmers capable of growing cotton of the purest quality.”

Gullah people have retained more extensive African influences in their speech, folklore, behavior, self-expression, and culture than any other African American group (Jackson 1974; Pollitzer 1999; Smith 1996). Sea Island climates were rather threatening to people of European extraction. It seems the immune system of a typical European was inadequate for protection against the extreme heat and high incidence of tropical diseases (Diop 2001; Pollitzer 1999; Tibbetts 2000). Plantation owners often took a *laissez-faire* attitude in the Sea Islands, leaving enslaved people relatively unsupervised given the climate and small threat of escape. Tibbetts (2000:6) states, “Plantation owners retreated to Charleston mansions during fever season and slaves were left by themselves.” Thus, the isolation of island life lessened the influence of mainland culture on the Gullahs.

A number of Gullahs migrated to southern cities such as Savannah, Georgia and Charleston, South Carolina following the Civil War, while others migrated to northern cities along the eastern seaboard such as Philadelphia and New York (Pollitzer 1999; Rowland 1996; Tibbetts 2000). Tibbetts (2000: 9) reports, “While some migration did occur, it’s important to note the majority of Gullahs remained on the islands tending to family farms and gathering clams, oysters, shrimp, crab, and fish.

Gullah people lived on the islands in relative seclusion until the 1940’s. After World War II, the construction of bridges connecting the mainland with the Sea Islands introduced land development in the form of gated communities, condominiums, country clubs, hotel properties, and a coastal economy founded on resort tourism. Lately, Gullah people have found themselves yelling *Yeddi Wi* (Gullah for hear us) as Gullah lands have been increasingly acquired in the name of economic development (Goodwine 6-12-01).

Emory Campbell, Executive Emeritus of the Penn Center, Inc., an internationally acclaimed African American educational center located on St. Helena Island, argues land development has triggered socio-economic changes in the islands that literally threaten

traditional Gullah lifestyles. Campbell (7-2-01) states, “The Gullah community is in the midst of transition! Gullahs are losing their land at alarming rates. Our people are tied to their land; so, if we don’t have the land, we can’t protect the culture.” A thriving coastal economy has brought the islanders an ever-increasing scale of interaction with outsiders from the mainland. Scholars suggest land development initiatives and the influences of assimilation present a series of potential threats to traditional Gullah lifestyles (Glanton 2001; Goodwine 1998; Pollitzer 1999; Rowland 1996; Siegal 2000).

Theory and Methods

Studies of human behavior have emerged from two intellectual traditions, each with a different perspective on the nature and style of social research. Positivism, the first intellectual tradition, contends sense perceptions are the only admissible basis of human knowledge and precise thought (Benton 1977; Giddens 1974; Patton 2002). Positivism assumes social phenomena exist not only in the minds of individuals, but also as an objective reality. The fact that a social phenomenon may be viewed differently by subjects does not negate its existence, nor the application of scientific principles as a valid means of investigation (Benton 1977; Denzin 2000; Giddens 1974; Sullivan 1992). Patton (2002:69) clarifies the *objective* nature of positivism saying, “A positivist seeks the facts or causes of social phenomena apart from the subjective states of individuals, using quantitative and measure-oriented methods to test deductive generalizations.”

Phenomenology, a second intellectual tradition, questions the premise that social reality can be determined using empirical data alone. The phenomenological perspective views social phenomena as constituting not one, but a set of multiple realities requiring subjective methods of inquiry (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Denzin 2000; Patton 2002; Schutz 1962). The phenomenologist is committed to understanding social phenomena from the actor’s subjective perspective. Thomas and Swaine (1928:572) clarify the *subjective* nature of phenomenology with their classic statement, “It is not important whether an interpretation is correct--if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.” Thomas and Swaine (1928) suggest social reality is a matter of human perspectives, that people construct reality from a subjective point of view.

Max Weber (1964:29) believed there was no absolutely objective scientific analysis of social phenomena. Weber notes, “We can only understand human action by using methods of investigation requiring “*verstehen*,” or “*empathetic understanding*.” Weber’s definition of sociological inquiry aimed for an interpretative understanding of social behavior by penetration into the subjective meanings that actors attach to their own behavior, as well as to the behavior of others (Coser 1977:220).

Phenomenological and Ethnographic Inquiry

Phenomenology provides a philosophical foundation for certain subjective styles of sociological inquiry and ethnographic research. Phenomenological inquiry requires a researcher

to apply subjective methods of investigation, or qualitative methods perceived more appropriate for gaining an “*empathetic understanding*” of people actively engaged in the daily routine of *reality construction* (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Thomas and Swaine 1928; Schutz 1962; Schutz and Luckmann 1973).

Ethnographic research frequently utilizes phenomenological tools to uncover the actor’s orientations toward social reality (Costelloe 1996; Fielding 1988; Patton 2000). Ethnography is defined as the work of describing cultures, with a particular goal of understanding another way of life from a ‘*native point of view*’ (Berg 1998; Patton 2002). Ethnographers produce forms of cultural description by placing themselves in the midst of a specific population, and from this unique vantage point, interpreting social reality from an empathetic perspective (Berg 1998; Fetterman 1998; Goodall 2000).

Phenomenological sociology and ethnographic research provide the philosophical foundation of this study. A multidimensional plan of inquiry was applied for the purpose of obtaining an *empathetic understanding* of a traditional community in transition. Data were collected during two summer field experiences in 2001 and 2002 on the islands of St. Helena, Hilton Head, and Daufauskie, South Carolina. The principal investigator began a literature review using local historical and archival documentation, conducted one-on-one and focus group interviews in the field, and experimented with a relatively new and innovative form of data collection known as autoethnographic observations.

The author recognizes the importance of working with a liaison, an agency within the native community that can ensure local people and cultures are respected. Jackson (1974:38) states, “Coordination with a local agency is an efficacious way to conduct research in black communities. Community controlled agencies introduce the scholar to a wide variety of information and reduce risks of exploitation to community members.”

The Gullah/Geechee Sea Island Coalition served as a community liaison during two separate field experiences. The local agency was established in 1996 to celebrate Gullah culture and language through educational means. The agency assisted with the identification of key informants, focus group participants, and with invitations to cultural celebrations and community activities. Access to historical and archival documentation was provided through the *Hunnuh Home*, a center for the *Alkebulan Archive* of Gullah history located on St. Helena Island, South Carolina.

Berg (1998) and Patton (2002) define key informants as people whose insights are useful in helping an observer understand a native community. Key informants were selected for interview on the basis of reputation, accomplishment, and special expertise. A total of sixteen (16) one-on-one interviews were conducted with key informants, each interview lasting about one hour in duration. Interviews were semi-structured and designed to provide respondents latitude for expressing their opinions and personal views. Key informants were asked to define important aspects of Gullah culture and to comment on the impact of economic development on traditional Gullah lifestyles.

Berg (1998) and Patton (2002) define a focus group interview as an interview style

designed for group discussion, usually with a small number of people interacting under the guidance of a qualified moderator. Unlike the typical interview, participants of a focus group have an ability to create a synergistic environment by hearing shared comments and responding accordingly. The principal investigator conducted twelve (12) focus group interviews, lasting from one to two hours in duration, with members of the “Wisdom Counsel of Elders” of the Gullah/Geechee Nation, church groups, youth clubs, artisans, women’s organizations, and island residents. Focus group interviews were semi-structured and designed to allow participants latitude for expressing their personal views. Participants were asked to define the important aspects of Gullah culture and to discuss the impact of economic development on traditional Gullah lifestyles.

The principal investigator used *autoethnographic observations* as a method of gaining an *empathetic understanding* of Gullah perspectives regarding their culture and the impact of economic development on traditional lifestyles. H. L. Goodall (2000: 9) describes autoethnographic observations as a new form of ethnography saying, “By new ethnography, I mean creative narratives shaped out of a writer’s personal experiences within a culture and addressed either to academic or public audiences.” Patton (2002:86) explains, “What distinguishes autoethnography from ethnography is the reporting of one’s own experiences and introspections as a primary data source.”

Immersed in the native culture, and from that unique vantage point, the principal investigator used autoethnographic observations to produce forms of cultural description from a more empathetic perspective. Carolyn Ellis (2000:739) defines the format of such observations explaining, “Autoethnographic texts are usually written in the first person and appear in a variety of forms including short stories, poetry, fiction, journals, photographic essays, and social science prose.” The principal investigator used a laptop computer for posting autoethnographic observations to a research-specific web site, and readers may access the raw data by logging on to www.southern.ohiou.edu/folkknography.

Findings

The principal investigator conducted an interactive study of Gullah culture by incorporating local knowledge and the expertise of Gullah/Geechee people throughout the investigative process. A multidimensional plan of ethnographic inquiry was used to ascertain Gullah perspectives on their culture and the perceived impact of economic development on traditional lifestyles. Data collection included a review of archival records, key informant and focus group interviews, and autoethnographic observations describing two summer field experiences in the Sea Islands of South Carolina.

Study findings reflect a descriptive summary of Gullah attitudes and perspectives by an investigator working to establish an *empathetic understanding* of a community in transition. Gullah/Geechee people have responded by describing their spiritual way of life as the foundation of Gullah culture. Gullah perspectives regarding the impact of economic development on traditional island lifestyles provide readers an interesting dialogue on the functional and dysfunctional aspects of socio-economic changes.

A Spiritual Way of Life

Gullah “spiritual life” operates as a central ethos and foundation for the culture. Guided by spiritual beliefs and personal values not easily discounted, Gullah/Geechee people have a deep sense of spiritual connection to *Almighty God*. Gullah religious beliefs provide a philosophy of life whereby the *Great Creator* directs a *Divine Order* of things in the universe. A member of the Council of Elders of the Gullah/Geechee Nation clarifies the central role of God stating, “God comes first--we can’t breathe without our God. Faith in God gets the Gullah by on a daily basis. Goin’ to church is like goin’ to an ole’ dug well and drawin’ up a cold cup of water. When you drink it down on a hot August day; well, then you get yourself a good feeling (Focus Group Interview 2001).”

Religious beliefs guide the Gullah sense of justice, equity, and social awareness. Nellie Holmes (6-12-01) suggests, “Respect and love form a basis for social interaction in the Gullah community. Gullah/Geechee people respect and love everybody, but some people don’t want you to love ‘em. I just don’t know what we’re gonna’ do with them folk.” Gullahs literally believe love is a more powerful emotion than hate, as illustrated by Holmes’ final comment, “My parents taught me to love my enemies the most, for love is stronger than hate. You gotta’ have respect and love for all God’s chillun’ (6-12-01).”

The terms *neighbors* and *community* are nearly synonymous for Gullahs. The concept of extended kinship may include aunts, uncles, cousins, distant relatives, and even some people not necessarily related by blood. Gullahs incorporate into their daily routine the Biblical passage “love thy neighbor as thyself.” Nellie Holmes (6-12-01) explains, “Gullahs believe in a moral responsibility to care for their neighbors. Gullah people respect others immensely and believe in the spirituality of the Golden Rule.”

Church membership is largely Baptist, or Methodist. However, the expression within these churches is not the same as in mainstream and mainland churches of the same denomination. A major departure from typical Christian philosophy is a duality of presence involving *soul* and *spirit*. For the Gullah, one’s *soul* leaves the body and returns to God at death, but the *spirit* stays on earth still involved in the daily affairs of its living descendants (Campbell 6-4-02; Goodwine 7-6-02; Holmes 6-12-01; Wilson 6-21-01).

Gullahs believe ancestors visit with families, walk the streets and roads, guide individuals, and council people through spiritual means. Gullah belief in the duality of *soul* and *spirit* is illustrated by comments like, “The souls of the old dead black folks are the spiritual anchors of the Gullah community. Our ancestors are the roots--we are the branches! We know their struggles. They left us the struggle, now we gotta’ pass it on to the chillun (Focus Group Interview 2001).” Gullah/Geechee people show some concern that growth and development may be affecting ancestral visits. For instance, a local realtor states, “My grand mama says all this development has done affected the ancestors. She says they ain’t walkin’ the streets like they used to.”

Funerals are elaborate and mourners decorate graves with prized possessions of the newly deceased. The dressing of graves reflects a significant dimension of one very important concept--family members who have passed 'are still with us now.' Wilson (6-21-01) suggests, "Cemeteries are very important to the Gullah. We can't believe people pave over them, actually build condos over graves. I know a place that has three condos over graves of Gullahs. They keep sellin' those condos because the people in them graves sure enough don't let anyone sleep at night."

Alonzo Johnson (1996) connects the spiritual awareness of Gullah/Geechee people to the socio-religious functions of traditional Gullah "*pray's houses*." Pray's houses are small buildings that serve as extensions of the spiritual base of a community. Johnson (1996:8) argues, "The *pray's house spirit* functions as an extension of African American churches by providing a distinctive socio-religious context wherein religious practices prosper." However, others argue pray's houses are their own spiritual centers in various parts of the Gullah/Geechee Nation and provide a mechanism for handling the deviant actions of community members and for the socialization and moral instruction of Gullah youth (Goodwine 7-6-02, Holmes 6-12-01, Wilson 6-21-01).

Impact of Economic Development

Gullah/Geechee people represent a traditional, rural population with extensive economic and emotional ties to their homelands. The introduction of bridges connecting the islands with the mainland led to land development initiatives that were increasingly directed toward Gullah owned properties (Glanton 2001; Rowland 1996; Siegal 2000). A thriving coastal economy has brought an ever-increasing scale of interaction without outsiders from the mainland. Land development, combined with the influences of assimilation, presents a series of potential threats to the traditional Gullah way of life (Glanton 2001; Goodwine 1998; Pollitzer 1999; Rowland 1996; Siegal 2000).

Emory Campbell stated over twenty years ago at the South Carolina Sea Grant Consortium Conference (12-3-82), "Economic development is altering the esthetic and cultural character of traditional island communities. The new resorts have turned the Sea Islanders' lives upside down. Land development has limited the freedom of Gullahs to roam traditional hunting grounds, fish in salt water rivulets, and visit their sacred burial grounds. Gullah artisans struggle to find the materials for making sweet grass baskets, and local waters no longer produce ample supplies of shrimp, crab, and fish."

Economic development has piled tax burdens on local Gullahs who often cannot meet the rising costs of living. Yvonne Wilson (6-21-02) reports, "Of the approximately five thousand total acres once owned by Gullahs on Daufuskie Island, only about two hundred fifty acres are now Gullah owned properties. As the assessed values of Gullah properties continue to escalate, it's difficult for traditional families on the islands to pay their property taxes. Land speculators often pay the escalated taxes and secure the land for further economic development. Unable to afford the rising taxes that come with resort development, Gullahs sell their land and move away from the islands."

Although the loss of land ownership adversely affects traditional Gullah lifestyles, Gullah/Geechee people recognize the functional aspects of economic development. Gullahs acknowledge the fact that economic development provides jobs and employment opportunities for islanders. There exists a positive attitude among Gullahs that jobs offer the necessary resources for maintaining one's legal deed to property, and the ownership of land is viewed as an essential element for retaining kinship ties and extended family units. Employment opportunities mean Gullahs do not have to sell their land below market value, or lose their properties through auctions.

The National Park Service is currently completing a three-year study to determine the role of government in preserving Gullah culture. A series of public meetings were held in the Sea Islands to determine the concerns of the Gullah community. Transcripts of these meetings have been analyzed by researchers from the Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture. Gullah people listed their concerns as follows:

- 1) educating Gullah youth to take pride in their unique cultural heritage
- 2) preserving historic sites within Gullah/Geechee communities
- 3) creating economic opportunities within the Gullah/Geechee community
- 4) finding ways for Gullah people to tell their own story "in their own words"
- 5) limiting the adverse effects of economic development on traditional lifestyles

Porcher (2000:2) reports, "The results of this study provide a foundation for advising and assisting communities in the preservation of historic properties. Heritage tourism brings millions of dollars into local economies and may lead to economic gains for the Gullahs."

Local festivals and cultural programs are currently sponsored by organizations interested in preserving Gullah language and cultural heritage. Charles Young (2002:1) reports, "The Annual Native Islander Gullah Celebration creates economic opportunities for minority business owners and stimulates heritage tourism on Hilton Head Island. Celebration programming includes demonstrations of sweet grass sewing, cuisine, fish net weaving, storytelling, music, dance, and cultural workshops designed to share the history of Gullah culture with visitors to the island."

Political activism is becoming a more common strategy for preserving Gullah culture and language. Gullah communities on St. Helena Island are actively planning strategies to avoid the unwanted impacts of assimilation. At a community action meeting held on June 18, 2001, the moderator began by saying, "We are here tonight to discuss the preservation of our culture. We know many other islands have been over-developed. Gullah/Geechee notions of development do not include building strip malls, attracting fast food chains, or expanding highways to facilitate growth. We must develop strategies for the protection of our culture, for ourselves and for the future of our children."

Gullah/Geechee people declared their right to self-determination during a public ceremony on Sullivan's Island July 1, 2001. The Gullah/Geechee Wisdom Circle ratified the First Constitution of the Gullah/Geechee Nation. "Queen Quet," spokesperson and first elected

Queen Mother of her people stated at the ceremony, “Gullah/Geechee people are claiming the right to genuine social dignity; the right to preserve and protect Gullah culture and language; the right to develop in spirit with Gullah principles and aspirations; and for the right to proclaim our existence to the international community. Our culture is a dynamic phenomenon that resonates within the living soul of Gullah people. We must protect our culture by establishing appropriate institutions of law and by exercising our human rights.”

A Divine Order

Gullahs believe people on the mainland live at a “fast pace” not conducive to a spiritual lifestyle. There is a belief among Gullahs that the technological and material influences of post-modern society mask the importance of family, community, neighbors, and spiritual awareness. Rural sociologists agree economic development poses common obstacles for traditional people who practice collectivist values and communal living.

The Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture published a report suggesting the number one priority of the Gullah community was educating the youth to take pride in their cultural heritage. Emory Campbell, Executive Emeritus of the Penn Center, Inc., argues (6-4-02), “The greatest threat to our culture is ignorance. The strongest asset of our community is the tenacity of Gullah adults to educate their youth.”

“Queen Quet,” Marquetta L. Goodwine, in her address to the United Nations stated (4-1-99), “We wish to have Gullah children proudly continue our crafts, spiritual expressions, and especially our language. Gullah language is a living, breathing, oral tradition--it’s our *‘breath of life.’* The language is African by definition and operates as a *‘code of the spirit,’* a method by which cultural traditions are passed from generation to generation. Gullah language provides a sense of continuity with the past for *De Wey Wi Speak, Duh De Wey Wi Lib!* (The way we speak is the way we live!)”

Gullah adults remind younger generations that the past, present, and future are inter-related as part of a *Divine Order*. Gullah/Geechee people believe the foundation of their culture is a spiritual awareness expressed by one’s sense of personal commitment to *Almighty God*. Gullah adults believe the best way to preserve their culture is by passing the torch of responsibility to their youth. In the *Divine Order* of things--it shall be done!

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