



HILTON HEAD ISLAND-BLUFFTON CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

GULLAH CULTURE IS NOTHING SHORT OF UPLIFTING

HILTON HEAD ISLAND, SC -- Although it had its origins in slavery, the history and culture of the inhabitants that call Hilton Head Island and the Lowcountry coastal region of South Carolina “home” is an inspiration to all Americans. Living simply just as they did more than a hundred years ago, these people, whose ancestors are known as the Gullah [pronounced **ˈgə – ɪə**], subscribe to high religion and the celebration of spiritual redemption in leading their daily lives.

Historical Perspective

The original Gullah were African slaves who were shipped across the Atlantic from West Africa to work the cotton plantations of the South. While plantation owners built their fortunes upon slave labor, the slaves were able to create something of their own -- the unique culture that is now known as Gullah. With that culture came a thriving mix of language, folktales and superstition, a mix that has shaped generations of families who live on Hilton Head Island and in the Lowcountry today.

Plantation owners originally built Praise Houses as a means of social control. The Praise Houses, however, proved to be the base upon which the Gullah founded their culture, providing a central place for spiritual guidance and group leadership. Religion, a blend of both the ideologies of the Baptist Church and African heritage, became and today remains the very basis of Gullah culture. In fact, the Gullah often express time in terms of before or after they “had sense,” referring to the time of completion of membership in the Church and the Praise House.

In commemoration of this achievement the new member is immersed in water, clothed in new garments and invited to partake in communion with the other “true believers” of the Church. In order to articulate their spiritual lives, the Gullah often participate in the “shout,” an adaptation of the West African ring dance performed counter-clockwise to joyous handclapping and foot stomping. Only “true believers” may participate in the “shout.”

The religion of Gullah also is deeply rooted in superstition. For example, most island graveyards are located near water to ensure that spirits will travel back to Africa to be among ancestors. The Gullah often place broken dishes, shells, water pitchers and shiny objects on graves to prevent

the deceased from returning from the dead to look for former personal belongings, and even children are passed over the caskets of deceased relatives for protection against future harm.

The Gullah culture is kept alive through vivid storytelling in the native tongue of Gullah, a dialect that appears to be a combination of a variety of African languages and English. Forbidden by plantation owners to speak their native tongue, the African slaves developed the dialect out of necessity by incorporating broken English with African words. The Gullah dialect survives today as a “creolized” version of English. Through passionate prayers, sermons and tales, the Gullah remember their past and look toward the future preservation of their culture; a culture distinguished by the crafts of sweet grass basket weaving, boat building and quilting. Remnants of the past, including old churches and once segregated school houses, are well-preserved and legally protected since the 1991 passage of an ordinance prohibiting the destruction or looting of archaeological or historical sites. In fact, native islander communities comprise nearly 3,000 acres of Hilton Head Island.

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