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ABSTRACT

Principles of rural sociology and interpersonal communication provide the foundation for a study of "Gullah" culture. The Gullahs are a group of African Americans living along the southwestern U.S. coastal territory. Gullah culture began to evolve with the enslavement of African people in the Sea Islands off the coasts of South Carolina, Georgia, and northern Florida. Unlike enslaved Africans on the mainland, the more isolated Gullahs were able to transform their language and cultural traditions into a unique African American heritage. With the construction of bridges from mainland areas to the islands, scholars developed a perceived fear that Gullah language and culture might begin to disappear, with younger generations of Gullahs losing their cultural identity. Rapid Rural Appraisal, an effective method of assessing the needs of rural populations, was applied to examine the current priorities of Gullah people with respect to preservation of their language and culture. This provided researchers with a systematic structure for interviewing Gullah people and recording structured observations in the field. Qualitative data were collected during a 35-day field experience in the Sea Islands of South Carolina. Results show the resilience of the Gullah people and culture, based on a deep, abiding faith in God, (Contains 55 references.) (SM)

RAPID RURAL APPRAISAL:
A STUDY OF GULLAH CULTURE

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Rapid Rural Appraisal: A Study of Gullah Culture

Abstract Principles of rural sociology and interpersonal communication provide the foundation for a study of "Gullah" culture. The "Gullahs" are a distinctive group of African-Americans living along the coastal territory of our southeastern United States. Gullah culture began to evolve with the enslavement of African people in the Sea Islands off the coasts of South Carolina, Georgia, and northern Florida. Unlike enslaved Africans living on the mainland, the more isolated Gullahs were able to transform their language and cultural traditions into a unique and distinctive African-American heritage. With the construction of bridges from mainland areas to the islands, there exists a perceived fear among scholars that Gullah language and culture may begin to disappear. A concern exists that younger generations of Gullahs may be losing their cultural identity. Rapid Rural Appraisal, an effective method of assessing the needs of rural populations, was applied to examine the current priorities of Gullah people with respect to the preservation of their language and culture. This method of data collection provided researchers with a systematic structure for interviewing people in the Gullah community and for recording structured observations in the field. Qualitative data were collected during a thirty-five day field experience in the Sea Islands of South Carolina. This study represents a descriptive analysis of Gullah culture and the current priorities of Gullah people relative to the preservation of their language and culture.

Introduction

The "Gullahs" represent a unique and distinctive group of African-Americans indigenous to the coastal regions of our southeastern United States. The term "Gullah" refers to a language

spoken by descendants of enslaved African ethnic groups brought to the coastal regions of South Carolina, Georgia, and northern Florida (Barnwell 1998; Pollitzer 1999; Pyatt 1999; and Tibbetts 2001). Marquetta L. Goodwine, the first Gullah/Geechee person to address the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland (1999) states, "The Gullah people number some 750,000 persons who still speak the Gullah language, a 'Creole' evolved from the interaction of diverse African languages and English."

Tibbetts (2001) suggests the vocabulary of every "Creole" language is European. Gullah language combines elements of West African dialects with English pidgin bases characteristic of the languages spoken by 17th and 18th century American colonists (Barnwell 1997; Carlie Towne 2001; Pollitzer 1999; Pyatt 1999; and Tibbetts 2001). Along the coastal areas of South Carolina, Eurocentric slaveholders required a method of communication with their enslaved Africans. Gullah language was born in the holding pens of Africa's "slave coast" and nurtured on the isolated plantations of coastal Carolina (Jones-Jackson 1987; Joyner 1999; Morgan 1998; Smith 1996; and Tibbetts 2001).

The word "Gullah" is thought possibly to descend from the name "Gola," an African tribe living in Liberia, but it may also be

a corruption of the name "Angola," where many of the Gullah's ancestors originate (Barnwell 1997; Carlie Towne 2001; Columbia Encyclopedia 2000; Gullah/Geechee Foundation 2001; and Pollitzer 1999). Among academicians, the word "Gullah" is generally used in the South Carolina Sea Islands, while the word "Geechee" is frequently used to describe Gullahs living in the more southern islands off the coasts of Georgia and northern Florida.

Joyner (1986) suggests the word "Geechee" derives from the Ogeechee River near Savannah, Georgia. Barnwell (1997) argues "Geechee" is simply another name for the language and culture of black Sea Islanders, originating from a tribal name in Liberia. However, Marquetta L. Goodwine (2001) definitively states, "Geechee exists due to the transliteration of the name 'Gidzi' (an ethnic group from the Windward Coast of Africa). When commenting on our speech, Geechee is derived from the interaction of Gullah speakers with non-Gullah, English speakers. Thus, a dialect (of sorts), a bridge language, or as linguists call it, a 'pidgin language' was created." For the purposes of this paper, the terms "Gullah" and "Geechee" should be considered as synonymous. Marquetta L. Goodwine (2001) confirms the terms

are synonymous by saying, "Gullah/Geechee people have always considered ourselves as one."

Gullah people reside primarily in the Sea Islands and coastal regions of South Carolina and Georgia. Pollitzer (1999), using a rather romantic description, states, "The homeland of the Gullah people is a coastal strip two hundred fifty miles long and forty miles wide where low, flat islands, separated from the mainland by salt-water rivulets, feel the tides twice a day. Swampy grass-covered marshlands alternate with palmetto trees, pines, and live oaks overhung with gray moss." The Sea Islands extend from a northern point of Georgetown, South Carolina, near Myrtle Beach, through nearly one thousand islands including Wadmalaw, St. Helena, Hilton Head, Daufuskie, Sapelo, St. Simons, Jekyll, and Cumberland, until reaching a southern point of Amelia Island off the coast of northern Florida (Barnwell 1997; Goodwine 1998; Jones-Jackson 1987; Online Encyclopedia 2000; Pollitzer 1999; and Smith 1996).

Gullah people have retained extensive African sources in their speech and folklore. The grammar and rhythm of Gullah remains African, and many aspects of Gullah culture are derived from African sources including religious beliefs, stories, arts and

crafts, songs, and proverbs (Goodwine 2001; Tibbetts 2001; Smith 1996; and Pollitzer 1999). Goodwine (1998) states, " Gullah people have been able to retain what may be the purest continuation of the African culture of their enslaved ancestors. Indeed, the Gullah community may well be viewed as a living link between Africa and America." William S. Pollitzer, professor emeritus of anatomy and anthropology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, agrees with Goodwine saying, "The Gullah population reflects a more African influence in behavior, beliefs, and self-expression than any other long-established American population."

Slave Shopping

The Gullahs are descendants of slaves captured from the 'Windward Coast' of West Africa (Goodwine 1998; Pollitzer 1999; Greer 1999; Pyatt 1999; Morgan 1998; Montgomery 1994; and Smith 1996). Southern plantation owners, unfamiliar with the cultivation of rice, cotton, and indigo, specifically requested West African slaves from Senegal, Sierra Leone, Angola, Liberia, and the 'Gold Coast' who understood the agricultural subsistence of these crops (Diop 2001; Goodwine 2001; Greer 1999; Lee 1998;

Pollitzer 1999; Tibbetts 2001; and Williams 2001). Bettye (Mbitha) Smith (1996) says, "These well-endowed Africans, who became known as the Gullahs, were refined indigo tillers, superior rice producers, and skilled farmers able to grow cotton of the purest quality." Plantation owners literally went "slave shopping" for African people possessing the knowledge and agricultural skill required for the successful cultivation of rice, indigo, and cotton (Goodwine 1998; Pollitzer 1999; Tibbetts 2001; and Williams 2001). Williams (2001) notes, "The process of 'slave shopping' represents the 'first great divide,' a division of African people from their homes, families, and ancestral roots."

Gullah people lived a relatively secluded existence from the era of "chattle slavery" through the mid-1950s, a favorable set of circumstances with respect to preserving Gullah language and culture. Scholars note the Sea Island climate was not friendly to people of European extraction during the period of "chattle slavery."

The immune system of a typical European descendant was inadequate for protection against extreme heat, malaria, and the inevitability of tropical diseases (Diop 2001; Goodwine 2001; Pollitzer 1999; Tibbetts 2001; and Williams 2001). Slaves from the

'Windward Coast' were accustomed to the climate and topography of the Sea Islands. Since there was little opportunity for escape from the Sea Islands, plantation owners often took a laissez-faire attitude with the enslaved Gullahs by leaving them relatively unsupervised (Carlie Towne 2001; Pollitzer 1999; Tibbetts 2001; and Smith 1996).

By virtue of their isolation in the Sea Islands, the Gullah population received little acculturation into the ways of Eurocentric colonists, or their enslaved Africans living on the mainland. The geographical isolation of the Sea Islands, the insistence of Carolina's plantation owners on importing slaves from West Africa, and the relatively small number of whites able to survive life in the tropical climate of the region were significant contributions to the preservation of Gullah language and culture (Diop 2001; Greer 1999; Smith 1996; Pollitzer 1999; and Tibbetts 2001).

Periods of Assimilation

There was an initial period of out-migration following the Civil War, as Gullahs began to assimilate into the southern black society of Savannah, Georgia and Charleston, South Carolina

(Pollitzer 1999; Tibbetts 2001; and Greer 1999). Tibbetts (2001) reports many from the Gullah population became part of the great migration of blacks to northern cities on the eastern seaboard, especially Philadelphia and New York City. It is equally important to note a substantial Gullah population stayed at home, living in the sea islands and rural areas along coastal South Carolina (Barnwell 1997; Online Encyclopedia 2000; and Rowland 1996). The vast majority of Gullah/Geechee people were freed slaves emotionally and economically attached to their land. Pollitzer (1999) and Goodwine (1998) contend the land from Charleston to Florida, for forty miles inland from the sea, was reserved for the settlement of former slaves during the period of Reconstruction.

The construction of bridges in the mid-1950s, connecting coastal Sea Islands with mainland areas, led to land development in the form of gated communities featuring expensive homes and elaborate country clubs. The following decades saw a continued encroachment of land development, the creation of a thriving tourist industry, and an increasing scale of interaction among Gullahs with outsiders from the mainland (Agyeman, 2000; Jones-Jackson 1987; Lee 1998; Siegal 2000; and Tibbetts 2001).

Emory Campbell, Director of Penn Center, Inc., an academic and cultural attraction for African-Americans located on St. Helena Island, stated at the 1982 South Carolina Sea Grant Consortium Conference, "New resorts have turned the Sea Islanders' lives upside down. Before developers built gated communities, blacks had been free to travel anywhere, hunting and fishing on their land, or on property belonging to absentee white landlords. But developers built gates and fences cutting blacks off from fishing and hunting grounds, sometimes even traditional cemeteries." Emory Campbell (2001) continues by saying, "To sustain the Gullah culture, we've got to protect the land. We're very much a land-based culture. If we don't have the land—we can't protect the culture."

Campbell (2001), Goodwine (2001), and Wilson (2001) argue land development, and a rapidly accelerating tourist industry, have piled tax burdens on local residents often unable to meet swiftly rising costs of living. Goodwine (2001) adamantly claims, "The Gullahs are a people tied to their land, and the loss of land means the loss of language and culture." Yvonne Wilson (2001) 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." In another Sea Island community once known as "Trench Island," Emory Campbell (2001) sadly reports, "When development came to Hilton Head Island, segregation was the law and prejudices were prevalent. Gullah people became ashamed of their culture; therefore, they abandoned it. In most cases, they took on the culture of (newcomers)."

Porcher (2001) reports the National Park Service is currently collecting data for a three-year study relative to the factors associated with preserving Gullah culture. The *Special Resource Study of Lowcountry Gullah Culture* was funded at $100,000 for the initial fiscal year, with funding provided for an additional two more years. Marquetta L. Goodwine (2001), enstooled as "Queen Quet, Chieftess of the Gullah/Geechee Nation," the first queen mother of the Gullah/Geechee Nation, responds by saying, "If the federal government wants to help preserve Gullah/Geechee culture, it can start by protecting land ownership. There's a definite need for Congress to fund more studies of this type."

Historian Lawrence Rowland (1996) of the University of South Carolina at Beaufort reports, "As the coastal economy has

thrived and newcomers have poured to the shoreline in record numbers, historic folkways have been disappearing." Agyeman (2000) suggests before the bridges were built, Gullah/Geechee people residing in the Sea Islands were isolated and able to maintain their culture in a close-knit, rural community. Scholars fear an increasing scale of interaction with mainlanders may cause younger generations of Gullah/Geechees to lose their cultural identity (Agyeman 2000; Branch 1995; Guthrie 1997; Porcher 2001; Rowland 1996; Siegal 2000; Smith 1996; and Tibbetts 2001).

Research Methodology

There exists a fear among scholars that massive land development, the acceleration of coastal tourism in the Sea Island region, and an increasing scale of interaction by Gullahs with outsiders from the mainland seem to be contributing to a pattern of cultural diaspora relative to Gullah language and culture. This study attempts to better define Gullah culture and investigate concerns of Gullah/Geechee leadership regarding the apparent dissipation of Gullah language and culture. Also, researchers investigated the possible methods and strategies (if any) currently

being implemented by the Gullah/Geechee community for preserving their language and culture.

This study is a descriptive analysis of Gullah/Geechee culture using qualitative research methods. Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA), an effective method of assessing the needs of rural populations, was used for the collection of data. Rapid Rural Appraisal has an international reputation for rigorous and systematic principles of data collection, and it has become an increasingly important methodology in rural regions where descriptive analysis may be preferred due to the constraints of time and funding (Casley 1993; Chambers 1992; Dunn 1994; and Kumar 1990).

Rapid Rural Appraisal has no strict set of methodological procedures; however, several distinctive methodological features have emerged from existing literature. Rapid Rural Appraisal features a commitment to multidisciplinary research, active listening by researchers responsible for data collection, the use of structured observations, adaptation to the unique cultural context of field experiences, and the application of qualitative data for the purpose of descriptive analysis (Chambers 1992; Dunn 1994; Ison and Ampt 1992; and Khon Kaen 1985). Researchers using (RRA)

are concerned with learning as it takes place in the field, relying on the knowledge expressed by local people (Chambers 1992; Dunn 1994; Ison and Ampt 1992; and Khon Kaen 1985).

Criteria For Selecting (RRA)

- RRA provides a quick and efficient method of obtaining scientific data during a relatively short period of time
- RRA has proven a particularly effective method for assessing attitudes of residents in rural, isolated locales
- RRA has an international reputation for rigorous and systematic principles of data collection
- RRA has developed a reputation for understanding the value of local knowledge and the importance of native perspectives
- RRA offers an appropriate structure for multidisciplinary research

Methodological Triangulation

Rapid Rural Appraisal is a multidisciplinary technique of data collection conducive to the application of *"methodological triangulation,"* a metaphorical term in the social sciences used to describe the convergent validation of three separate sources of data (Barker 2000, Berg 1998; Chambers 1994; and Fetterman 1998). Assuming three different methods of data collection reveal slightly different facets of the same symbolic reality, methodological

triangulation provides researchers with a more substantive means of confirmation and verification of study findings. Researchers applied a modified version of Rapid Rural Appraisal for the collection of data during a thirty-five day field experience in the Sea Islands of South Carolina from June 3, 2001 through July 7, 2001.

Researchers gathered data using three distinct methods considered appropriate within the descriptive context of Rapid Rural Appraisal.

Researchers gathered data using each of the following methods:

1) *Key Informant Interviews*
2) *Focus Group Interviews*
3) *Structured Observations*

- ***Key Informant Interviews***

  Key informants were defined as leaders in the Gullah/Geechee community. Key informants were identified and selected for one-on-one interviews on the basis of special knowledge, expertise, accomplishments, leadership reputation, and active involvement in the community. One-on-one interviews with key informants provided researchers with an initial source of data.. In order to create a pool of candidates for focus group interviews, key informants were asked to provide names of other leaders in the Gullah/Geechee community.

- ***Focus Group Interviews***

  Berg (1998) defines a focus group as an interview style designed for group discussion, usually a small number of people under the guidance of a qualified moderator.

Focus group interviews provided researchers a series of interactive discussions with other leaders in the Gullah/Geechee community. Researchers considered focus groups (and the interactive and synergistic nature of these interviews) a second distinctive source of data, as distinguished from more conventional methods of one-on-one interviewing.

- ***Structured Observations***

  Structured observations were made by researchers and recorded daily using ethnographic methodologies. Ethnographic methods are defined as cultural descriptions by researchers placed in the midst of a particular group, who then attempt to describe and interpret social expressions, human interactions, and communication among people (Berg 1998 and Fetterman 1998). Structured observations, recorded in written text and supported by digital camera photos, were summarized daily by researchers using lap top computers. Data were posted on a web site (see bibliography) for colleagues and others concerned with the progress of research in the field. Researchers considered structured observations a third distinctive source of data.

A Phenomenological Approach

Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) provided researchers a method of data collection appropriate for qualitative, descriptive analysis. This methodology has emerged from two intellectual traditions, each with differing perspectives on the nature and style of social research. Positivism, the first perspective, suggests social phenomenon exist not only in the minds of individuals, but also as

an objective reality. The mere 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 (Berg 1967; Casley 1993; and Thio 2001).

A second approach, the phenomenological perspective, questions the premise that objective reality can be determined via scientific inquiry and views social phenomena as constituting not one, but a set of multiple realities that require subjective methods of inquiry (Handel 1982; Morris 1977; Schutz 1962; and Thio 2001). The phenomenological approach is a version of symbolic interactionism, which defines human reality as a product of "social construction" formed through the activities of people interacting (Berger 1967; Blumer 1969; Schutz 1962; and Thio 2001).

A requirement of phenomenology is the importance of gaining an *"empathetic understanding"* of the people under investigation, specifically how humans construct their own social reality. William I. Thomas (1928) has stated, "It is not important whether or not the interpretation is correct—if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences." Thomas' theorem clearly indicates social reality is a matter of human perspectives. A primary goal of the research was to gain an

"empathetic understanding" of Gullah culture, an interpretation of social reality from the Gullah/Geechee perspective.

A Multidisciplinary Study

This paper reflects a multidisciplinary study by a rural sociologist and a communication specialist trained in the methods of ethnography. A phenomenological approach was applied during stages of data collection. A phenomenological approach to data collection must by definition stress the subjective perspectives of people including evidence of their conscious perceptions, attitudes, feelings, and personal beliefs (Handel 1982, Morris 1977, and Thio 2001). Researchers made a conscious decision to hear the *"voice of the people"* and to attempt an *"empathetic understanding"* of social reality from the perspective of Gullah/Geechee people.

Researchers interacted with local residents using a modified version of Rapid Rural Appraisal. Researchers collected data via interviews with key informants, focus group interviews, and by making structured observations in the field. Researchers adopted an ethnographic style of interviewing appropriate for phenomenological research. Fetterman (1996) argues the most effective interview strategy is, paradoxically, no strategy at all.

Fetterman (1996) and Berg (1998) contend ethnographic training stresses honesty, active listening, and being natural in the field. Researchers adopted the position that being natural during the field experience is much more effective than pre-programmed performances. Researchers proceeded with a goal of listening carefully and accurately recording the subjective responses of Gullah/Geechee people.

Interviews lasted from one to two hours in duration. A total of six (6) one-on-one interviews were conducted with people considered to be key informants, people selected on the basis of special knowledge, expertise, accomplishment, and leadership reputation within the Gullah/Geechee community. A total of six (6) focus group interviews were conducted with people identified by key informants as 'other' important leaders in the Gullah/Geechee community. One-on-one interviews with key informants and focus group interviews would best be described as either semi-structured and/or informal.

Researchers listened carefully during interviews for the surfacing of what ethnographers label *'emergent themes.'* Researchers provided a sense of structure by consistently asking the same three open-ended questions (see under findings) at some

point during each one-on-one interview and/or focus group interview. Researchers developed the three research questions from information obtained during a literature review of Gullah language and culture prior to the field experience. Structured observations were made on a daily basis and posted in written form on a web site established for this research project (see bibliography). Within the written context of study findings, researchers have summarized responses to open-ended questions, descriptions of emergent themes, and interpretations of structured observations made during the field experience.

Findings

Study findings reflect summaries of written notes, structured observations, and written text from a web site compiled by researchers during the field experience. Researchers conducted interviews from June 3, 2001 though July 6, 2001 in the Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia. Researchers conducted interviews on Hilton Head Island, Sullivan's Island, St. Helena Island, and Daufuskie Island in South Carolina. In addition, researchers conducted interviews in the cities of Charleston, South Carolina, Beaufort, South Carolina, and Savannah, Georgia.

Study findings have been organized in response to open-ended questions (see below) posed by researchers during one-on-one interviews and/or focus group interviews conducted with leaders and people representing the Gullah/Geechee community.

Research Questions

1. *What are the important components of Gullah/Geechee culture?*
2. *Is there concern among Gullah/Geechee people that the language and culture are beginning to disappear? If so, why?*
3. *What strategies have been implemented for preserving Gullah/Geechee language and culture?*

Components of Gullah Culture

Rogers and Burdge (1972) define a culture as 'a design for living,' and contend, "A culture consists of material and nonmaterial aspects of a way of life, which are shared and transmitted among members of a society." A summary of interview responses provide the reader with some degree of insight into important material and nonmaterial aspects of Gullah culture.

Language

Language has long been identified as a unique cursor of the Gullah culture. Gullah language remains an oral tradition, the

emphasis not placed on written text. Key informants insisted Gullah language represents their 'breath of life' and the foundation of Gullah/Geechee culture. Gullah language resonates with the rhythms of the islands, forming an instrument of interaction among Gullah/Geechee people. Gullah language represents a connection with African roots and ancestral traditions. The language is first (and foremost) African by definition, for it operates as a "code of the spirit," a method by which cultural traditions are passed from one generation to another. Gullah/Geechee people are self-expressive, and the language provides a sense of community, belonging, and continuity with the past.

The Gullah population may best be defined as a heterogeneous mixture of enslaved people taken from Angola, Senegal, Liberia, Sierra Leone, the 'Gold Coast,' and the 'Windward Coast' of Africa. It is important to note the enslaved ancestors of Gullah/Geechee people were bi-lingual, or often tri-lingual. Linguistic sources of Gullah sounds and grammar represent a diversity of African languages including Gola, Gidzi, Kissee, Ewe, Yoruba, Igbo, Twi, Efik, Fanti and Kongo. Vocabulary sources originate from Kongo, Yoruba, Mende, Ewe, and Bambara languages. The importance of language may be

interpreted from specific statements cited below (Focus Group Interviews 2001):

> *"De Wey Wi Speak, Duh De Wey Wi Lib!"*
> *(The way we speak is the way we live)*
>
> *"To get way from the Gullah language is to get away from your African roots ... our language is a connection to our past, our ancestral heritage."*
>
> *"Our language is a 'code of the spirit' ... an oral history. Through our language, Gullah/Geechee people continue to the traditional ways."*
>
> *"The Gullah language is unique, nothing like it survives in other places. Gullah language is the only lasting 'Creole' in North America."*
>
> *"Gullah adults reflect a deep appreciation and fondness for old ways of talking."*

Gullah youth, though not necessarily conversant in the language, show a curious interest in this unique form of communication. Gullah language was originally perceived by mainlanders as a form of 'broken English." Gullah/Geechee people were forbidden to use the language in public settings, the implication being Gullah language was, in fact, not a language. Lorenzo Turner (1949) challenged this very Anglo-centric viewpoint, changing the thinking not only about the speech of Gullah/Geechee people, but also about the linguistic heritage of African-Americans in general. The experiences of Gullah/Geechee people, who have had to defend the mere use of their language,

may be interpreted from specific statements cited below (Focus Group Interviews 2001):

> *"We lead a double life. We have the language of Gullah and the language of English."*
>
> *"For years we were told that our language is broken. A generation of people were told, 'you'll never get through life talking like that.' So, anybody living in town would say, 'I'm not Gullah; I'm not from the island.' "*
>
> *"During the days of slavery, we got whipped for speaking Gullah. When we went to school, we got disciplined for speaking Gullah. As adults, we were made fun of for speaking Gullah. Now you come and study us because we speak Gullah. What's a Gullah to think?"*
>
> *"A lot of young people are taking a new interest in the Gullah language. It is important for young people to have pride in their language and culture"*
>
> *"Our culture must be passed along to younger generations ... Gullah language is an oral history of Gullah culture and the younger generation must never lose touch with the language. Ignorance of the language and culture is our greatest threat."*

Gullah Cuisine

An essential component of Gullah culture is food. To the Gullah, food is not merely for human sustenance, but a bridge for celebration and family interaction. The elaborate preparation, presentation, and consummation of meals represent a form of communication expressing love and appreciation for family members. The names of Gullah dishes have special significance

and offer various nuances to the Gullah person. Gullah favorites include Low Country seafood boil, shrimp, crab, collard greens, lima beans, okra (gumbo), hoppin' john, red rice, pullet (chicken), turtle egg stew (now against the law), stew fish, bread pudding, sweet potato poone, sweet bread (cake), venison, raccoon, and conch. The importance of food to the Gullah may be interpreted from specific statements cited below (Focus Group Interviews 2001):

> *"Gullah is food, oh yes! You gotta' celebrate when you eat. You just don't eat food ... you celebrate food."*
>
> *"Food provides a healing. Good food is medicine for the soul."*
>
> *"We don't eat with our eyes like the mainlanders. If a tomato tastes good, then, it is good – no matter what it looks like."*
>
> *"Our food is for sharing – it shows our caring"*
>
> *"I'm always able to feed another person in my home. People (here) will automatically cook something more just in case a stranger drops in."*

Material Items

Handcrafted material items constitute a significant component of Gullah culture. Gullah/Geechee people understand the value of patience and take the necessary time required for completing a task by hand. Gullah/Geechee people insist that

energy flows from the Almighty through the hands of each human. Gullah people are famous for the quality of their hand made baskets, quilts, casting nets, fishing boats, and other material items required for survival in the Sea Islands.

The crafting of sweet grass baskets form a visible link to the African heritage of Gullah/Geechee people. Baskets served functions in the production of rice, cotton, and indigo. Men usually made larger baskets for vegetables and staples, while women made smaller baskets for domestic needs. True to the Gullah tradition of living in harmony with the land, baskets were crafted from indigenous materials—bull rushes, long leaf pine needles, palmetto leaves, and sweet grass.

Religious Beliefs

Gullah/Geechee people have a deep sense of spiritual connection to Almighty God. Gullah "spiritual life" operates as a central ethos and foundation for the culture. Gullah/Geechee people are guided by spiritual powers, beliefs, and personal values not easily discounted. Religious beliefs and teachings guide the Gullah sense of justice, equity, kinship, social awareness, and community relations. Religion provides the Gullah with a basic

philosophy from which life becomes directed, a 'divine order.' Gullah tradition and cultural heritage rest on a foundation of 'spiritual belief.' Activities in the life of Gullah/Geechee people, from town meetings to sporting events, have spiritual overtones. The quotes cited below reflect the spiritual awareness of Gullah/Geechee people (Focus Group Interviews 2001):

> *"We have to say God comes first. We can't breathe without our God, and we gotta start with Him."*
>
> *"Gullah people respect God first; then, we're able to respect others. We stop respectin' if people give us a reason. Otherwise, we just keep respectin.'*
>
> *"Goin' to church is like goin' to the 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. That's goin' to church."*
>
> *"You gotta' love everybody – that's what the Lord says. Some people don't want you to love 'em. I don't know what we're gonna' do with them folk."*
>
> *"This is all God's property. I don't know why outsiders think they own it. They sure ain't gonna take it with 'em when they meet the Lord."*
>
> *"Faith in our Almighty God gets the Gullah by on a daily basis"*

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 (Goodwine 2001). A major departure from mainstream Christian philosophy is a duality of presence involving 'soul' and 'spirit.'

The '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. As an example, funerals are elaborate and mourners decorate graves with prized possessions of the newly deceased.

Gullah/Geechee people believe their 'ancestors' maintain presence in daily affairs of the family. Ancestors visit with family members on various occasions, walk the streets and roads, guard and guide individuals, and advise or council people through spiritual means. The 'dressing' of graves, legends and accounts of visitations, and substantive Gullah folklore add significant dimension to this one specific concept—family members who have passed "are still with us now." Quotes that support the Gullah belief in a duality of 'soul' and 'spirit' are cited below (Focus Group Interviews 2001):

> *"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 and they left us the struggle, so now we gotta' pass it on to the next generation.*
>
> *"My grand mama says all this development and growin' has done affected the ancestors. She says they ain't walkin' the streets like they used to."*
>
> *"Cemetaries are very important to us. I can't believe them people have paved over them—built condos over graves. I*

know a place that has three homes over graves of Gullahs ... They keep sellin' 'em because the people in them graves sure enough don't let them sleep at night."

Pray's Houses

Gullah pray's houses function as a spiritual extension of their churches and communities, providing a distinctive socio-religious context wherein folk beliefs and religious practices prosper. The spiritual focus of the pray's house allows Gullah folk to practice "seeking the Lord." Alonzo Johnson spells the name pray's house' (rather than praise house) after Samuel Lawton's research in the 1930s. The majority of locals interviewed by Lawton referred to these places as either pray houses (without the possessive *s,* or as the pray-ers house), with an equal accent on the two syllables of the first word.

Socio-Religious Functions

- *Pray's houses provide churches a separate facility for examining new candidates for membership.*
- *Pray's houses provide a moral influence by bringing a spiritual voice directly into the neighborhood, curbing potentially destructive behavior patterns*
- *Pray's houses offer a place for strengthening one's faith, for extending one's fellowship, or for one's moral instruction.*

- *Pray's houses play an important role in the socialization of youth and for providing a forum for a child's rites of passage from childhood to adult*
- *Pray's houses provide a ritual framework facility for resolving personal disputes and dysfunctional behaviors within the community.*

Kinship

The concept of kinship is very important among Gullah/Geechee people. When describing family relationships, Gullahs frequently use words such as respect, honor, love, and phrases like "all we got is family," and "all we are is family." Aunts, uncles, cousins, distant relatives, and even people not necessarily related by blood, belong to the family unit. The bonds of connection are voiced through expressions of loyalty, appreciation, and consideration for family members.

The terms 'neighbors' and 'community' are nearly synonymous for the Gullah. Gullah/Geechee people literally interpret the Biblical passage "love thy neighbor as thyself." Gullah/Geechee people believe in a moral responsibility to "care for their neighbors." Gullah homes and family units are often arranged in a circular fashion. This pattern of settlement is called 'heir's property' and operates through a system of family

inheritance, as children receive permission to live on family property after marriage. A Gullah yard may contain the houses of parents, several children, and even grandchildren.

Social Norms

The concept of respect is extremely important for Gullah/Geechee people. Gullah/Geechee people respect, accept, and appreciate other people, for they believe in the spirituality of the "Golden Rule." Social norms tend to revolve around the foundation of Gullah life, a value system directly related to the 'spiritual beliefs' of Gullah/Geechee people. The following quotes reflect Gullah/Geechee norms of behavior with respect to family, friends, and neighbors (Focus Group Interviews):

> *"We gotta' have our family around. That makes us fulfilled. That gives you upliftment. Without family – what have you got?"*
>
> *"You have to respect your elders. That's what makes you civilized. Him that don't respect his elders is worse than an infidel."*
>
> *"I feel sorry for folk that can't feel their family. They don't know where they come from, so they sure don't know where they're goin'."*
>
> *"You have to give people honor. If somebody does something good, then you gotta give them the honor for it.*
>
> *"When I was little ... we shared everything. Neighbors shared. If somebody had a watermelon in the community, then every family got some. If a family had some venison in the community, then every family got some. We're not a*

selfish bunch. We understand loving, giving, and sharing. That is who we are!

Gullah social norms reflect a positive philosophical approach to the celebration of living. Gullah/Geechee people firmly believe in God, and the belief that there's "a little bit of God is in all of us." Their positive philosophical attitude seems to serve as a powerful tool for resisting depression, bitterness, and malice toward others. The Gullahs exhibit strong moral character and a positive approach to everyday life, as illustrated by the following quotes (Focus Group Interviews 2001):

> *"My culture lifts me up! When I feel low, I think of where we've been – then, I feel like goin' on."*
>
> *"We have open hearts 'til somebody don't want us to offer them up!"*
>
> *"If'n God be in us all, den we gotta love all of us, huh?"*
>
> *"You know love overpowers all! Love is more powerful than hate – our people strive only for peace and harmony. I have never been taught to hate – only to love!"*
>
> *"Tune in to the Almighty Spirit, then you can be in tune with everything else!"*

Cultural Diaspora?

There exists a concern among scholars that the language and culture of Gullah/Geechee people may be dissipating with the encroachment of mainland influences. Construction of bridges

from the mainland to Sea Island communities has made an impact and hastened social changes. Perhaps, this impact has been overstated in the literature, for there seems to exist a double-edged sword with respect to contact and assimilation. On the one hand, land development in the form of gated communities and a rapidly increasing number of tourists, continues to negatively affect traditional lifestyles on the islands. Gullah/Geechee people believe mainlanders live at a 'fast pace' not conducive to the more spiritual existence of Gullahs. The communal living style of the Gullah has been disrupted by the influx of mainlanders to the islands. Traditional hunting and fishing grounds are now gated communities. The elimination of sweet grass and long-leaf pine threaten traditional Gullah arts and crafts. Gullah cemeteries have been desecrated in the name of land development, modernization, and technological progress. Gullahs continue losing land due to taxing regulations and governmental policies. In summary, outsiders have become the majority and continue to impose 'their will' on the Gullah/Geechee community.

The other side of the double-edged sword involves an acknowledgement by Gullahs that the impact of tourism provides jobs and employment opportunities for islanders. There exists a

positive attitude among Gullahs that employment provides resources required for maintaining possession of the land. Employment opportunities mean Gullahs do not have to sell their land below market value, or lose their land through auctions. Gullahs do not necessarily reject technological progress, better standards of living, or personal contact with outsiders. In fact, Gullah/Geechee people view contact with others as an opportunity to educate persons willing to listen, people who may return and teach others in their own communities 'what they have learned,' in a healing, uplifting, and unifying way.

Gullah/Geechee people firmly believe in sharing with others, but in a manner *that they choose*, and not in a way that is *dictated to them*. Although committed to traditional teachings grounded in a deep spiritual faith, the Gullah/Geechee community lives in the present, celebrating life and perceiving the future in positive terms. Gullahs believe a better understanding of others enhances the conditions and qualities of human life. As one informant commented, *"The dynamic array of cultures that the Creator has placed in this part of the universe that we call 'our world' simply enhances the quality of life for all people."*

Strategies For Preserving Gullah/Geechee Culture

Gullah/Geechee people are actively taking steps to prevent further erosion of their language and culture. The *Gullah/Geechee Sea Island Coalition* is one of several influential organizations dedicated to the preservation of Gullah language and tradition. *Penn Center*, a cultural and educational facility for African-American Studies, provides visitors to St. Helena Island information on the preservation of Gullah/Geechee heritage. The lines of communication are currently open with county, state, and federal agencies for continued support (financial and otherwise) relative to the preservation of Gullah language and culture.

Gullah cultural presentations exist in the form of festivals, tours, drama, and cultural exhibits designed to educate the public about Gullah/Geechee heritage. Marquetta L. Goodwine (2001) says, "These activities also serve as a means of income for many Gullah/Geechee entrepreneurs and artists. Gullahs choose to educate people coming to the islands. So very many people come with pre-conceived notions of who Gullah/Geechee people are—and what Gullah/Geechee culture should be—notions that often lean toward encouraging Gullah/Geechee people to assimilate into the ways of mainstream American culture." Goodwine further

notes, "Gullah/Geechees are returning home with more knowledge of the mainstream system, with no need to work for outsiders who have invaded our homeland."

The Gullahs believe they have the tenacity to continue a culture that has survived for centuries. A brief investigation of Gullah history reveals a series of facts suggesting Gullah language and culture will continue to survive in the years ahead. This resilient and resourceful group of people have created a language, a unique culture, a means to cope with the injustices of slavery, and a philosophy of life based on a deep, abiding faith and spirituality. Gullahs have been taken from their original African homelands, families divided for the sake of forced labor, education forbidden as a means of oppression, and Gullah freedom restricted by lands converted to gated communities and the needs of developmental tourism. Gullahs have survived the post-Civil War economy, the roots of segregation, the Jim Crow Era, several periods of cultural assimilation, and the liberating transition from slavery to freedom. Gullah/Geechee people have been called free; when, in fact, they were not free.

The Gullah/Geechee community has continued to exist under scrutiny and study from federal agencies, scholars,

academicians, and other assorted and uninvited 'do gooders' from around the globe. Gullah/Geechee people have gained an awareness of the threats and obstacles presented by assimilation. Gullahs are communicating with one another and designing strategies for controlling the effects of modernization and economic development.

The Gullah/Geechee community is actively planning for socio-economic changes in the Sea Island region, as a way of avoiding the unwanted impacts of assimilation. At a recent community meeting attended by both researchers, a Gullah moderator addressed the audience in the following eloquent tones:

> *"We have come here tonight to discuss the reservation of our culture. We know other communities and islands have been over-developed. We're here to develop strategies for the protection of our culture, for ourselves and our children."*

The following points were addressed by residents of St. Helena Island in a recent community meeting (6-18-01):

Community Meeting Agenda (6-18-01)

- ***control of fast food restaurants with drive-thru windows***

  'for Gullahs ... food involves social exchanges, conversation, and unity'

- ***control of highway expansion***

'for Gullahs ... expanded highways mean unwanted automobile traffic'

- ***control of high-rise, or multi-story buildings***

  'for Gullahs ... preservation of island architecture is mandatory'

- ***control of strip malls, or shopping centers***

  'for Gullahs ... the concept of mass shopping is equated with mainlanders'

Gullah preferences for community development

1) *buildings with 'porches' that allow neighbors to visit and talk*
2) *'family' and 'mom and pop' type grocery stores and businesses*
3) *'farm markets' and 'vegetable stands' supplied by local farmers*
4) *a 'walking' path through the community to encourage interaction*
5) *a 'bulletin board' at the bus stop announcing community news*

The agenda of this community meeting represents a living testimony that Gullah/Geechee leadership is committed to the principles of traditional living and to the preservation of Gullah culture.

Conclusions

Existing literature does not adequately reflect the resilience of Gullah/Gechee people, nor descriptions of the current strategies

being implemented to preserve and protect Gullah culture. The findings of this study reflect the spirit and resolve of Gullah/Geechee people, a people determined to preserve their culture regardless of the obstacles presented by an encroaching value system based on materialism. Gullah language and culture have not yet been made victims of the impact of land development, developmental tourism, and/or contact with mainlanders. The contemporary Gullah attitude may best be described with the following quotes (Focus Group Interviews 2001):

> *"When you see that you've been sleepin' and your culture is slippin' away, then, what you gotta do is go back and fetch what you lost!"*
>
> *"Sometimes things slip away from you ... you just gotta go back and fetch 'em ... things that slip away."*

Gullah/Geechee people recognize the fact there is concern for the possible erosion of their language and culture. However, the foundation of Gullah culture, a deep and abiding faith in Almighty God, provides a 'light of truth' and a 'divine order' of things in the universe. Gullah/Geechee people repeatedly remarked and asserted, *"We do not desire 'outsiders to come down here and save us.' We already have a Savior. What we need is for people to let us*

tell our story, let us be who we are and not make us a commodity or piece of cultural merchandise."

Gullah/Geechee people seek respect for their faith, language, history, heritage, and cultural traditions. In many cases, academic and/or scientific intrusions have caused Gullah/Geechee people to feel exploited. As a result, Gullahs have become distrustful of outsiders and less willing to share information about their culture. A common Gullah sentiment is expressed by the following quotes (Focus Group Interview 2001):

> *"Outsiders shouldn't be making money on our everyday lives. We know who we are and we're at peace with that. We are Africans living in the United States—We are Gullah/Geechee. That is who we were, who we are, and who we will be. We are forever!*
>
> *"Outsiders should not expect to come here, hide away in an archive, read a few books and essays, and then go away saying they know who we are. They need to hear, feel, sense and touch our story."*

Passing The Torch

Gullah/Geechee leadership is in the process of passing the torch of 'cultural tradition' to their youth. The challenge of preserving Gullah/Geechee language and culture rests squarely on the shoulders of a younger generation. Gullah leaders are currently

working to motivate adults as positive role models for Gullah youth; and, as Marquetta L. Goodwine (2001) notes, "Youth do not learn things 'out of the blue.' We, as adults, must be living examples for them to follow!"

The value of this paper (and similar efforts) may truly be the response taken by Gullah youth. Gullah adults would remind younger generations they must understand the past, present, and future are inter-related, symbolically expressed as the 'breath of life' embodied in Gullah language and culture. The Gullah is constantly in touch with God. Gullah youth must feel a connection with God and to each member of the family and community. Gullah youth must rise to the occasion and accept the challenge of continuity expressed by the Gullah oral tradition.

Gullahs have declared their right to self-determination via *The Constitution of the Gullah/Geechee Nation*, announced July 1, 2001 during a public ceremony on Sullivan's Island, South Carolina. Gullah/Geechee people are claiming the right to genuine social dignity, the right to preserve and protect Gullah language and culture, the right to develop in spirit with Gullah principles and aspirations, and for the right to consolidate an official, institutional framework of the Gullah/Geechee Nation. Currently, these

objectives are being accomplished through community preservation meetings, conferences, workshops, festivals, and celebrations of culture.

Gullah language is a living, breathing, oral tradition that must be carried forward by younger generations. The greatest threat to Gullah culture is ignorance. The strongest asset of Gullah culture is the tenacity and determination of Gullah adults to motivate and educate their youth. In the 'divine order of things,' it shall be done.

Glossary

Ethnographic method	method of cultural description whereby the researcher is placed in the midst of a particular social group, and from this vantage point, attempts to describe and interpret social expressions, interactions, and communication among people
empathetic understanding	using 'empathy' to better interpret the social world from the unique, subjective perspective of people under investigation/study
emergent themes	important information or descriptive data obtained by researchers from interview and/or discussions with people under investigation
Gullah	a 'Creole' language spoken by people of African descent living in the Sea Island region of South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. Gullah also refers to the people who speak and use this language
Geechee	a dialect, or 'pidgin' language derived from the interaction of Gullah speakers with non-Gullahs. Geechee also refers to people living in the Sea Island region who speak and use this language.
focus group	a small group of people under the guidance of a moderator who are engaged in interactive discussion relative to topics of research
indigenous	native to (or living naturally in) a particular area, or environment
key informants	people of a rural community selected for interview on the basis of reputation, special knowledge, expertise, or leadership qualities
phenomenology	an approach that emphasizes the unique subjective perspective of a member of a social group, or members of a social group
pidgin	a simplified form of speech, usually a mixture of two or more languages, with a rudimentary grammar and vocabulary used for communication between groups speaking different languages
qualitative	indicates the notion of quality as essential to the nature of things/ qualitative research refers to the meanings, concepts, definitions, symbols and descriptions of things under investigation

structured observations	an ethnographic technique defined as cultural descriptions made by researchers in the field
triangulation	a method of investigating a phenomenon from three slightly different perspectives for the purpose of more reliable findings

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