

The Gullah:

Rice, Slavery, and the Sierra Leone-American Connection

Joseph A. Opala

The Gullah Today

The Gullah still form a strong, cohesive community in South Carolina and Georgia. It is true that their isolation has been breaking down for the past forty years. Many have left the rural areas for jobs in the cities. Young people are attending university and finding professional positions away from home. Television, telephones, bridges, good roads, and ferries have come to the once, most remote parts of the Gullah area—and many "old-fashioned" customs have been lost. But the Gullah still hold to their special identity, and they still take pride in their common heritage. Those who have moved away often return for family gatherings to expose their children to grandparents, to Gullah lore, and to the local life. Indeed, Gullah traditions still continue in many rural areas of coastal South Carolina and Georgia. In 1979, representatives of the Summer Institute of Linguistics conducted a survey in the region to determine how many people still speak the Gullah language. To their amazement, they found over one hundred thousand Gullah speakers, of whom ten thousand spoke only Gullah—no English at all. The Institute concluded that the Gullah community and the Gullah language are viable and will continue to be so for the foreseeable future; and it has embarked on a ten-year project to devise a system of writing for Gullah, to translate the New Testament into Gullah, and to teach Gullah people to read and write their own language.

The Gullah are also showing an increasing spirit of community service and self-help. There have been problems in recent years on the Sea Islands, once the most



Mrs. Ida Wilson, coastal South Carolina, 1965. Gullah women still offer their baskets for sale along Route 17 north of Charleston. These baskets are constructed almost exactly like the Sierra Leone *shukublay*.

remote part of Gullah country, where land developers have made huge profits constructing tourist resorts, luxury housing, golf courses, and country clubs for wealthy people attracted to the mild climate and island scenery. Land values jumped from a few hundred dollars an acre to many thousands; and some Gullah people, who sold their land, felt that they had not been paid the fair market value. But educated Gullahs have established Penn Center on the site of an early mission school on St. Helena Island, South Carolina. The Center is devoted to community service—to advising Gullah people about their legal rights and the economic problems confronting them. The Center has also established a museum displaying Gullah arts and crafts, and has recently begun a project to collect and preserve Gullah folklore and oral traditions.

The Oklahoma Seminole Freedmen, the largest of the scattered Black Seminole groups, have also shown a high level of community spirit. The Freedmen, numbering about two thousand, form two of the fourteen "bands" of the Seminole Indian Nation of Oklahoma and, by tradition, have controlled six of the forty-two seats on the Tribal Council. They have always participated keenly in Seminole tribal affairs, but in recent years those affairs have become more and more controversial. In 1977, the Seminoles won a \$17 million judgment in the courts as compensation for the lands their ancestors lost in Florida during the Second Seminole War (1835-42). Some factions among the Seminole Indians objected to sharing the award with the Seminole Freedmen, but the Freedmen obtained a Federal Court injunction halting disbursement of the funds until the issue is fairly resolved. The Freedmen are maintaining that the Black Seminoles were pioneers in Florida; that they were part of the Seminole tribe; that they shed their blood in defense of the Florida lands; and that, like the Indians, their descendants deserve compensation for the seizure of that land. The Freedmen are now trying to settle the issue through consultation within the tribe, rather than through divisive legal action. They have also made efforts to contact other Black Seminole groups which, although no longer in contact with the tribe, they feel have the right to share in the award.