

The Gullah:

Rice, Slavery, and the Sierra Leone-American Connection

Joseph A. Opala

Gullah Customs and Traditions

Gullah culture seems to emphasize elements shared by Africans from different areas. The Gullahs' ancestors were, after all, coming from many different tribes, or ethnic groups, in Africa. Those from the Rice Coast, the largest group, included the Wolof, Mandinka, Fula, Baga, Susu, Limba, Temne, Mende, Vai, Kissi, Kpelle, etc.—but there were also slaves brought from the Gold Coast, Calabar, Congo, and Angola. The Gullah slaves adopted beliefs and practices that were familiar to Africans from these widely separated regions. In most cases, therefore, we cannot say that a particular Gullah custom is from a particular African tribe; but we can often point more generally to West Africa, the Western Sudan, the Rice Coast, etc. And Gullah traditions are not, of course, all purely African. The Gullah slaves borrowed practices from their white masters, but they always gave these an African spirit. The Gullah became Christians, for instance, but their style of worship reflected their African heritage. In slavery days they developed a ceremony called "ring shout" in which participants danced in a ritual fashion in a circle amidst the rhythmical pounding of sticks and then, at the culminating moment, experienced possession by the Holy Spirit while shouting expressions of praise and thanksgiving.

The ring shout raises the subject of cultural change among the Gullah, as this custom, like some other Gullah practices, seems to have completely died out. Most of what we know about Gullah customs and traditions comes from studies done in the 1930s and 1940s before the isolation of the Gullah community began to break down. Some of the customs reported then have, no doubt, disappeared like the ring shout; but others, quite clearly, have not. Visitors to the South Carolina Sea Islands still find the Gullahs' doors and windows painted blue to ward off witches and evil



South Carolina Gullahs, about 1900. Men using a mortar and pestle.

spirits. And tourists traveling by car through coastal South Carolina and Georgia on their way south to Florida still encounter Gullah women selling their traditional baskets on the roadsides. These handsome baskets greatly resemble the Sierra Leonean *shukublay*.

A few examples of Gullah customs and traditions are sufficient to convey their distinctive African spirit.

Gullah burial customs begin with a drum beat to inform people that someone in town has died. Mirrors are turned to the wall so the corpse cannot be reflected. The funeral party takes the body to the cemetery, but waits at the gate to ask permission of the ancestors to enter. Participants dance around the grave, singing and praying, then smash bottles and dishes over the site to "break the chain" so that no one else in the same family will soon die. Then, the funeral group returns to town and cooks a large meal, leaving a portion on the veranda for the departed soul. In slavery days some Gullahs called this cooking ceremony *saraka*, a term derived from Arabic and familiar to most West Africans.

The Gullah believe in witchcraft, which they call *wudu*, *wanga*, *joso*, or *juju*. They say that witches can cast a spell by putting powerful herbs or, roots under a person's pillow or at a place where he usually walks. There are special individuals called "Root Doctor" or "Doctor Buzzard" who can provide protection against witchcraft or withdraw the effects of a curse. The Gullah also believe in dangerous spirits capable of enslaving a person by controlling his will. They sometimes paper the walls of their houses with newsprint or put a folded bit of newspaper inside a shoe, believing that the spirit must first read each and every word before taking action. This custom is clearly derived from the common West African practice of wearing a protective amulet, called *sebeh* or *grigri*, containing written passages from the Koran.

The Gullah possess a rich collection of animal fables with such stock characters



as Brer Rabbit, Brer Fox, Brer Bear, and Brer Snake. The plots of these stories always involve competition among the animals, which have distinctly human personalities; and the situations and predicaments are virtually identical to those in stories told in Africa. The main character in the Gullah tales is Brer Rabbit, a clever figure who often outwits his bigger and stronger animal opponents, but whose dishonest tactics sometimes lead him into serious trouble. Brer Rabbit is analogous to the "trickster" found in animal stories throughout Africa and represented in Mende, Temne, and Limba tales as the spider and, in Krio stories, as "Koni Rabbit." The Gullah story-telling tradition is the only part of Gullah culture widely known in the United States. The writer Joel Chandler Harris popularized Gullah stories a hundred years ago in his books on the tales of "Uncle Remus."

Gullah arts and crafts are also distinctly African in spirit. During slavery times and the decades of isolation that followed, the Gullah made a wide assortment of artifacts, some indistinguishable from West African crafts. In museums in South Carolina and Georgia one can see wooden mortars and pestles, rice "farmers," clay pots, calabash containers, baskets, palm leaf brooms, drums, and hand-woven cotton blankets dyed with indigo. In modern times Gullah men have continued their wood carving tradition, making elaborate grave monuments, human figures, and walking sticks. Gullah women sew quilts organized in strips like African country cloth, and still make their finely crafted baskets.

Finally, the Gullah diet is still based heavily on rice, reflecting the Rice Coast origins of many of their ancestors. Two traditional dishes are "rice and greens" and "rice and okra," similar to Sierra Leone's *plasas* and rice and okra soup. The Gullah (and other South Carolinians) also make "red rice" which, when served with a "gumbo" containing okra, fish, tomatoes, and hot peppers, greatly resembles West African jollof rice. In fact, one South Carolina writer, who has visited West Africa, refers to jollof rice as a "typical South Carolina meal." In remote rural areas the Gullahs have also traditionally made a boiled corn paste served in leaves, similar to Sierra Leonean *agidi*, and a heavy porridge of wheat flour which they call *fufu*.