

Preserving and Creating Culture

The Gullah-Geechee People

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An Interpretive History of African American Education, 1700-1950

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Purpose

The purpose of this unit is to provide students with an opportunity to investigate the Gullah culture which has been successful in preserving various aspects of cultural traditions from Africa for hundreds of years. This unit will provide a historical background of the Gullah people in order to understand the historic events that enabled them to preserve and create new cultural aspects of life. The unit will also cover the language of the Gullah people along with its use of loan words, grammar, and syntax from various ethnic groups from the region of West Africa. Students will be able to learn folktales and proverbs that helped the Gullah people preserve and translate many of the moral beliefs of the community. This unit also offers an occasion for students to learn new forms of art and artistic expression used by the Gullah people. Various activities are provided that can be made relevant for K-12 students.

Course Objectives

1. Explain the history of the Gullah people (Who, where, and when)
2. Discuss the linguistic history of the people and the similarities to other language changes
3. Develop and understanding of the similarities and differences in the Gullah language
4. Engage in the storytelling process and develop an understanding of the moral stories
5. Explain the different types of artistic expressions in the community
6. Discover new ways of communication
7. Understand and practice new forms of musical expression
8. Identify aspects of Gullah culture that are unique to them and to their African heritage

Historical Background

Along the coast of South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida a conglomeration of over 100 barrier islands have been the home to various people groups for hundreds of years. In the 1700's farmers began bringing slaves from the West African coast who had experience growing rice in difficult climates. On these Sea Islands the African people developed a unique culture combining aspects of their various backgrounds to form what has become known as the Gullah/Geechee culture. Gullah people have survived enslavement, hurricanes, gentrification, and other forms of oppression preserving a common language, folk stories, foods, music, art, and farming techniques. They have produced scholars, artists, schools, and even a Supreme Court Judge.

Some scholars believe the name Gullah is linguistically linked to the country of Angola, while others believe that it comes from the Gola ethnic group of in West Africa. It is most likely that the tie to Angola is correct and may be evident in historical documents in Charleston. There is a reference in the 1822 City Council meeting notes that references a man called Gullah Jack who sold slaves from Angola. The term Geechee, another name self-ascribed by the group most likely comes from the Ogeechee River in Georgia (Crum, 1968). Ties to Sierra Leone have also be shown through records of slave trading from Bunce Island in Sierra Leone to South Carolina (Opala, n.d.).

The Sea Islands provided an isolated space that allowed for the preservation of many cultural aspects from mainly West African ethnic groups. Bridges to the islands were not built until the 1920's. They also played a part in the cultivation of products such as cotton and indigo. After Emancipation formerly enslaved people worked as wage laborers continuing the cultivation of rice. In 1861, at Fort Walker, the Union Flag was raised for the first time signaling a victory for the North. This caused many of the white residents to flee the territory leaving much

of their property (Crum, 1968). After the bottom dropped out of the rice market near the 1900's most of the remaining white farmers abandoned the plantations in favor of other business opportunities. As Joseph Opala (n.d.) notes, "The Gullah people were left in an area of little commercial importance and of little interest to the outside world." This allowed for the preservation and development of their cultural practices.

After the victory by the North, the next "invasion" was from Northern missionaries, "those zealous Northerners whose sense of duty brought them south to 'elevate' the Negro race" (Crum, 1968, pg. 4). The Northerners began starting schools in the region with help from Northern philanthropists. One of the most influential schools in the region was the Penn School on St. Helena Island. Founded in 1862 it was one of the first schools for freed slaves in the region. The school's name was changed to the Penn Normal, Industrial and Agricultural school. By 1900 the school was engaged in teacher training, carpentry, cobbling, agriculture, basket weaving, and blacksmithing. After the school closed in 1948 the local community used the land to create the Penn Community Service Center to work on local issues of individual and communal development. The Center survives today to preserve the history of the Gullah community, teaching about the richness of the cultural and historic traditions preserved on the island.

Language, Dialect, and Literature

The Gullah language is a creole language that arose among slaves from various backgrounds and their interaction among one another and whites in the Sea Islands. The language is mostly English based but has its own grammatical and syntactical differences preserved from some of the African cultures it is composed from. As Mason Crum (1968) writes,

“It may be said that, while the body of the dialect is English, its spirit is African.” This is represented in “its peculiar intonation, its pleasing inflection, and its unique tonal quality” (111).

One of the first scholars to investigate and record the Gullah language was Lorenzo Dow Turner. A leading scholar in English, Turner taught at Howard and Fisk Universities and was the Chair of African Studies at Roosevelt University. When studying the Gullah Language Turner found remarkable similarities in linguistic styles to other creole languages like those found in the Caribbean and in West Africa. Turner’s pinnacle text *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect* was published in 1949 with much success. After multiple trips to West Africa, Turner concluded that the isolation of the Gullah people allowed the common language to be routinized into a language linguistically structured like the Mende, Vai, Mandinka, Wolof, etc. (Turner, 1949)

American Literature has had a variety of publications that reference and occasionally highlight Gullah culture and dialect. Stories such as Edgar Allan Poe’s, *The Gold Bug* and Caroline Gillman’s *Recollections of a Southern Matron* give us glimpses into life on the Sea Islands before the Civil War. W.F. Allen’s collection *Slave Songs of the United States* gives us some insight into the spiritual dimensions of Gullah life as well. Charles Colcock Jones Jr. also made a significant contribution to the literature of the Gullah people when writing *Negro Myths from the Georgia Coast*. Because they were recorded very well in the original dialect they help us to understand the language differences very well, but they did not have much resonance with the public because of the unfamiliar dialectical differences in them. Probably the most well-known collect, while controversial, are the Uncle Remus Stories collected and retold by Joel Chandler Harris.¹

¹ Because of the controversial nature of these stories, care should be taken to make sure that stereotypes are not reified for students.

Arts and Crafts

One of the most visually stunning parts of the Gullah culture is their skilled work in basket making. Ties can be shown to similar West African practices. Basket weaving, which has its roots in creating functional items for work (such as fana for separating rice from the chaff) has been a financial base for Gullah culture for over a century. Baskets were sold for their functionality and as artistic pieces to be displayed in homes. The 1989 film *Family across the Sea* shows how the practice of basket weaving is done in the same way in Sierra Leone, West Africa as it is in South Carolina.



Along with physical crafts like the basket weaving, the Gullah also preserved musical practices which are often tied to religion. The Ring Shout ritual is composed of a group in a circle or ring that stomps and claps while others shout out praises or spontaneously sing. As noted in *Family across the Sea*, this practice is still present in West African culture as well.

Along with the ring shout, musical styles composed of instruments such as skin drums, rattles, wood blocks, and stick pounding have been preserved as well.



Doing the Ring Shout in Georgia, ca. 1930s <http://newsdesk.si.edu/photos/word-shout-song-ring-shouters>



Musical Instruments made from wood, cloth rattles, etc.

<http://yale.edu/glc/gullah/04.htm>

Lessons

1. Designing musical instruments with simple everyday items

Students will be given a variety of items like tin cans, dowel rods, bottle caps, wood blocks, sand paper, and various things that age appropriate. They can be given different pictures of things to make and shown videos that explain how music can be made with each of the items. Students can work in groups to compose different songs with the aid of the teacher. Videos of Gullah performers can be shown. On a larger scale a video can be shown of the performance group Stomp to show them how simple items can be used for music.

2. Song history and writing

The history and purpose of song writing in the Gullah culture can be explored. The students can examine the language and meaning in the songs. Students can also learn to write their own songs based on their experience in the world. Depending on age, students can take the melodies from other songs and create new words to go along with them. The ring shout can be taught with simple clapping and stomping practices shown to the students.

3. Communication without oral language

Through learning the Gullah art of stick pounding students can learn that communication is not limited to using specific words. Using larger dowel rods or walking sticks, students can be shown how to communicate with tapping and sliding patterns. Students can learn a code for simple language transmission all the way up to using Morse code. Various sizes of sticks can be used from chopsticks to large dowel rods. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mQlg-UomM8k>

4. Storytelling and translation

Students can read some traditional Gullah stories in the original dialect. They will have access to a Gullah glossary to help them. The glossary and stories can be tailored to the level of the students. Students can also translate stories from English into Gullah. Students can learn about differences in syntax, word order, and grammar. Students can learn about how languages are shaped and changed throughout time through the use of Old, Middle, and Modern English. For higher level students learning languages similarities can be drawn between Romance Languages

Use the Gullah glossary - <http://gullahtours.com/gullah/gullah-words>

5. Storytelling-Part II

After listening to Gullah stories students can discuss the meanings behind the stories. This is a good opportunity to discuss the morals of the stories and why they think the stories have lasted so long. Students could create story boards, do skits telling the story, or retell the story using more contemporary references. In the process students can learn about the ways stories help us learn how to do simple things like help others and participate in different activities.

6. Story-writing

Students can create their own folktales that tell a moral story. Students can develop their characters (animals) that will have specific meanings. Students can start with a list of potential moral points that are important and choose one to create a story around. For example, how could they tell why education is important using different animal characters? How could they teach about the importance of sharing?

7. Basket Weaving

Students can learn about the history of basket weaving among the Gullah people. Ties to West Africa can be shown through various film clips. After the films are shown students can work on some basket-weaving projects based on ages. Older students can investigate the economics of basket-making in the time period asking questions about how long it takes and how much we should charge for items. <http://artwithmre.blogspot.com/2011/11/welcome-my-new-best-circle-weaving.html>

8. Quilt Making (and measurement)

Students will learn stories behind the production of quilts in the Gullah culture. This is an opportunity to teach students how to measure with a ruler. Students can learn to measure pieces of fabric for the larger project. Mistakes can be easily corrected or used for something else along the way. They will cut pieces and patterns for the final product. Students will learn simple braiding techniques.

9. Geography (now and then)

Students can study the geography of the region that the Gullah live. They can investigate how it has been shaped and changed over time. Resources on the history of South Carolina can be used to find things like statehood, boundaries, cities, hurricanes and storms that affected the people and landscape and so on. Students can research important time periods before and after Emancipation and how that affected the Gullah people and where they lived. They can also look at the economic changes throughout the region over time as well. What did the shift from rice to other crops do?

10. Penn School History

Students can investigate the historical roots of the Gullah people at the Penn school. Topics can include the history of the Penn Center, a trade and normal school in the Sea Islands for the Gullah people. Students can create time lines tracing the history of the Penn School. <http://www.penncenter.com/> and http://www.lib.unc.edu/mss/inv/p/Penn_School.html

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