

The Gullah Community and their evolution in the South

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Enslaved African Americans in the United States were able to foster a thriving community of culture and religion despite the undeniable attempt to strip them from their heritage. The Gullah people of South Carolina are a prime example of the resilience that slaves had. Many of the slaves purchased to work on Southern coastal plantations came from trading posts in Guinea or Angola. They were highly sought after due to reports from slave owners that said these specific ethnic groups have a more compliant and efficient demeanor.¹ Enslaved Africans were able to create a homogeneous culture that is mixed with several other African belief systems because of the isolation they endured in coastal regions. The Gullah people were forced into an environment surrounded solely by their white suppressors, despite the circumstances the ethnic group was able to cultivate a unique form of community, spirituality and resistance. The Gullah integrated their African beliefs with carefully selected American ideologies.

South Carolina coastal regions were large producers of rice and indigo, this created an increasing demand for labor that was not able to be satisfied using white people. Plantation owners turned to the next alternative and that was African slaves. During the 1730s there were large numbers of enslaved Africans being imported and the slaves that were highly sought after in the Carolinas were those from the Gold and Angolan Coasts. Slaves originating from Ghana were seen to be strong, clean and able to handle the hard tasks assigned to them on plantations. While Angolan slaves were characterized as less strong but submissive and more pleasing to look at.¹ These differences were used to decide which slaves would be used as field hands or house servants. Although these slaves had desirable attributes, both groups were said to possess qualities that were rebellious and would induce a desire for revenge against their masters.

¹ Littlefield, Daniel C. *Rice and Slaves: Ethnicity and the Slave Trade in Colonial South Carolina*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981, 30

Another reason accounting for the demand of slaves from these regions is their prior knowledge of cultivating crops such as rice, cotton and indigo. Officials that traveled to the coasts of Africa noted how well these crops grew there and focused on bringing back slaves with those specific skill sets.²

When discussing the ability African slaves had to create and maintain their own belief systems, it is logical to question how they were able to survive when they were torn from their homelands and put through extreme traumas. African slaves had everything taken away from them including their freedom; the only thing that they had control over were their ideologies. During the middle passage the solidarity amongst slaves is seen in the words of John Pope-Hennessy, “they were able to regain their spirits - and to form such a community of mutual support and suffering that there remained forever afterwards a special feeling of comradeship among those who had come over in the same vessel.”³ Having others to confide in that were also going through the same hardship was a way they could process the situation they were in. Africans that were sold in the Carolinas were able to adjust to their environment in a rapid manner. Their quick adjustment can be connected to their religious African beliefs; oracles are known by historians to have prepared their people for slavery and justified it with destiny and God’s will. An African American South Carolina minister wrote “-asking one day a Negro Pagan woman how she happen’d to be made a Slave [she] reply’d that God would have it so & she cou’d not help it.”⁴ Therefore some slaves were psychologically conditioned to accept their hardships and were able to maintain their spirits in spite of the appalling circumstances.

² Litchfield, “Rice and Slaves” 2

³Litchfield, “Rice and Slaves” 3

⁴ Litchfield, “Rice and Slaves” 5

The Gullah community was able to be created due to three reasons: many slaves were brought from similar regions, the absence of mass white intervention, and the task system. As mentioned before, slaveholders often preferred slaves that knew how to cultivate rice. These Africans were from West Africa and were imported to the United States in large numbers. The environment of West Africa resembled the environment of South Carolina, knowledgeable Africans in rice cultivation allowed for the grain to become a cash crop in the state. Rice is required to grow in water and the marshes where it was farmed were often home to breeding grounds for insects like mosquitoes. This environment is dangerous because it creates an opportunity for diseases like malaria, yellow fever, and tuberculosis to arise. As a result white slave owners and overseers avoided the area, and rice plantations were often watched over by slaves.⁵ The task system was used frequently in Coastal regions, this was a process where the slave owners gave their slaves a task to complete in a certain period of time and if they completed their assigned task they were incentivized by being able to do other activities of their choosing. Having time apart from the daily plantation tasks gives the chance for slaves to pursue things of interest such as basket weaving, telling folktales or religious devotion. The combination of all three instances created a sense of individualism amongst the slaves that allowed them to invest in and maintain their cultural beliefs.

In traditional African communities there is a strong connection between kinship and lineage in their societal structure and this can be seen in the dynamics of the Southern Coastal plantations. Leadership and social control was maintained by religion, in the earlier years of slavery African diviners automatically assumed religious leadership.⁶ These spiritual leaders

⁵ Smith, Tytianna Nikia Maria Wells. "An Exploration of African Folktales Among the Gullah Community of the South Carolina Sea Islands: History, Culture, and Identity." ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2012. 22

⁶ Creel, Margaret Washington. *"A Peculiar People": Slave Religion and Community-Culture among the Gullahs*. New York University Press, 1988. 57

provided a connection between traditional African views and the New World. They provided guidance and natural medicines for the slaves. Once white slaveholders realized the importance of the spiritual leader amongst the slaves they began appointing them and were labeled as house elders. One of the many roles of the house elder was to help share the Christian religion with the others. The house elder created a perception of a firm community for the slaves. Women played a vital role as well in the Gullah culture.⁷ They sometimes served as religious leaders and were the main sustainers of Gullah traditions. Women slaves were often the ones who passed down the folklore and instructions of basket weaving to the children. Loyalty for one's clan is an important moral code in African societies and this was carried on to the Gullah communities. There were often internal expectations of conduct in plantations and if they were violated the house elders would decide on the appropriate punishment.⁸ Having a semi-structured community amongst the slaves gave people a role and as a result people were actively involved and shared their traditions with other slaves.

Although slaves had very little to call their own, they were always supporting one another and had a mutual respect for what each individual was going through. Gullahs were generous and made sure everyone's basic needs were accounted for such as having food to eat. Households also were dynamic and flexible because they were constantly being separated by the slave owner. Many children did not have parents on the Sea Islands but according to Gullah culture "there were no orphans."⁹ Slaves living on plantations would take each other in and teach them the inner workings of the community. Gullah slaves were known to be generous and gifted Northern benefactors presents of sweet potatoes to show their gratitude. These instances are a clear

⁷ Creel, "A Peculiar People" 120

⁸National Park Service. Low Country Gullah Culture Special Resource Study and Final Environmental Impact Statement. Atlanta, GA: NPS Southeast Regional Office, 2005.

⁹Creel, "A Peculiar People" 250

indication of the resilience of the Gullah community as well as an ability to keep positive mindsets and their emphasis of being kind to others.

The isolated community was able to create its own traditions that were a mix of several African beliefs and American influence. One important aspect of Gullah culture was folklore. Telling folktales is an attribute of African traditions, many stories discussed lessons about the cunningness of animals in Africa.¹⁰ According to Alan Dundes, folklore encourages kinship and family unity, provides a code of conduct, and creates alternative ways to deal with issues.¹¹ Through folklore slaves were able to educate their children on the conditions of the plantation since they were denied an education while in the institution of slavery. Folktales that were told on plantations were modified to depict events that slaves were constantly battling against such as struggle with the slave owner. Animals were used as main characters as a way to hide their true emotions towards white people. The folktales were often directed towards the children and the lessons that could be derived were perseverance and courage.¹² Along with depicting the struggles of life as a slave, tales were used as a way to pass down information about the Gullah's history, identity and culture.

To understand the swift assimilation of Africans to Christianity and American society it is necessary to notice the similarities among traditional African religions as well as beliefs. Islam and other African religions were monotheistic, they believed in a Supreme being that was all knowing as well as the creator of the universe. In African perceptions, God was not to be feared and was a display of kindness, sincerity and justice. African religions also had a

¹⁰ National Park Service. Low Country Gullah Culture Special Resource Study and Final Environmental Impact Statement.

¹¹ Alan Dundes, "The Functions of Folklore," in *The Study of Folklore*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall Inc., 1965.

¹² Smith, Tytianna Nikia Maria Wells. "An Exploration of African Folktales Among the Gullah Community of the South Carolina Sea Islands: History, Culture, and Identity." ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2012

similar view of origins of evil, they stemmed from outside forces separate from God. The afterlife was a continuation of one's life on earth, after one dies they are destined to go to a place with no suffering, poverty or disease.¹³ Although there are several factors that differentiate African religions with those of Christianity, the resemblance in the main dogmas was key in the African acceptance of the religion.

Once the Southern Coastal regions slowly changed their perspective on sharing Christianity to their slaves, there was an interest in the way religion was able to be used to remain in control. Slaveholders interpreted religion in a way where it justified having slaves and promoted the concept of being a “good servant.” Methodist missionaries first were documented in the plantation seacoast of South Carolina in the 1830s. Methodists began sharing the Gospel as a way to “save” black souls as well as preserving the safety of the country. The large African and African American population living in the South worried many people, and there was a constant fear of an uprising amongst the slaves.¹⁴ For example St. Paul provided doctrines to missionaries that had proslavery sentiments, and texts that discussed subjects regarding the “truth shall make you free” or “the labor is worthy of his hire” were not allowed because of the way slaves would have interpreted it with their experience.¹⁵ Thomas Turpin was a missionary tasked to convert slaves in the Sea Islands in 1833, he described a developed social system that the slaves were using that mirrored those of traditional African societies.¹⁶ Specifically the slaves were punished amongst each other for sinning, there would be a moral guilt that was specifically targeted rather than religious. Methodists began to pursue a persistent form of conversion in order to solidify their spirituality; this was attempted by having slaves memorize doctrine and scripture. In order

¹³ Creel, “A Peculiar People”, 58

¹⁴ Creel, “A Peculiar People”, 63

¹⁵ Creel, “A Peculiar People”, 96

¹⁶ Creel, “A Peculiar People”, 182

to be a true believer one had to “demonstrate a reasonable understanding and acceptance of Christian teaching.”¹⁷ In the earlier years of missionary work, the Gullah community was hesitant on its acceptance of the doctrine because the instruction was solely shared by whites. Because slaves on the coast were isolated and they already had established beliefs it was difficult to completely adopt and have a genuine desire to pursue an understanding of Christianity.

Religion for the Gullah community became a concept that allowed them to keep their personal autonomy and helped them maintain a light in their life. Although missionaries often focused on doctrine that discussed the importance of obedience and submissiveness, there were also lectures that discussed more inspiring concepts and those are the topics they often adopted in their culture. Slaves connected with Christian imagery and connected it to their experiences as a persecuted group. The African essence can be seen in the adoption of Christianity because of the focus on “affirmation and celebration of human life.”¹⁸ The Gullah people often ignored the tedious instructions of Christianity because of their superficial exposure, they were able to interpret it in pragmatic ways where traditional religion was solidified. This is seen when representatives of the American Missionary Association saw how Gullahs lacked “practical religion.” despite them consistently singing and talking about Jesus.¹⁹ Even though Gullah’s lacked the knowledge regarding the origin stories of Jesus as well as other foundational information they had a strong understanding of Jesus’ suffering. They connected with his crucifixion and believed their knowledge of Christianity was a religious fulfillment due to their interpretation of a similarity between both experiences. The Gullahs definitely had feelings of opposition for the treatment they were receiving from white oppressors but they saw that their

¹⁷Creel, “A Peculiar People” 248

¹⁸ Creel, “A Peculiar People” 212

¹⁹Creel, “A Peculiar People” 261

horrible treatment was less than what Christ endured, “no matter how painful life was, someone had endured more than they.”²⁰ As a result of their acceptance of their enslavement as a part of something that has a larger overall meaning, the Gullah community had a very impressive way of coping with hardships. The Gullah community created a strong bond between slaves in Coastal regions of the South this offered a way for them to get past obstacles together. Religion also was used as a way to consistently maintain hope for freedom from slavery.

In religion the Gullah community found ways to resist slavery and the treatment of their white oppressors. They were able to demonstrate it by having a collective unity, a connection with Christ and his struggles as well as having their own separate traditions. Gullah’s often spread a belief of freedom from oppression in their hymns. Many of them discussed topics regarding Jesus setting them free, triumphant stories, and a passion for life. Slaves in Georgetown were arrested for singing a spiritual that says, “We’ll Soon be free... My brudder, how long, Fore we done suffering here... It won't be long ‘Fore de Lord will call us home.”²¹ It has also been documented that slaves used religious instruction to justify slave rebellion. This can be seen in the case regarding Denmark Vesey, the riot was planned while white overseers believed they were discussing religion. Vesey was a part of the African Methodist Episcopal Church and frequently preached his ideas of liberation to other slaves. The attempt of creating a large rebellion like the one planned by Vesey and his followers can be considered the end of large organized resistance from black slaves because white people became more vigilant and attentive of behavior of slaves.²²

²⁰ Creel, “A Peculiar People” 312

²¹ Creel, “A Peculiar People” 245

²² Creel, “A Peculiar People” 278

In conclusion the Gullah community is an example of the tenacity African Americans had to strive for freedom and maintain a zest for life. The Sea Islands provided an environment where slaves were able to celebrate their traditional African beliefs and merge them with American religion. The traditions were able to make life on the plantation slightly bearable and it gave slaves a sense of self ownership. Community was the foundation of the Gullah and the factor that solidified it was religion. Enslaved Africans were an adaptable group and were able to take the things given to them such as Christian knowledge and use it in a way that best catered to their needs. Through traditional beliefs and religion slaves were able to organize their resistance. The importance of kinship and heritage has made it possible to see the remnants of Gullah culture today.

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