

Introducing Folknography: A Study of Gullah Culture

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Abstract Principles of rural sociology, ethnographic research, and interpersonal communication provide the foundation for a study of Gullah culture. The Gullahs are descendants of enslaved people living in the Sea Islands and coastal regions of South Carolina, Georgia, and northern Florida. Unlike enslaved Africans living in mainland regions, the Gullahs remained more isolated and able to transform their language and culture into a uniquely distinctive African American heritage. Construction of bridges during the last fifty years, connecting coastal Sea Islands with the mainland, eventually led to land development initiatives and a thriving coastal economy founded on resort tourism. Gullahs began losing their land at an alarming rate. The Gullahs are a people with economic and emotional ties to their homelands, and the loss of land means the loss of Gullah culture. Literature suggests the Gullah community is experiencing a cultural Diaspora, exacerbated by a perceived fear that younger generations of Gullahs may be losing their cultural identity. *Folknography*, a version of Rapid Rural Appraisal, will be introduced to provide a descriptive analysis of Gullah culture and explore the impact of land development initiatives on the dissipation of Gullah culture and language.

Introduction

The Gullahs represent a distinctive group of African Americans living primarily in the Sea Islands and coastal regions of our southeastern United States. 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; Pollitzer 1999; and Smith 1996). Pollitzer (1999), provides a rather romantic

description of the region saying, “The Gullah homeland 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 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).

Marquette L. Goodwine, the first Gullah representative to address the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland (1999) states, “Gullahs number some 750,000 persons who still speak the Gullah language, a ‘Creole’ evolved from the interaction of diverse African languages and English.”

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).

Euro-centric slaveholders required a method of communication with their enslaved Africans, a very diverse population speaking many different languages. To this end, 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. Gullah may also be a corruption of the name “Angola,” a region in Africa 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 often used to describe descendants of enslaved Africans now living in the Sea Islands 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 derived from the interactions 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 synonymous. Marquetta L. Goodwine (2001) confirms the terms are indeed synonymous saying, “Gullah/Geechee people have always considered ourselves as one. Amongst ourselves, we don’t use designations of ‘Gullah,’ or ‘Geechee.’ We know we are all kin. We know we’re all the same culture, heritage, and legacy.”

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). Historian and preservationist Marquetta L. 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, 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.”

Historical Background

Gullahs are descendants of slaves captured from the “Windward Coast” of West Africa (Goodwine 1998; Greer 1999; Montgomery 1994; Morgan 1998; Pollitzer 1999; Pyatt 1999; 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). Edsel 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-1950’s, a favorable set of circumstances with respect to preserving Gullah culture and language. Scholars note the Sea Island climate was not

friendly to people of European extraction. The immune system of a typical European descendant was inadequate for protection against the extreme heat and inevitability of tropical diseases (Diop 2001; Carlie Town 2001; Pollitzer 1999; and Tibbetts 2001). Africans 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 enslaved Gullahs leaving them relatively unsupervised (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 Euro-centric 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 willing to live in the tropical coastal climate were significant factors contributing to the development of a unique Gullah culture and language (Diop 2001; Greer 1999; Smith 1996; Pollitzer 1999; Tibbetts 2001 and Williams 2001).

Following the Civil War, a significant number of Gullahs assimilated into the southern cities of Savannah, Georgia and Charleston, South Carolina, and/or migrated to northern cities along the eastern seaboard like Philadelphia and New York (Pollitzer 1999; Rowland 1996; and Tibbetts 2001). However, it is more important to note the majority of Gullahs stayed home, remaining in the Sea Islands and rural areas along coastal South Carolina. In fact, the land from Charleston, South Carolina to the northern border of Florida, and forty miles inland from the sea, was reserved for the settlement of formerly enslaved Gullahs (Pollitzer 2001; Rowland 1996 and Tibbetts 2001).

Significance of the Research

This study has significance for people concerned with preserving the history, culture, and language of African Americans living in rural regions of the United States. Gullah/Geechees are descendants of ancestors from West Africa, specifically brought to the Sea Islands by Carolina plantation owners who required an enslaved population with agrarian skills considered essential for the cultivation of rice, cotton, and indigo (Diop 2001; Goodwine 2001; Lee 1998; Pollitzer 1999; and Tibbetts 2001). A majority of Gullahs have maintained an economic and emotional attachment to their homeland after the disappearance of plantation culture. From the Era of Reconstruction throughout the middle of the 20th Century, Gullahs have been able to live a relatively secluded, agrarian lifestyle (Diop 2001; Pollitzer 1999; and Tibbetts 2001).

Gullahs represent a traditional, rural population with extensive economic and emotional ties to their homelands. The construction of bridges in the middle 1950's, connecting coastal Sea Islands with mainland areas, led to land development in the form of gated communities, expensive homes, elaborate country clubs, and elite hotel properties. The following decades brought increasing land development initiatives directed toward properties owned by Gullahs (Goodwine 2001; Jones-Jackson 1987; Rowland 1996; Siegal 2000; and Tibbetts 2001). The creation of a thriving coastal tourist industry, and an ever-increasing scale of interaction with outsiders from the mainland, presented a series of potential threats to the traditional Gullah 'way of life' (Jones-Jackson 1987; Lee 1998; Pollitzer (1999) 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, Gullahs had been free to travel anywhere, hunting and fishing on their land, or on property belonging to absentee landlords. But developers built gates and fences cutting Gullahs off from fishing and hunting grounds, sometimes even traditional cemeteries. To sustain 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.” Emory Campbell reinforces his position two decades later saying, “The Gullahs are a people tied to their land, and the loss of land means the loss of Gullah culture and language.”

Significant changes in the development of Gullah lands must (by definition) impact the preservation of Gullah culture and language. 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 owned by Gullahs,” Emory Campbell (2001) sadly reports, “When development came to Hilton Head Island, prejudices were prevalent and segregation became the law. Gullah/Geechee 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 on Gullah culture and language. The study entitled, “*Special Resource Study of Lowcountry Gullah Culture*” explores the factors associated with preserving Gullah/Geechee culture. Marquetta L. Goodwine (2001) suggests, “If the federal government wants to help preserve Gullah/Geechee culture, it should start by protecting land ownership. There’s a definite need for Congress to fund studies of this type.”

The literature suggests Gullah people are experiencing a cultural Diaspora. Historian Lawrence Rowland (1996) of the University of South Carolina at Beaufort reports, “As the coastal economy has thrived and newcomers poured to the shoreline in record numbers, historic folkways have been disappearing.” Agyeman (2000) notes 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. There exists a perceived fear that an increasing scale of interaction with mainlanders may cause younger generations of Gullahs to lose their cultural identity (Agyeman 2000; Branch 1995; Guthrie 1997; Porcher 2001; Rowland 1996; Siegal 2000; and Tibbetts 2001).

This study has significance for people concerned with the impact of technical, social, and economic changes on a traditional population living in the ‘midst of transition.’ A planned series of events, the construction of bridges connecting coastal South Carolina with its Sea Islands, has introduced rapid social and economic changes for people indigenous to the region. Land development initiatives have triggered changes that literally threaten the existence of Gullah culture and language.

There exists a need for social scientists to examine the current state of Gullah culture and the effects of land development and resort tourism on the dissipation of Gullah culture. The Gullahs are a traditional people living in the midst of transition, and the loss of land places an obvious burden on community members wishing to preserve Gullah culture and language. This paper reflects a descriptive analysis of important aspects of Gullah culture, and it explores the perceived impacts of land development initiatives on the dissipation of Gullah culture.

Research Methodology

This study is a descriptive analysis of Gullah culture using qualitative research methods. Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA), an effective method of assessing the needs of rural populations, provides the foundation for data collection during a two-year pilot study. Casley (1993), Chambers (1992), Dunn (1994), and Kumar (1990) suggest there are advantages associated with using (RRA) for data collection in rural areas (see below).

Advantages of RRA

- *RRA has an international reputation for rigorous and systematic principles of data collection.*
- *RRA has proven a particularly effective method for assessing attitudes of residents living in rural, isolated locales.*
- *RRA has a reputation for understanding the value of local knowledge and the importance of listening to native perspectives.*
- *RRA has an appropriate structure for the application of multidisciplinary research techniques in the field.*
- *RRA has become an increasingly important method of data collection in studies hindered by the constraints of time and funding.*

RRA has no strictly determined rules of methodological procedure; however, several distinctive methodological features have emerged from existing literature that may constitute a foundation of procedure (Casley 1993; Chambers 1992; Dunn 1994; Ison and Ampt 1992; Khon Kaen 1985; and Kumar 1990). RRA requires a commitment to multidisciplinary research, a recognition of the value of local knowledge and native perspectives, an adaptation to the unique cultural context of field experiences, and the use of qualitative data for the purpose of descriptive analysis (Chambers 1992; Dunn 1994; and Kumar 1990). The authors have modified certain features of Rapid Rural Appraisal to develop a more innovative methodology of data collection entitled, “*Folkography*.”

Introducing Folknography

The authors are introducing a research methodology entitled, “*Folknography*,” for the purpose of completing a two-year pilot study of Gullah culture and language. This research methodology has evolved through recent field experiences based on a qualitative technique of data collection known as Rapid Rural Appraisal (Jarrett and Lucas 2000; Jarrett and Lucas 2001; and Lucas and Jarrett 2001). *Folknography* combines core features of Rapid Rural Appraisal with influences from ethnographic research, phenomenological sociology, symbolic interactionism, and rural sociology.

Rapid Rural Appraisal has 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; Berube 1985; Giddens 1974 and Patton 2002). Positivism assumes social phenomena exist not only in the minds of individuals, but also as an objective reality. This intellectual position assumes 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 (Benton 1977; Berg 1998; Coser 1977; Giddens 1974; Patton 2002; and Schils and Finch 1949).

A second intellectual tradition, phenomenology, questions the premise that social reality can be determined via scientific inquiry 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; Blumer 1969; Handel 1982; Morris 1977; Patton 2002; and Schutz 1962). The phenomenological

perspective includes both symbolic interactionism and phenomenological sociology, two theoretical orientations that define social reality as a product of “*human construction.*” Social reality is perceived to be a social product by people actively engaged in symbolic communication with one another (Barker 2000; Berger and Luckmann 1966; Blumer 1969; Patton 2002; Thomas and Swaine 1928; and Schutz 1962).

A requirement of phenomenological inquiry is the importance of gaining an “*empathetic understanding*” of human action, especially the “*subjective perspectives*” of people as they define their own social reality. William Isaac Thomas (1928) offers his classic statement, “It is not important whether an interpretation is correct - if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.” Thomas’ theorem indicates reality is a matter of human perspective, and that humans construct their own social reality by defining situations subjectively.

Folkography is a modified version of Rapid Rural Appraisal designed to assist researchers who are interested in gaining a better understand the “*subjective perspective*” of a particular “*folk*” selected for investigation. A literal interpretation of the term *Folkography* suggests “*folk*” refers to people of a specified kind, while “*nography*” is a direct reference to the use of ethnographic methods during research. *Folkographers* gather raw data for the purpose of gaining an “*empathetic understanding*” of the social reality experienced by a particular “*folk.*”

Folkography borrows from the objectives and methods of ethnographic research. Ethnography is defined as the work of describing cultures, with a goal of understanding another way of life from the ‘native point of view’ (Berg 1998; Fetterman 1998; Geertz 1973; Goodall 2000; Patton 2002; and Willis 1980). Barker (2000) defines ethnography

as an empirical and theoretical approach that seeks detailed, holistic description and analysis of cultures based on intensive participatory fieldwork. *Folkknographers* share with ethnographers a philosophical commitment to investigate cultural norms, values, beliefs, practices, and artifacts, especially as these entities connect to the wider social processes of a whole ‘way of life.’

The objective of ethnography is to produce what Geertz (1973) has described as “*thick descriptions*” of the “*multiplicity of conceptual structures*” of cultural life. *Folkknographers* produce forms of cultural description by placing themselves in the midst of a specific “*folk*,” and from this vantage point, attempting to describe social reality from the “*subjective perspective*” of that particular population.

Phenomenology, a theoretical orientation stressing the importance of subjective interpretations, provides a philosophical foundation for certain styles of sociological investigation. Contemporary expressions of phenomenological sociology suggest human beings possess the ability to create their own social reality (Berger and Luckmann 1967; Blumer 1969; and Schutz 1962). *Folkknography* promotes a conscious decision to investigate social reality from the “*subjective perspective*” of particular “*folk*.”

Max Weber, one of the ‘founding fathers’ of sociology, believed there was no absolutely objective scientific analysis of culture, or social phenomena (Coser 1977). Weber notes, “We can only understand human action by using methods of investigation requiring “*verstehen*,” or “*empathetic understanding*.” Max Weber’s definition of social investigation aimed for an interpretative understanding of social behavior by penetration into the subjective meanings that actors attach to their own behavior, and to the behavior of others (Coser 1977; Shils and Finch 1949; and Weber 1964).

Folknographers apply “*verstehen*” (or *empathy*) by using qualitative methods appropriate for interpreting the social world from the “*subjective perspective*” of “*folk*” in *their* natural setting, stressing *their* attitudes, *their* beliefs, *their* values, *their* social expressions, *their* interactive rituals, and *their* mode of communication. *Folknographers* actively listen for the “*voice of the people*,” searching carefully for “*emergent themes*” and “*collective interpretations*” appropriate for gaining an “*empathetic understanding*” of social reality as defined by a particular “*folk*” selected for investigation.

Folknography represents a “*middle range analysis*” with respect to time and space. Data are gathered using methodological techniques requiring a more intermediate period of time in the field. Sociologists often use survey research to obtain a ‘snapshot,’ or singular perspective in time and space of a particular social group. Ethnographers often prefer participating in people’s lives for an extended period of time making observations, asking questions, and listening to ‘what is said’ (Barker 2002; Berg (1998); Goodall 2000; and Wolcott 1999). *Folknographers* conduct leadership interviews, direct focus group sessions, write ethnographic narratives of daily experiences, use content analysis, collect digital camera photos, and post data labeled “*artistic observations*” to a research-specific web site during a more intermediate field experience, somewhere between the framework required by researchers of the other two disciplines.

Folknography employs “*methodological triangulation*,” a metaphorical term describing a convergent validation of three distinct sources of data. There exists an assumption that *different* methods of data collection reveal *different* facets of reality. Leadership interviews, focus group interviews, and artistic observations reflect three distinctively different forms of data collected during field experiences (see page 17).

The innovative nature of *Folknography* allows for the inclusion of many forms of qualitative data, especially data described as artistic observations. *Folknographers* are encouraged to post written narratives, photographic essays, autoethnographic accounts, journal entries, and personal observations to a web site designed specifically for the research project. “*Methodological triangulation*,” expressed by three distinct forms of data - leadership interviews, focus group interviews, and artistic observations - provide researchers with a more substantive means for verification of study findings.

Folknography is a “*multidisciplinary endeavor*,” relying on the expertise of researchers who apply knowledge from their respective disciplines during the field experience. Phenomenological sociology allows for subjective perspectives to play a role in the process of scientific investigation. *Folknography* encourages researchers to use their professional training during field experiences. For example, a rural sociologist may focus on the importance of values as a motivator of social action, while an expert in the discipline of interpersonal communication may focus on the forms of communication used to transmit values from one generation to another. There exists an assumption that different interests lead to different interpretations of the same social reality, each observation playing an important role in the totality of description.

Folknography employs a technique of data collection known as “*feed forward*,” or the ability for others to provide a critique of data during the field experience. Rather than processing information as ‘feedback,’ or critique after the fact, researchers will encourage commentary during the process of data collection. One method used by *Folknographers* to facilitate the process of “*feed forward*” requires posting data to a research-specific web site. Data from leadership interviews, focus group sessions, and

artistic observations may be immediately accessed by scholars, colleagues, educators, students (even the ‘folk’ under investigation) who may wish to provide commentary.

Folknography recognizes the importance of researchers working with a liaison (s) within the ethnic community selected for investigation. A community liaison provides guidance for researchers, ensuring the indigenous population and culture are respected. A liaison can provide legitimate opportunities for people in the community to express their views by assisting with interviews, focus group sessions, and opportunities for artistic observations. Data may be shared with the community through the liaison, with comments and critique enabling researchers to further substantiate gathered data.

Foundations of Folknography in Abbreviated Form

1. *Folknography represents a modified version of Rapid Rural Appraisal combining elements of ethnographic research with principles of rural sociology, symbolic interactionism, and phenomenological sociology.*
2. *Folknography is defined as a qualitative research methodology providing a descriptive analysis of specific ethnic groups.*
3. *Folknography employs methods of data collection that encourage the use of ‘verstehen,’ or empathetic understanding, to gain insight into native perspectives of social reality.*
4. *Folknography requires a limited, intermediate time frame for data collection and field experiences.*
5. *Folknography employs ‘methodological triangulation’ during stages of data collection.*
6. *Folknography is a ‘multidisciplinary approach’ to field research, data description, and qualitative analysis.*
7. *Folknography promotes the concept of ‘feed forward,’ or methods designed to allow immediate access of data and information.*
8. *Folknography recognizes the importance of using a community liaison throughout the field experience.*

Methods of Data Collection

Researchers applied a modified version of Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) called “*Folkography*” for the collection of data during this two-year pilot study of Gullah culture and language. Data were collected during two separate field experiences in the Sea Islands of South Carolina. The initial period of data collection was a thirty-five day field experience from June 3, 2001 through July 7, 2001, and the second was a thirty-six day field experience from June 2, 2002 through July 7, 2002.

Researchers applied the concept of methodological triangulation by using three distinct techniques of data collection considered appropriate within the descriptive context of “*Folkography*.” Researchers conducted leadership interviews, focus group interviews, and posted artistic observations to a research-specific web site during the two separate field experiences. The methods of data collection used in this study are briefly described (see below) for better clarity.

Methods of Data Collection

- ***Key Informant Interviews***

Berg (1998) and Fetterman (1998) refer to interviews as conversation with a purpose. Key informants in the Gullah/Geechee community were identified and selected for one-on-one interviews (conversations) on the basis of special knowledge, expertise, accomplishments, status, leadership reputation, and active involvement in the community. Certain key informants were selected to play the role of liaison with community members and assist with scheduling interviews and the provision of additional opportunities for data collection labeled artistic observations. In order to create a pool of candidates for focus group interviews, key informants were asked to provide names of other people and/or assist with selecting others that would constitute a diversity of people within the Gullah/Geechee community. One-on-one interviews with key informants provided researchers with an initial source of data.

- **Focus Group Interviews**

Berg (1998) and Fetterman (1998) define a focus group as an interview style designed for a group discussion, usually a small number of people under the guidance of a qualified moderator. Focus group interviews were organized with assistance from community liaisons to provide researchers a series of interactive discussions featuring a diversity of people in the Gullah/Geechee community. Focus group interviews included interactive sessions with community elders, church members, males, females, and young people. As distinguished from more conventional methods of one-on-one interviewing, researchers considered focus groups, and the interactive and synergistic nature of these interviews, a second distinctive source of data.

- **Artistic Observations**

Artistic observations represent an innovative method of data collection by researchers using a combination of ethnographic methods. 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 interpersonal communication among people (Berg 1998 and Fetterman 1998). Artistic observations were posted to a research-specific web site during the field experience by researchers using lap top computers. Artistic observations represented a wide range of data including - short stories, autoethnographic texts, non-fictional accounts, photographic essays, journals entries, and prose – representing personal and subjective interpretations by researchers of observations in the field. Data were posted on the research-based web site (see bibliography on page 44) so that scholars, colleagues, educators, students, the ‘folk’ under investigation, and others could provide commentary, or monitor progress of the research. Artistic observations are considered a third distinctive source of data.

Researchers interacted with local residents using an ethnographic style of interviewing appropriate for qualitative research. Fetterman (1996) argues the most effective interview strategy is, paradoxically, no interview strategy at all. Fetterman (1996) and Berg (1998) contend ethnographic training stresses honesty, active listening, and being natural in the field, as opposed to pre-programmed performances.

Researchers proceeded with a goal of listening carefully and accurately recording the subjective responses of Gullahs during interviews lasting from one to two hours in duration. A total of sixteen (16) one-on-one leadership interviews were conducted with key informants, or people selected on the basis of special knowledge, expertise, honor, accomplishment, and/or leadership reputation within the Gullah/Geechee community. A total of twelve (12) focus group interviews were conducted with groups of people identified by key informants as representing a diversity of people 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 provided a sense of structure by consistently asking the same four open-ended questions (see page 20) listening carefully for “*emergent themes*” that may express Gullah views of social reality. Researchers developed open-ended questions from information obtained during a literature review of Gullah/Geechee culture prior to the field experience. Each question addresses an important aspect of Gullah culture and/or factors affecting the preservation of Gullah culture and language.

Researchers were provided opportunities to create artistic observations via community meetings, community social events, cultural festivals, historic tours, and workshop/seminars detailing the history and tradition of Gullah culture. Artistic observations took the form of ethnographic narratives, digital camera photo essays, journal entries, autoethnographic short stories, and a content analysis of community events. Data were posted to a research web site especially developed for this two-year pilot study of Gullah culture during two separate field experiences in 2001 and 2002.

Findings

Study findings reflect descriptive summaries of questions asked by researchers during one-on-one interviews, focus group interviews, and in the interpretations of artistic observations made by researchers during a two-year field experience in the Sea Islands of South Carolina. Interview sessions and artistic observations were conducted in South Carolina on St. Helena Island, Hilton Head Island, Sullivan’s Island, Daufuskie Island, and in the cities of Charleston and Beaufort, as well as in Savannah, Georgia.

Study findings have been organized via responses to the four open-ended questions (see below) asked by researchers during interviews. A community liaison assisted with scheduling interviews and providing legitimate opportunities for researchers to conduct artistic observations. The liaison serves the Gullah community as director of an organization actively involved in the preservation of Gullah culture and language (refer to *Gullah/Geechee Sea Island Coalition* as noted in the bibliography on page 40).

Research Questions

1. *What are the important aspects 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?*
4. *Have Gullah/Geechee people been separated from their land in recent years? If so, how have Gullah/Geechee people lost their land?*

Question # 1 Aspects of Gullah Culture

Rogers and Burdge (1972) define culture as ‘a design for living,’ contending, “A culture consists of material and nonmaterial aspects of a way of life, which are shared and transmitted among members of a society.” Goodall (2000) considers culture to be the production and consumption of everyday life - how everyday life is accounted for - through verbal exchanges, nonverbal performances, and group practices. A summary of interview responses provide readers with some degree of insight into important material and nonmaterial aspects of Gullah culture, including examples of verbal exchanges and group practices accounting for the production of a Gullah ‘way of life.’

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, Kisse, 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 statements cited below (Interviews 2001-2002):

*“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 general linguistic heritage of African-Americans. 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 (Interviews 2001-2002):

“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 (Interviews 2001-2002):

“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 (Interviews 2001-2002):

"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 supporting the Gullah belief in a duality of ‘soul’ and ‘spirit’ are cited (Interviews 2001-2002):

“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 chullin.”

“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 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 1930’s. 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. Without question, the ‘pray’s house’ provides a number of important socio-religious functions for the Gullah/Geechee community (see below).

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 (Interviews 2001-2002):

“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.” Gullah values revolve around issues of religion, family, kinship, and humanitarianism. Their positive philosophical attitude seems to serve as a tool of power 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 (Interviews 2001-2002):

“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!”

Question # 2 Issues of 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 assimilation.

On the one hand, land development in the form of gated communities and resort tourism continues to negatively affect traditional Gullah lifestyles on the islands. Gullah 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.*”

Question # 3 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 (Campbell 2001; Goodwine 2001; Williams 2001; and Wilson 2001). Marquette 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 resort tourism. Gullahs have survived the post-Civil War economy, the Jim Crow Era, periods of segregation, several movements of cultural assimilation, and the liberating transition from slavery to freedom. Certainly, there have been instances in American history whereby Gullah 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 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 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. The residents of St. Helena Island, South Carolina discussed issues of land development and economic growth during a community meeting held at the local elementary school on June 18, 2001 (see agenda below). A Gullah moderator began the meeting by saying: *“We have come here tonight to discuss the preservation 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.”*

As the meeting proceeded, residents of St. Helena Island presented notions of economic growth more congruent with traditional lifestyles on the island. Gullah preferences for community development do not include building strip malls, fast food chains, or expanding highways to facilitate anticipated growth. On the contrary, Gullah preferences stress the importance of conversation between neighbors, kinship and family

relations, community values, and traditional lifestyles (see below). The agenda of this community meeting represents a living testimony that Gullah/Geechee leadership is committed to principles of traditional living and the preservation of culture.

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 Regarding Economic 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*

Question # 4 Loss of Gullah Land

Gullah/Geechee people have developed an acute awareness that one must acquire a legal deed to land, and that social custom, heritage, or tradition will not insure the passage of land from parents to offspring. Gullah/Geechee people seek to legally own and/or acquire land for the security, safety, and future existence of their culture and language. Ownership of land is the essential element necessary for retaining kinship ties,

keeping families together, and maintaining Gullah culture and language.

Gullah/Geechee people acquired, or inherited significant tracts of land during and after the Civil War. This land was passed on to surviving generations until intense land development began in the Sea Islands of coastal South Carolina during the mid-1950's. Land has been procured from Gullah families through many diverse methods (see below).

Methods of Land Loss in the Gullah Community

Land Speculation

Many Gullahs were prevented from getting a formal education and could not Read, or write effectively. Land agents would create contracts and coerce, or “trick” Gullah landowners into signing contracts that resulted in families relinquishing all rights to the land they had owned for many years. Often lawyers verified illegal surveys and corrupt government officials confirmed such illegal land transactions. Land speculations often translated into fraud, trickery, or coercive treatment of Gullah/Geechee people, who are suspicious of ‘white’ land developers promising one thing and delivering quite another – the loss of Gullah lands.

Partition Action

There was a significant migration of Gullah/Geechee people to northern cities following the Civil War. When Gullahs headed north seeking employment, the absent families paid taxes on properties in the Lowcountry, or in the Sea Islands. However, absentee Gullahs often lost the “attachment” to the land, unlike the Gullah/Geechees left behind who remained productive farmers and fishermen. When land speculators contacted absentee families in the North, (who had no intention of ever coming back to their ‘roots’) they agreed to sign “quit claim deeds” on the family property. Speculators would rush to and fro, from one Gullah family to another living in the North, and have ‘quit claim deeds’ signed. After recording the deeds, Judges would require the deeds be sold during land auctions. Speculators, knowing the full worth of the land, would outbid Gullah family members bidding on the property. Partition actions would often result in the loss of Gullah land.

Inaccurate Surveys

Gullah people were never considered to be a vital interest by the dominant group, so Gullah land was often improperly recorded in the county ledgers. Gullah families have indicated a loss of over half their land through legal wrangling and boundary disputes based on inaccurate surveys. In fact, more water front property has been lost in this way than by any other kind of land swindle. If deeds were the least bit inexact, swift actions by land speculators and the legal community resulted in land sales (and most often at much lower than market value). Inaccurate surveys have led to the loss of Gullah land, especially the loss of waterfront properties.

Adverse Possession

Gullah/Geechee people hold a different kind of attitude toward land. Land is more than a single commodity, it's more like a divine part of Gullah daily life. Gullahs consider the land to be home - a place of being - the land is perceived as a living ancestor. Often, people would "squat" on Gullah property, and if they squatted long enough, they could claim the property as theirs. A squatter could go to court and get a "quick release deed," and then rightful owners may lose rights to the land. Developers and speculators were known to pay people to squat, then speculators would buy the property from squatters as soon as it could be legally declared. The South Carolina Supreme Court ruled that the county can't be burdened with cases of land reapportionment. That means that the land -all of the land - must be sold so that one or more of the heirs can get their share of the money. The land is sold for the taxes owed, for the county refuses to subdivide it. Developers would buy the land, subdivide it, and by using adverse possession, make millions. Meanwhile, Gullah/Geechees lost their rightful ownership of the land.

Real Estate Taxes

Real estate taxes have cost many Gullah/Geechee people their land. The county sets the value of land and, therefore, the amount of taxes owed on land. Coastal properties owned by Gullahs continue to rise in value, according to the tax assessor, and therefore taxes continue to escalate. The land can be taxed on its potential value, so that, in the end, Gullahs are often taxed off their land by escalating real estate taxes. For example, if the property next to a Gullah family was developed into a hotel property, golf course, tennis court, gated community, or popular restaurant, then the assessed value of the Gullah property would escalate at an alarming rate, making it very difficult for the family to pay the taxes. Speculators would pay the escalated tax and secure the land making it available for further development by elites or corporations.

Conclusions

Existing literature does not adequately reflect the resilience of Gullah/Gechee people, nor accurately describe 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 complete victims of the impact of land development, resort tourism, or assimilation with mainlanders. The contemporary Gullah attitude may best be described by the quotes below (Interviews 2001-2002):

“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 in the following quotes (Interviews 2001-2002):

“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 Goodwine (2001) notes, “Youth do not learn things ‘out of the blue.’ We, as adults, must be living examples for our youth 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 - part of a ‘Divine Order’ of things – and one must be constantly in touch with God Almighty! Gullah adults teach children and adolescents to feel a connection with God, a connection to each member of the family, and a connection to each member of the Gullah/Geechee community. Gullah youth must rise to the occasion and accept the challenge of continuity symbolically expressed as the ‘breath of life’ embodied in the oral tradition of Gullah language.

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. The Gullah right to self-determination was re-affirmed during a similar ceremony held on Sullivan's Island July 7, 2002. 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, preservation objectives are being accomplished through community meetings, academic conferences, seminars and workshops, cultural festivals, and socio-historical presentations exploring Gullah cultural traditions.

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

<i>Ethnographic method</i>	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
<i>empathetic understanding</i>	using ‘empathy’ to better interpret the social world from the unique, subjective perspective of people under investigation/study
<i>emergent themes</i>	important information or descriptive data obtained by researchers from interview and/or discussions with people under investigation
<i>Gullah</i>	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
<i>Geechee</i>	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.
<i>focus group</i>	a small group of people under the guidance of a moderator who are engaged in interactive discussion relative to topics of research
<i>indigenous</i>	native to (or living naturally in) a particular area, or environment
<i>key informants</i>	people of a rural community selected for interview on the basis of reputation, special knowledge, expertise, or leadership qualities
<i>phenomenology</i>	an approach that emphasizes the unique subjective perspective of a member of a social group, or members of a social group
<i>pidgin</i>	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
<i>qualitative</i>	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
<i>artistic observations</i>	cultural descriptions made by researchers in the field expressed in the form of ethnographic narratives supported by digital camera
<i>triangulation</i>	a method of investigating a phenomenon from three slightly different perspectives for the purpose of more reliable findings

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