

# The Gullah:

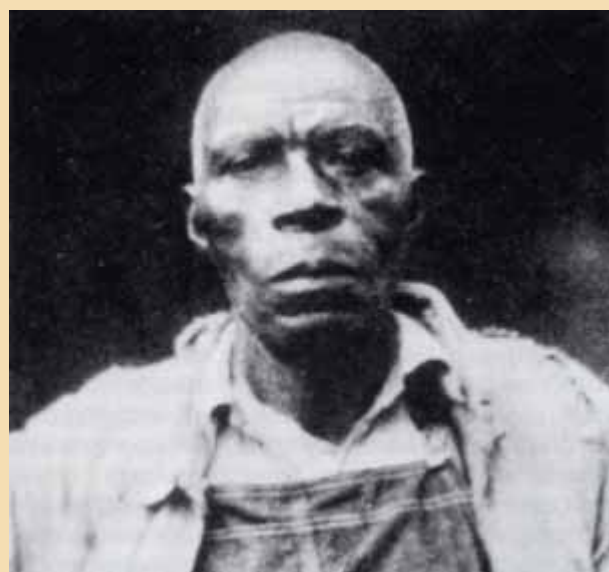
Rice, Slavery, and the Sierra Leone-American Connection

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## ***The Gullah Language***

The Gullah language is what linguists call an English-based creole language. Creoles arise in the context of trade, colonialism, and slavery when people of diverse backgrounds are thrown together and must forge a common means of communication. According to one view, creole languages are essentially hybrids that blend linguistic influences from a variety of different sources. In the case of Gullah, the vocabulary is largely from the English "target language," the speech of the socially and economically dominant group; but the African "substrate languages" have altered the pronunciation of almost all the English words, influenced the grammar and sentence structure, and provided a sizable minority of the vocabulary. Many early scholars made the mistake of viewing the Gullah language as "broken English," because they failed to recognize the strong underlying influence of African languages. But linguists today view Gullah, and other creoles, as full and complete languages with their own systematic grammatical structures.

The British dominated the slave trade in the 18th century, and during that period an English-based creole spread along the West African coast from Senegal to



Sea Island Gullahs, about 1930.

Nigeria. This hybrid language served as a means of communication between British slave traders and local African traders, but it also served as a lingua franca, or common language, among Africans of different tribes. Some of the slaves taken to America must have known creole English before they left Africa, and on the plantations their speech seems to have served as a model for the other slaves. Many linguists argue that this early West African Creole English was the ancestral language that gave rise to the modern English-based creoles in West Africa (Sierra Leone Krio, Nigerian Pidgin, etc.) as well as to the English-based creoles spoken by black populations in the Americas (Gullah, Jamaican Creole, Guyana Creole, etc.). All of these modern creole languages would, thus, fall into the same broad family group, which linguist Ian Hancock has called the "English-based Atlantic Creoles." This theory explains the striking similarities found among these many languages spoken in scattered areas on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. It also shows that the slaves brought the rudiments of the Gullah language directly from Africa.

The first scholar to make a serious study of the Gullah language was the late Dr. Lorenzo Turner, who published his findings in 1949. As a Black American, Dr. Turner was able to win the confidence of the Gullah people, and he revealed many aspects of their language that were previously unknown. Dr. Turner found that Gullah men and women all have African nicknames or "basket names" in addition to their English names for official use; and he showed that the Gullah language, like other Atlantic Creoles, contains a substantial minority of vocabulary words borrowed directly from African substrate languages. Altogether, Dr. Turner was able to identify more than four thousand words and personal names of African origin and to assign these, on an individual basis, to specific African languages. But Dr. Turner also made the spectacular discovery that certain Gullah men and women, living in isolated rural areas of South Carolina and Georgia in the 1940s, could still recall simple texts in various African languages—texts passed from generation to generation and still intelligible! He identified Mende and Vai phrases embedded in Gullah songs; Mende passages in Gullah stories; and an entire Mende song, apparently a funeral dirge. Dr. Turner also found some Gullah people who could count from one to nineteen in the Guinea/Sierra Leone dialect of Fula. Although his Gullah informants knew that these expressions were in African languages, and in some cases knew the proper translation, they did not know which specific African languages they were reciting.

P.E.H. Hair, a British historian, later published a review of Dr. Turner's work in which he noted that Sierra Leone languages have made a "major contribution" to the development of the Gullah language. Dr. Hair pointed to the "astonishing" fact that *all* of the African texts known to be preserved by the Gullah are in languages spoken in Sierra Leone. Mende, which accounts for most of the African passages

collected by Turner, is spoken almost entirely in Sierra Leone, while Vai and the specific dialect of Fula are found on the borders with Liberia and Guinea. But Dr. Hair also noted that a "remarkably large proportion" of the four thousand African personal names and loanwords in the Gullah language come from Sierra Leone. He calculated that twenty-five percent of the African names and twenty percent of the African vocabulary words are from Sierra Leonean languages, principally Mende and Vai. Dr. Hair concluded that South Carolina and Georgia is the only place in the Americas where Sierra Leonean languages have exerted "anything like" this degree of influence.

The Gullahs' African personal names and African vocabulary words include many items that are familiar in Sierra Leone today. The Gullah have drawn their African nicknames from various sources, including African first, or given, names; clan names; and the African tribal names of their ancestors. They use the masculine names Bala, Sorie, Salifu, Jah, and Lomboi; and the feminine names Mariama, Fatu, Hawa, and Jilo. The Gullah also use as nicknames the clan names Bangura, Kalawa, Sesay, Sankoh, Marah, Koroma, and Bah; and the Sierra Leonean tribal names Limba, Loko, Yalunka, Susu, Kissi, and Kono. Gullah loanwords from Sierra Leonean languages, used in everyday speech, include: *joso*, "witchcraft" (Mende *njoso*, forest spirit); *gafa*, "evil spirit" (Mende *ngafa*, masked "devil"); *wanga*, "charm" (Temne *an-wanka*, fetish or "swear"); *bento*, "coffin" (Temne *an-bento*, bier); *defu*, "rice flour" (Vai *defu*, rice flour); *do*, "child" (Mendendo, child); and *kome*, "to gather" (Mende *Kome*, a meeting).

The Gullah language, considered as a whole, is also remarkably similar to Sierra Leone Krio—so similar that the two languages are probably mutually intelligible. Krio is, of course, the native language of the Krios, the descendants of freed slaves; but it is also the national lingua franca, the most commonly spoken language in Sierra Leone today. The West African Creole English of the slave trade era gave rise to both Krio and Gullah, as well as to many other English-based Creoles in West Africa and the West Indies. All of these languages, it must be said, share many common elements of vocabulary and grammar. Sierra Leone Krio expressions such as *bigyai* (greedy), *pantap* (on top of) *udat* (who?), and *usai* (where?) are found in almost identical form in Gullah, as well as in many other related Creoles. But the linguist Ian Hancock has also pointed to *uniquesimilarities* between Krio and Gullah—features of vocabulary, grammar, and the sound system found in these two languages, but in none of the other Atlantic Creoles. These common elements include, among others, the Krio expressions *bohboh* (boy), *titi* (girl), *enti* (not so?), and *blant* (a verb auxiliary) which appear in Gullah as *buhbuh*, *tittuh*, *enty*, and *blang*. Dr. Hancock has argued, reasonably enough, that these unique similarities, as well as the many loanwords in Gullah from Sierra Leonean

indigenous languages, must reflect a significant slave trade connection between Sierra Leone and the Gullah area.

We are now in a position to draw a clear picture of the language connection between Sierra Leone and South Carolina and Georgia. By about 1750 there was probably a local creole dialect spoken in Sierra Leone and, perhaps, on neighboring parts of the Rice Coast—a variant of the broader West African Creole English, but with its own unique forms and expressions. Some of the Rice Coast slaves taken to South Carolina and Georgia already spoke this Rice Coast dialect, and on the rice plantations their creole speech became a model for the other slaves. The Gullah language, thus, developed directly from this distinctive Rice Coast creole, acquiring loanwords from the "substrate languages" of the African slaves from Sierra Leone and elsewhere. In Sierra Leone, itself, the Rice Coast creole continued to flourish throughout the late 1700s, so that when the freed slaves, ancestors of the Krios, arrived at the end of the century, they found the language already widely spoken among the indigenous peoples along the coast. Indeed, slave traders' accounts from *before* the founding of Freetown make it clear that a form of creole English was already being spoken in Sierra Leone. The emerging Krio community adopted the local creole as its native speech, enriching it with new expressions reflecting the diverse backgrounds of the freed slaves. So, Krio and Gullah both derive from an early slave trade era Rice Coast creole dialect. Each language has gone its separate way over the past two hundred and fifty years, but even now the similarities are astonishing to linguists and laymen alike.

Finally, the word "Gullah," itself, seems to reflect the Rice Coast origins of many of the slaves imported into South Carolina and Georgia. Lorenzo Turner attributed "Gullah" to Gola, a small tribe on the Sierra Leone-Liberia border where the Mende and Vai territories come together. But "Gullah" may also derive from Gallinas, another name for the Vai, or from *Galo*, the Mende word for the Vai people. The Gullah also call themselves "Geechee," which Dr. Turner attributed to the Kissi tribe (pronounced *geezee*), which inhabits a large area adjoining the Mende, where modern Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Guinea converge. Given the Mende and Vai texts preserved by the Gullah, and the significant percentages of Mende and Vai names and loanwords in the Gullah language, these interpretations seem to have considerable merit.