

Public Communication and the Preservation of North Florida's Gullah/Geechee History and Culture

Research Summary

The Gullah/Geechee are an African American people who inhabit the Lowcountry Coastal Plains and Sea Islands along the Southeastern coast of the United States, and who are known to have retained more of their African cultural and linguistic heritage than any other African American community. Today, Gullah/Geechee populations remain as a unique cultural enclave in the Southeastern region, though modern suburban, commercial, and resort developments have increasingly transformed the region's physical, social, and economic geographies and threatened the culture's survival. In the wake of these developments, efforts to preserve Gullah/Geechee culture have emerged, often with an emphasis on tourism, news, and entertainment projects designed to merge economic and cultural activity.

This interpretive ethnographic study examines contemporary issues of public communication and the preservation of Gullah/Geechee history and culture occurring in the North Florida "border area" of the Gullah/Geechee Heritage Corridor, which was recently established through the Federal Gullah/Geechee Heritage Corridor Act (Public Law 109-338, 2006). Belonging to a "border area" of the Heritage Corridor presents unique questions and challenges for North Floridians of Gullah/Geechee descent, particularly in terms of how they identify their relationship to broader Gullah/Geechee history and culture, articulate cultural belonging, and communicate the value of their distinct history and culture to broader publics, such as politicians, urban planners, real estate developers, and newcomers to the region.



Key Findings

- 1) In addition to the challenges of raising public awareness about the culture among outsiders, significant challenges exist with respect to raising awareness of the culture within North Florida's African American communities themselves. The loss of Gullah/Geechee land and culture, displacement, and the failure of public education have all eroded ties to the culture within African American communities.
- 2) Interviewees expressed cautious optimism about the role of cultural tourism in the Corridor, noting that it could provide valuable resources in terms of public education and economic development, through forms such as guided heritage tours and the establishment of tourist destinations at key cultural and historical sites in the region. Yet Gullah/Geechee people are also wary of the intrusion of cultural outsiders and potential exploitation of the culture by profiteers.



Sandra Robinson Morene, Vice President of Operations, Jacksonville Gullah/Geechee Community Development Corporation and Alternate on the Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission. Author's Photo.

"I think that Florida might be a little new to the awareness of the culture and because of that, maybe the efforts are not put forth because we don't do a lot of things that you see in the Lowcountry. We don't make baskets, we don't do a lot of family fishing, you know with family owned companies as African Americans. So, we have kind of moved in to a different phase of economics—that phase of economics that we had in the Gullah time, we have gone on to do other things. So I think that the culture, probably the thought of the culture in the State of Florida, has been forgotten, and I think that the awareness that we bring to it now is for a better opportunity to make some changes." (Sandra Morene, Author's Interview, October 25, 2014).



Dr. Anthony Dixon, member of the Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission and historical archivist. Author's Photo.

"As soon as the Gullah Geechee Corridor was made official, you had all kind of people putting Gullah Geechee stamps on something trying to benefit but haven't been anywhere near South Carolina or Georgia, places like Portland, Oregon. You see, so it's about people who are purveyors of the culture actually controlling it. Not only controlling the dollar, but controlling how it is exhibited, how the story is told." (Dr. Anthony Dixon, Author's Interview, October 25, 2014).