



Gullah Geechee Heritage

History of the Gullah/Geechee



The Gullah story is one of human endurance, adaptation, reinvention and survival on new ground. The Gullah / Geechee people are descendants of enslaved Africans from various ethnic groups of west and central Africa. Brought to the New World and forced to work on the plantations of coastal South Carolina, Georgia, North Carolina and Florida, Gullah/Geechee people have retained many aspects of their African heritage due to the geographic barriers of the coastal landscape and the strong sense of place and family of Gullah/Geechee community members.

Today, the cultural and linguistic umbrella of the Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor extends from Wilmington, NC to St. Augustine, FL. African-Americans who reside under this cultural umbrella have retained their African heritage to a strong degree. This heritage is reflected within their naming traditions, linguistic patterns/African vocabulary, worldview, philosophy, African religious syncretism, ring-shouts, sweet grass basket weaving, mortar & pestle use, diet/cooking methods, carving traditions, fishing methods (net making and casting), quilting patterns (African symbolism), rice cultivation, and storytelling traditions. Historically they are speakers of the only true African-America Creole language of the continental United States.

Language

Prominent among the distinguishing characteristics of Gullah Geechee identity is a unique form of speech that is commonly known as Gullah. While Gullah developed, adapted, and has spoken over the past 250 years, outsiders have historically derided it as substandard English. Beginning with Lorenzo Dow Turner's work: *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect* (1949, University of Chicago Press), Gullah has now come to be appreciated, even by outsiders, as a legitimate and remarkable language in its own right. Unfortunately, it is also an endangered language, due to the encroachment of English.

Gullah has had an influence of American English in general and in particular influence on African American English. Words like gumbo, yam, tote, biddy, and nanny have come into English from Africa through Gullah. Besides words of African origin, Gullah has many distinctive idioms. When is day clean? What does it mean to say that someone da rake straw or broke e leg or ain crack e teet?

Common Gullah Words

Bene
Bididi
Guba
Gumbo

English Meaning

Sesame
Small bird/Chicken
Peanut
Okra

Ring Shout



The ring shout is a musical folk tradition that evolved from former enslaved Africans who lived and worked on rice and cotton plantations that flourished throughout the tradition passed down to current generations who help keep it alive.

During enslavement the ring shout began along the coast as a clandestine religious performance in brush arbors throughout the vast plantations that once encompassed the corridor. Later, it was practiced in praise houses or after Emancipation at churches. The ring shout tradition can also be observed at concerts and Gullah/Geechee festivals.

The ring shout is performed frequently on Watch Night, the evening leading up to New Year's Day. During the ring shout, the song is set in a call and response format by the lead singer. Rhythm is applied to the song by the "stickman" who beats a

wood stick on the floor or uses a washboard. "Basers" accompany the lead singer by responding to the song while adding vigorous handclapping. The women in the group, who are also known as the "shouters", move counterclockwise in a ring. The ring shout differs from dancing because the feet are never crossed while responding to the song. The shouters pantomime the song or make gestures in response to the basers and the stickman.

Sweetgrass Basketry



Sweetgrass basketry is an African art form that has existed since enslavement. The baskets were commonly used on plantations to harvest rice and had other uses in slave dwellings and plantation houses. Baskets are woven by hand with Sweetgrass that grows naturally in marshes and tidal areas. Sweetgrass production has been adversely impacted in the corridor, where development has disturbed ecosystems. The tradition has been passed on by generations of Gullah/Geechee people who continue to make baskets today for many household uses. Baskets are artifacts in the permanent collections of many museums or cultural centers and are exhibited internationally and in the United States at the Smithsonian Institution.