

History of the gullah community in florida essay sample

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Introduction

My community is the Gullah/Geechee people. These are African Americans from the slave ancestry, occupying the coastal areas of South Carolina, Florida and Georgia. The name *Gullah* may have originated from Angola, a West African country, where most of the ancestors of Gullah came from. Nonetheless, some believe that *Gullah* originates from *Gola*, a tribe near the border of Liberia and Sierra Leone in West Africa. Linguists term the Gullah dialect as English based Creole language. Creoles result from the context of colonialism, trade and slavery. This marked the period during which people from different ethnicities socialized and compelled to forge common communication means (Turner, 1973). Creole languages are essential hybrids blending linguistic influences from numerous different sources. The Gullah vocabulary is largely sourced from English as the target language. English language was used in all areas from social to economical aspects of the people. However, there was major alteration in pronunciation of English words by African languages. This provided a sizeable minority Gullah language vocabulary.

Language Development

The slave trade was dominated by the British in the 18th century. It was during this time that English based Creole extended along the West African coast. This hybrid language was used as a communication means between the local African traders and the British slave traders. However, it formed a common language of communication among different African tribes (Falk, 2004). Some of the slaves shipped to America must have had knowledge of

this Creole English prior to leaving Africa. This early Creole English of West Africa is touted as the ancestral language, which gave rise to contemporary English based creoles. This includes the Nigerian pidgin, Sierra Leone Krio and the English based Creole spoken by black Americans like Gullah, Guyana Creole and Jamaican Creole. This hypothesis serves to show that the rudiment of the Gullah language was directly brought by slaves from Africa.

The present Gullah/Geechee community is descended from enslaved Africans of numerous ethnic groups, mainly from west and central Africa who forcedly worked on plantations of coastal Florida, Carolina and Georgia. They are survivors or unique African American groups who resided near the coast and occupied barrier islands, often separated from the mainland by rivers, marshes and creeks (Cross, 2008). Due to their strong sense of family and community, coupled with such geographic protection, the Gullah/Geechee people were able to maintain a separate Creole language. This also enabled them to develop a distinct cultural pattern, which involved more African traditions as compared to African American people occupying other regions of the United States.

My Gullah community is in possession of a rich cultural history, since from the time of the enslavement of our ancestors, most of our people still occupy the very same exact regions. The people have burial areas, graveyards and sacred spots where they put their hands on several historical generations. The Gullah language can be cited as the lone surviving English based Creole speech in North America. It is partly African and partly Elizabethan English, spoken rapidly and rhythmically.

This makes the language tricky to comprehend even to those growing around it. For example a phonetically written language in Gullah may run like this: “ Ef oona dey frum de lowcountree an de islandt, lookya, e da time fa go bak. Disyah da wey fa cum togedda wid wi people fa hold on ta de tings wa wi peepol lef wi (Gullah/Geechee Sea Island Coation, 1996, par 2)”. When transliterated into English it becomes: “ If you are someone that is concerned about the preservation of the branch of Africa’s tree that has grown in America, this is a way for you to assist in nurturing and protecting that branch (Gullah/Geechee Sea Island Coation, 1996, par 3).” Turner (1973) argues that slaves from Rice Coast who were taken to Florida already spoke the Gullah dialect, making the Rice Coast dialect to become a model Creole speech for other slaves on the rice plantations.

This language flourished throughout the 1700s, so that the freed slaves and Krio ancestors arriving at the end of the century found the speech already popular among the coastal indigenous populations. Hence Gullah and Krio are derived from an early era of slave trade Rice Coast Creole language. Over the past two centuries each language has assumed its path, however even at present laymen and linguists alike are astonished by the similarities. African personal names and vocabulary in Gullah include many items popular in West Africa today. The Gullah people draw their African nicknames from numerous sources and tribal ancestral names. They utilize masculine names like Salif, Bala and Jah, with feminine names like Hawa, Fatu and Mariama. Clan names used as nicknames by the Gullah people include Sankoh, Marah and Bangura, plus African tribal names like Yalunka, Kono and Limba. The

Gullah vocabulary also incorporates words from West African languages, particularly from the Mende community (Cross, 2008).

Conclusion

Gullah as a word in itself seemingly reflects the Rice Coast origins of numerous slaves brought to Florida, Georgia and Carolina. Scholars attribute Gullah to Gola, a minute tribe on the border between Sierra Leone and Liberia, where the territories of Mende and Vai intersect. However Gullah may also have been derived from Gallinas or Galo, which are Mende words for the Vai people. Geechee as another name for the Gullah people is attributed to Kissi (pronounced geezee) tribe, which inhabits West African regions adjoining the Mende. Thus the language of my Gullah community arose from the interaction between West African tribes and the British during slave trade and colonization. Occupying the isolated islands helped preserve our dialect even after the end of the civil war. At present, the Gullah people's language is the only preserved English based Creole speech in Florida and other states like South Carolina.

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