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# The Emergence of the Gullah: Thriving Through 'Them Dark Days'

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# Thriving Through 'Them Dark Days'

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Spanish moss clings to the branches of oak trees south of the sand hills which run the width of South Carolina from Aiken to Chesterfield County separating what is known as the "Up" and the "Low" Country of this region. The geographic barrier of the Sandhills created two distinct regions with vastly different climates. The Low Country's sub tropical climate left it nearly uninhabitable in many places due to malarial swamps, with Charleston as the exception. The city of Charleston became a major commercial hub and one of the most populated cities in America during the antebellum era. The wealth and commercial prosperity of Charleston was in no small part due to the large commercial rice plantations located on the Sea Islands and on the mainland coast. The rice plantations were created from the malarial swamps by imported West African slaves who became known as the Gullah.[1] The Gullah or Geechee are members of a African-American community inhabiting the Sea Island and coastal regions of South Carolina and Georgia Low Country, beginning in the mid 1700's on until the modern day.

Those enslaved persons upon arriving in South Carolina joined the collection of peoples assembled in the Low Country transporting with them vibrant and unique cultural traditions that added new beliefs, religious practices and traditions to the American cultural landscape. Culture is a dynamic phenomenon influenced by many factors. It includes a people's belief system, food, mores, values, language, music, dance, art, writing, and a multitude of other factors.

> Most social scientists today view culture as consisting primarily of the symbolic, ideational, and intangible aspects of human societies. The essence of a culture is not its artifacts, tools, or other tangible cultural elements but how the members of the group interpret, use, and perceive them. It is the values, symbols,

[1] Gullah and Geechee are both used to describe the same culture. I interviewed with several Gullah during the summer of 2010 and one of them told me that as a child he was teased by other kids from the mainland, not the Sea Islands, they called him Geechee to make fun of him so for the purpose of remaining respectful and consistent I will be using Gullah for the entirety of the paper.

interpretations, and perspectives that distinguish one people from another in modernized societies.[2]

The influence of African cultures has only recently been investigated by social historians in comparison to the slew of other influences present in the modern American culture; this paper will explore the depth and influence of West African culture and how it survived and thrived during slavery in the South Carolina Low Country. The scholarship of the Gullah has evolved and increased in recent years with scholars debating the agency and portrayal of the Gullah people.

The modern historical scholarship concerning the Low Country begins with Peter Wood's *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion*, published in 1974. Wood begins the modern discussion of Sea Island and Low Country rice slavery. As slavery emerged in rice-growing regions it took on characteristics that were very different from those that emerged in slave economies that produce tobacco or cotton. In these later systems of cultivation enslaved people often lived alongside larger numbers of whites and as a result black culture and white culture were more readily influenced by one another.[3] Because of the "black majority" found in the Low Country rice plantations that Wood documents, the cultural world slaves created in this region differed greatly from the cultures of those enslaved people producing tobacco in Virginia or cotton in the South West.

The enslaved persons that arrived, starting in the 1670's, and worked the rice fields in the Low Country were given a unique opportunity to create a culture that stood in contrast to the dominant white culture in that region. This West African originated culture eventually permeated

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[2] J.A. Banks, *Multicultural Education for the Dominant Culture* (Needham Heights: Allyn & Bacon, 1989), 125.

[3] This statement is in reference to a typical American citizen, viewing popular culture references and traditional classroom texts on slavery. Historians would not have this view of slavery.

into the larger American one, slowly over time, changing both at the same time.[4] The Gullah culture still survives, albeit in an altered form. Throughout much of American cultural history it was thought that slaves lost all semblance of culture and had to adhere to the dominant American culture. Lawrence Levine debunked this thought process in his groundbreaking 1977 text *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* but his answer was only partially correct. Levine shows that enslaved Africans in all regions of the South were able to hold on to elements of African culture in a meaningful and purposeful way. The specific region of South Carolina provided a nearly unadulterated combination of West African culture that eventually emerged to assimilate into American culture and in doing so affected the white population as much as the former slave community was affected by it. Levine argues that black culture endured throughout slavery and rejects the notion that black culture was destroyed through Diaspora and enslavement. Levine is convincing in his argument and defends the notion that black culture retained many remnants of West Africa in the pre and post antebellum eras. Levine makes a compelling argument for the existence of black culture surviving the onslaught of tobacco, sugar and cotton slavery. The study of the Gullah people has increased in recent years and the scholarship underlines the importance of understanding that the modern American culture has many influences and that cultures with African origins have permeated into the consciousness of Americans as a whole.

The strongest argument for proving a systematic and cultural difference in the Low Country is made in *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth Century Chesapeake and Low Country* historian Phillip Morgan compares these two slave experiences in great detail. Historical investigations such as Morgan's lay a foundation for others to expound upon and flesh

[4] The largest demographic of slaves that worked the fields of the Low Country were taken from West Africa due to the familiarity with rice production, this paper will discuss more about the reasoning's and practice of using West African slaves for rice cultivation.

out the "foundations of a black national subculture."[5] John Thornton in *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1650* sets the baseline for much of the scholarship concerning the survival of African culture during slavery. Thornton' basic argument is that Africans did not suffer "social death" when they were transported from Africa to the Americas. Though the Middle Passage was a shared traumatic experience, it did not result in "deculturation," but was, instead, "temporarily debilitating."[6] Thornton continues to discuss how slaves were generally bought and sold in similar culture groups and the loss of culture depended mostly on the harshness of slave conditions.

The scholarship of the Low Country is varied and many historians make excellent arguments about the Gullah people. However, the historical debate over the cruel nature of slavery and the resilience and resistance of the enslaved often avoids combining these two realities into one meaningful discussion.[7] In much of the historiography, enslaved people are either treated as passive victims or as active agents. However, a more accurate rendering would posit that slaves were not as a mass but as individuals whose actions fell somewhere on the spectrum at either extreme or in the middle. The ruthless features of Low Country slavery including massive infant death rates and the passive accounting of 'property losses' that William Dusinberre describes in *Them Dark Day: Slavery in the American Rice Swamps* hammers home the passive victimhood of slaves. Dusinberre argues that no matter what the enslaved did the evil

[5] Philip Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Williamsburg: Chapel Hill, 1998), xviii.

[6] John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the making of the Atlantic world 1400-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 162.

[7] The major works regarding the nature of slavery either concentrate on how slaves suffered like Dusinberre or try and make an argument over how slaves had control over their lives in many ways like Joyner. The arguments provided by both styles of authors do bring meaningful scholarship to the discussion but are often one sided and fail to individualize slaves, slave owners and situations as well as demonizing or ignoring the other scholar's discussions.

"Charnel House" of slavery decimated family, lives and personhood. Meanwhile, Charles Joyner's *Down by the Riverside* concentrates on making the Gullah active agents. Joyner expounds on the ways of resistance and autonomy of the Gullah trying to convince readers that slaves lead a rich cultural existence. Joyner concentrates his research on the positive activities and agency of the Gullah and neglects the harshness of the enslavement. Current scholarship concerning the Gullah continues in Wilbur Cross's *Gullah Culture in America he* writes a compelling discussion of the Gullah culture building and expounds upon Joyner's work. Cross, despite the quality of his description of Gullah culture, does seem to gloss over the harshness of slavery in his attempt to celebrate Gullah life. The truth of the lives of the Low Countries slaves lies somewhere between these two poles; slaves controlled what they could when they could squeezing out what autonomy they could, conversely the slave owners and overseers controlled what they could wringing what labor they could from the slaves.

The Low Country region was a secluded incubated bastion of West African culture that created a group called the Gullah which had a distinct culture. The Gullah culture was successful in surviving the horrors of slavery and the attempts of whites to assimilate those enslaved. Indeed, Gullah were able to carve out a specific way of life that even survives today, the Gullah became a major contributor to the modern American way of life, through music, art and culture.

Agency is the key to the creation of the Gullah; the slaves of the Sea Islands had increased agency compared to other slaves in America. Agency is defined for this paper as the ability or power to control the outcome of different situations during a person's life. An active agent makes most of their own decisions and directly attempts to gain and assert more control over their life, an active agent Gullah slave may have run away from enslavement. Passive agency is a when an individual fights to gain more control over their lives not by confrontation

with the powers that be but using what means that are available to gain as much independence as possible and example would be, to sneak away extra food, to pass language onto future generations, to pass along skills to others, to tell tales and stories keeping a culture alive, and any instance in which a slave sought to improve his or her condition.[8] Agency is not to be confused with quality of life or a reduction of the harshness of slavery. Discussions over the existence of a separate African culture that survives the cruelty of slavery often concentrates on the agency of the enslaved people and under evaluates the enslavement conditions. The authors of such work such as Joyner and Cross often fail to walk a very fine line of agency vs. subjugation. It is the intent of many of the writers to show how the slaves had some power over their lives and concentrate on proving this point; the tenor of such work tends to point to a scenario in which slavery is not as bad as we have been taught. The reality remains that an enslaved person no matter how agent was subjected to a lifetime of cruelty and abuse and suffered at the hands of a plantation economy in which the slave was dispensable replaceable chattel.

The relationship between the knowledge and technology brought from Africa to be used in rice production and the passing along of a culture is not adequately described in simply outlining the connections. The passing along of knowledge from one generation to another is the most important tenant of a culture if it is to survive. The region of West Africa was a rice culture and the Low Country was transformed into a rice culture as Wood states "these Africans who were accustomed to growing rice on one side of the Atlantic and who found themselves raising the same crop on the other side did not markedly alter their annual routine."[9] Wood's argument is not that the lives of the people taken from their homeland and forced into slavery were the

[8] The West African slave who was brought to the South Carolina coast had an extension of the agency because of the circumstances of his incarceration. This unique set of circumstance led to a wholly different society that eschewed many of the tenants of white culture and instead formed a conglomerated West African, American culture.

[9] Peter Wood, *Black Majority; Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York: Knopf, 1974), 172.

same but that the growing of rice in West Africa and the Americas allowed certain aspects of that culture to be transported to the Gullah people. The statement is a dangerous one if taken out of the context of the absolute horror that was slavery in America and it is important to remember that the Gullah culture survived because the people of West African cultures conducted passive agency. The slaves were going to be forced to work in the Americas regardless if they carried rice culture with them or not. This paper will prove the distinct difference of the Gullah culture and how it was a separate dominant way of life for Low Country slaves. Gullah is the imperfect marriage of many different cultures and influences that helped the slaves of the Low Country gain power over certain aspects of their incarceration.

The primary argument of this paper is that the language created by West African enslaved persons proves the existence and virility of the Gullah culture; the secondary argument is that skill sets transferred over the Middle Passage contributed to the Gullah culture.[10] The Gullah developed their own language which provided a consistent conduit in which culture was passed among each other and to their progeny and outside the control and influence of whites. The skill sets brought from Africa and taught to each preceding generation happened outside the influence of whites allowing for a passing on of a way of life that was very different than the majority of slaves in America. Language and skill sets are not the only determinants of a different culture but they are the greatest indicator of a separateness that defines divisions between groups of people. The emergence of a rice culture with a unique language and set of skills was integral to the birth and development of the Gullah people.

[10] The role of religion in a Low Country slave's life is not to be understated and cultural markers from Africa survive the Diaspora. The reason that religion was not discussed in this work is that religion would have been a topic too large for this endeavor.

The schism between cultures is clearly present in language. Language divides people into separate groups based on their ability or inability to communicate. The Gullah developed a true creole language and not simply a pidgin.[11] The Gullah language allowed the slaves to communicate openly with limited understanding by mainstream white society. The Gullah people spoke a unique language that was unintelligible to most English speakers and a clear indication of the separate culture of the Gullah.

The West Africans were brought to the Sea Islands specifically because of their proficient skill in growing rice, "During the decades after 1720 as rice rose from the status of a competing export to become the colony's (South Carolina) central preoccupation."[12] The aptitude for growing rice, weaving the necessary technology to prepare rice, and the adroitness of the processing of rice overall further allowed the Gullah culture to evolve separately from American influence.

## Rice Kingdom

The crop of rice is the main culprit for the difference; it was a potent cash crop but its cultivation proved difficult if not impossible for indentured servants and Native American slaves. The rice culture of the Low Country was the perfect breeding ground for the growth of Gullah. Scholars such as Wood and Dusinberre have delved into the reasons why rice was such a

[11] A pidgin language is simplified means of communication that is developed between two or more different language groups when the different language groups have little or no common words, it is mostly used in trade and is not nativized or passed down through the generations. A creole language evolves from a pidgin and is nativized by a specific group and passed down from generation to generation. Pidgin and Creole are used in the technical sense throughout the literature and during this paper, the word pidgin has been used as a derogatory term to describe a language spoken by lesser people, in no way is the derogatory use of the word pidgin present in this paper.

[12] Wood, 154.

troublesome crop and most of the rationale surrounded disease.[13] Rice is grown by flooding the crop at different stages in stagnant pools of water. This process provides an ideal breeding ground for mosquitoes and subsequently malaria and yellow fever. The cultivation of rice is also a skilled craft unlike some other crops it takes constant tending and skilled workers to keep it viable. The West Africans who worked the rice fields of the Low Country brought a sophisticated knowledge of rice cultivation with them.

Native American tribes such as the Santee and Wimbee, who suffered greatly from a litany of diseases brought from Europe, died having little to no immunity from the disease. Natives were also poor slaves because their knowledge of the area, this allowed them to escape servitude if not killed by disease beforehand. Indentured servants also had drawbacks in cultivating rice, they lacked the knowledge of how to properly grow the crop, died quickly from malaria and had limited terms of service. Indentured servants could also run away with a greater chance of escape because they were the same race and culture of the areas they ran to "Thus in quality as well as in quantity white indentured labor clearly left something to be desired."[14] West Africans proved to be the preferred workforce for the cultivation of rice in the Low Country region. West Africans could be instantly identified as slaves due to their color, and were held as chattel, not only working for life but any progeny burgeoned the workforce and wealth of the owner. West Africans also brought an innate knowledge of rice cultivation because the west coast of Africa had been successfully growing rice for centuries, "Ancient speakers of a proto-Bantu language in the sub Sahara region are known to have cultivated the crop [rice] ... long before Portuguese and French navigators introduced Asian and American varieties in the

[13] Ibid, 65.
[14] Ibid., 42.

1500's."[15] The West Africans were sought after by rice plantations as one plantation owner stated "Gold Coast or Gambia's are best, next to them the Windward Coast are prefer'd to Angola's."[16] A grouping of enslaved persons who had similar cultural backgrounds were more likely to be successful in keeping their culture.[17]

The slave owners would take any strong and capable slaves as they needed for the cultivation of rice on their plantations; there was an implicit added value in acquiring a slave with rice cultivation knowledge. The preference for slaves from a specific region allows for an increase in the cultural 'weight' that each slave brought to the plantation.

Black slaves were to grow rice instead of other labor sources due to several important factors the danger and difficulty of growing the crop and the knowledge and skill that was required to grow it. Rice production began in the Low Country around 1700 and had accelerated by 1767 to produce 72 million pounds of cleaned and milled rice.[18] West Africans brought some immunity to malaria with them but that did not mean that they avoided the disease and others such as yellow fever. Death rates among slaves in the Low Country are substantially higher than in the cultivation of tobacco and cotton in the Chesapeake region and other Southern plantations. In a 25 year period on the Gowrie plantation, located on Argyle Island off of the Savannah River, a total of 294 deaths and a huge infant mortality rate of 88%.[19] The Gowrie plantation is a stark example albeit at the most destructive end of the spectrum, but the fact remains the conditions in

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[15] Ibid., 59.

[16] Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1998), 69.

[17] The individual plantation would have a profound effect on the ability of slaves to keep their cultural tenets; this paper is not trying to prove that their is a universal keeping and passing along of culture in the Gullah region but that there was a large enough group of like-cultured people that was successful in maintaining and creating a unique and vibrant culture that had strong West African roots.

[18] William Dusinberre, *Them Dark Days Slavery in the American Rice Swamps* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 389.

[19] Ibid., 51.

which it is ideal to grow rice are generally considered inhospitable for quality human life. The continued importation of fresh slaves from Africa, or other American plantations was deemed necessary to sustain rice cultivation, the slaves died in large enough numbers that "in the sickly rice swamps foreign supplies are necessary."[20] The horrid conditions that surrounded rice plantations had multiple effects on culture, there were constantly new slaves brought in from Africa which strengthened the influence of West African culture but the infant mortality rate also suppressed the passing of culture to future generations. The Gowrie plantation provides us with the worst example of conditions for slaves but it cannot be taken as the average experience.

The scholarship on Low Country slavery splits at how severe the mortality was for slaves. Dusinberre goes too far in his attempt to prove how bad conditions were and scholars such as Morgan and Joyner seemingly underestimate the damage that is done. Dusinberre picks the more horrific examples of slave plantations to prove how bad rice slavery was. Dusinberre is correct in describing the abject evils of slavery and does not have a shortage of plantations to prove his point. Dusinberre does give proper respect to the work of Joyner while disagreeing with the central issues of Joyner's work as Dusinberre states "Charles Joyner found little evidence of active discontent among slaves on South Carolina's Waccamaw River, and a reader of his illuminating study of slave culture might infer that the morale of slaves on rice plantations was better than that of free black sharecroppers in the twentieth century."[21]

The two historians are both correct in many ways but fail to properly show both sides. Joyner in his attempt to prove that the Low Country Gullah had a vibrant culture downplays the conditions of rice plantations; conversely Dusinberre in his attempt to prove how deadly rice cultivation was misses acknowledging the Gullah culture. The rate at which slaves were born and

[20] Ibid., 79.

[21] Ibid., 80.

died due to disease or harsh working conditions can be quantified and discussed but the underlying truth remains, rice cultivation was a demanding skilled job that operated in unsafe and deadly conditions. The death rates on plantations such as Gowrie it is hard to believe a culture could thrive under such high death rates, instances such as this should serve as an example of the inherent problems with collectivizing the experience of a group without accounting for individual variables.

The rice plantation existed for one reason and that was to provide a profit to the owner. Slaves brought from West Africa to work on the rice plantations suffered from disease and death much like the white indentured servants and Native Americans. Rice cultivation was a deadly business due to the malarial swampy conditions. The slaves of the Low Country may have had more relative freedoms and agency than their counterparts on tobacco or cotton fields but they paid for this benefit with dangerous work conditions and shorter lifespans. Plantation owners gambled with lives of their slaves. Indeed they attempted to squeeze enough profit from a group of slaves to offset the cost of replacing the dead ones. The gamble often worked out in the owners favor and to the detriment of the slaves. The owners were willing to replace sick and dead slaves, instead of taking precautionary measures such as sending vulnerable children away from the swamps during the wet season, in order to maintain or increase profit. The growing of rice was left to a group of people seen as dispensable and under the complete control of the plantation owner, paid workers would have run away during an outbreak of disease but enslaved people had no option but to stay. Rice as a cash crop was only possible because "slavery was the only means by which great agricultural estates could flourish."[22] Rice cultivation in the Low

[22] Ibid., 27.

Country did not survive after slavery was abolished; "the quick decay of those estates after the Civil War."[23] Only the forced enslavement of a foreign people allowed it to be a viable business.

The prevalence of disease encouraged plantation owners to only travel to their plantations during certain conditions of low mosquitoes leaving an overseer and a few hired hands to oversee the West African slaves; "the problem of absenteeism was endemic in the rice kingdom, where it was an axiom that rich planters would leave the immediate vicinity of the malarial swamps from May until November each year."[24] The situation created a quandary for the overseer a certain amount of was required to be done for the plantation to remain profitable but, could not rely on the typical sunup to sundown methodology of the cotton and tobacco plantations. The overseer was largely outnumbered as Dusinberre states "Large numbers of slaves, who could not be closely supervised by the (relatively tiny) class of white overseers who had build up a certain resistance to malaria."[25] As such a task system was put in place, a slave was told what was to be accomplished that day and however long it took him or her to finish was how long the work day lasted "those slaves who finished their allotted day's task before dusk were permitted to leave the fields upon completion."[26]

The task system thus allowed for a possibility of extra time but it should not be assumed that this was an easy system of labor. The tasks were difficult and the conditions they faced harsh. The free time coupled with limited oversight by white culture and people allowed a blended West African culture to be created and cultivated and subsequently passed on through generations of rice plantations slaves; these people became known as the Gullah. The time

[23] Ibid., 27.

[24] Ibid., 78.

[25] Ibid., 180.

[26] Ibid., 180.

carved out by the task system was essential for the creation and subsistence of the Gullah. The slaves, in the free time they earned from the task system, wove fishing nets, baskets and clothing, sang, danced, played music, conducted religious ceremonies, conducted court proceedings within the community, cooked food in recipes descended from Africa conversed in Gullah and passed along traditional African folk tales.[27]

The large percentage of slaves in South Carolina compared to other regions of the South are tied directly to rice: "South Carolinians did not import Negroes in large numbers until the introduction or rice in the 1690's."[28] The culture of the Low Country was specifically potent because of three factors; first many of the slaves were from the same general area of West Africa, and West Africans were the supermajority on the plantations at a ratio of 19 to 1 as Berlin notes "no white face belonging to the plantation but an overseer."[29] The second factor was more leisure time due to the task system, and finally the Gullah were geographically isolated from the influences of white culture. White culture in the Low Country region was far removed from that of the Gullah. The rice swamps were too dangerous for most of the whites to visit except during the dry seasons. The white plantation owners were largely absent and spent much of their time in Charleston.

Slaves in the Low Country were brought from the West African coast and were predominantly from the coast of modern day Senegal, Guinea and Gambia. The West African region had many different tribes and languages, but many common similarities of culture based

[27] A dish which has defined southern cuisine, gumbo, has its origins in West Africa. The name gumbo itself comes from the Bantu word for the vegetable okra, *ki ngombo*. The folk tales and language will be discussed further along in the paper in more detail.

[28] Wood, 37.

[29] Berlin, 68.

around rice production and similar practices of dance, food, tools and customs.[30] Rutkoff and Scott who argued to the continued modern diffusion of West African culture stated "West Central Africa accounts for more than 50 percent of African imports into British North America."[31] The vast majority of slaves brought to the Low Country were imported from the West African region because of rice cultivation knowledge and skill. Joyner notes "The most sought after slaves were from Senegal-Gambia and the Gold Coast".[32] The rice production of the Low Country was not possible without the contributions and knowledge of the West Africans.

## Language

The language of the Low Country evolved from a pidgin West African English hybrid into a creole language that was passed from generation to generation.[33] Language itself becomes a cultural 'post', a clear distinction separating one group from another, marking the passage of values mores and beliefs to the next generation. Culture is often partitioned between different language groups; the existence of separate language implies a separation of culture. The existence of a Gullah language is the greatest indication that a separate culture existed in the Low Country and survived slavery "Thus the study of Gullah is the study of the central element in slave cultures, a moving force in the creation of Afro-American culture in the crucible of

[30] Peter Rutkoff and William Scott. *Fly Away: The Great African American Cultural Migrations* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 7.

[31] Michael Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks the Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 33.

[32] Charles Joyner, *Down by the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 14.

[33] Gullah's West African root languages include Ibo, Ga and Yorba, also the development of any new language begins with pidgin and then evolves into a creole, but not all pidgin become creole in a process called creolization

slavery."[34] The Gullah language had cultural importance such as choosing a child's name, proverbs and parables. Language's connection to culture are married with these factors, the passing along of information as well as traditions, rites and lessons through language were essential in creating and then keeping the Gullah culture. The slaves were chosen by the planters due to their health, age, size, and rice growing expertise among other skills. The divided tribes that entered the slave ships now coalesced into a group, treated equally savagely by the whites. The differing tribes had little option but to meld together as the experience of being a slave and racially identified as the other, mattered more to group identity than tribal ties.

The first generation of Africans that experienced the middle passage began to form a pidgin language, first in the slave forts and markets of Africa and later on the ships during the Diaspora, Wood states "the pidginization process began around the slave barracoons of the West African coast."[35] A multitude of languages existed among the slaves and many were unintelligible to each other, but certain factors allowed for a pidgin language to form. The major languages of West Africa shared certain elemental foundations, these were merged with the major language of the slave destination over time; Afro-French in Louisiana and Afro-English in the Caribbean and South Carolina. [36] South Carolina stands as a unique example of West African English creole language forming from the pidgin within the United States. It was not uncommon for Africans to speak at least parts of several languages due to trading and the common Wolof and Bantu language groups, this allowed connections to be made between enslaved persons. Joyner argues "many in the Senegal-Gambia region, for instance, were bilingual in both Wolof

[34] Ibid., 197.
[35] Wood, 173.

[36] Including Ewe, Fante, Kikogo, Yoruba, Kimbundu, Mandinka, Ibo, Wolof, Mandingo Bantu and Ga.

and Mandingo, the two most widespread languages of the region."[37] The pidgin language first emerged on ships as the slaves on board had time to attempt to communicate and the shared situation far outweighed any formal tribal situations. The Gullah language would evolve from the pidgin first spoken on the slave ships as many West Africans found themselves enslaved on the rice plantations of the Low Country. The Gullah language developed over time changing it to a native creole passed along to future generations.

Gullah is a separate language, formerly dismissed as ignorant English until Lorenzo Turner's groundbreaking *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect,* Turner argues that Gullah has complex rules, distinct tones and other unique characteristics. [38] Gullah was exclusively a verbal language and not in written form until the twentieth century. Gullah employed a simple set of rules for pronouns, much less complex than English for example he meant male or female and could be used to show possession without change "he made he husband he supper" (She made her husband his supper). The sound of he was more like a long e such as "E teet da dig e grave" he/she is overeating. The use of the literal, is common in Gullah, such as digging a person's grave because they are overeating or to"pull of my hat" means to run. [39] When the words themselves are English the meaning and understanding of the words would be unintelligible to non- Gullah speakers. Verbal rules of Gullah retain many characteristics of several West African languages, such as the omission of an equating verb called zero copula, and it often clashes with English rules; "one gentman at de gate tell se say he Messus broder, is Messus dare in"[40] (A gentleman at the gate told me he was the mistresses' brother, is the mistress in). Gullah may

[37] Joyner, 204.

[38] Turner's book became the turning point in the scholarly discussion of Gullah. This paper recognizes the immense influence of Turner on the relevance of Gullah in modern research.

[39] Wilbur Cross, *Gullah Culture in America* (Westport: Praeger, 2008), 144-162.

[40] Joyner, 198.

seem at first glance to be a simplified version of English but as scholarship has proven it is a complex and developed language.

English serves as the base language for much of the vocabulary of Gullah, the social necessity to understand the slave masters orders required slaves, even those directly from Africa to know some English. The existence of English as the base language does not mean that Gullah was understandable to whites, except those with extensive exposure to the Gullah people. Gullah's rules coupled with the accent associated with the language made it very difficult for English speakers discern what a Gullah speaker was saying. The slave trade in Sierra Leone created a pidgin turned creole version of language due to contact with English speakers creating a similar language. The Mende Bai, and Bantu languages also contributed some vocabulary and rules of these languages "speakers of Sierra Leone Krio and Low Country Gullah can converse with one another without a translator [today]" further strengthening the proof that West African languages influenced Gullah. [41]

The overwhelming number of slaves on a plantation from West Africa or West African heritage diluted the language diffusion. A slave from West Africa who was placed on a plantation of only English speaking slaves would have been forced to learn only English and lose their native tongue, "a few isolated areas such as coastal South Carolina and Georgia there is still no unambiguous evidence that the English of North American blacks was ever completely creolized."[42] A slave from West Africa who was placed on a plantation with a large contingent of West Africans could have a language form with West African rules and influences. A slave was required to understand orders from the overseer and other whites and with the vocabulary

[41] Rutkoff, 27.

[42] Morgan, 572.

base similarities of English and Gullah, this was easily attained. The vast majority of time for a enslaved person of the Low Country was not spent talking to or listening to native English speakers but to other slaves, whom spoke Gullah, "nowhere else did Afro-Americans constitute so large a proportion of the population in so limited a space."[43] The general operations of rice plantations helped facilitate the imbalance of time spent with native English speakers and native Gullah speakers. Thus the task system itself contributed to English exposure for the Gullah, for most of the year, plantations were run by a small contingent of native English speaking white overseers. The slave was sent about their task for the day out in the fields or somewhere in the plantation around fellow Gullah speaking people with limited contact with the English speaking overseers.

The enslaved people coming from Africa had more in common linguistically with their fellow slaves and when confronted with the orders given in English this tension allowed and necessitated a new language to emerge. The Gullah language was not only passed down to future generations of slaves but due to the preponderance of slaves it influenced whites whom were described as speaking with "that peculiar accent derived from almost exclusive association with negroes" whites who lived among the Gullah speakers were influenced by the dominant language of the rice plantation, Gullah. It may even be assumed that due to the slave masters delegating the raising of children to the slaves that the plantation owner's children may have learned Gullah as a first language.[44] The other factor that created ideal conditions for Gullah to emerge were that slave owners "may have been prompted as much by a fear that they would master English as by a condescending belief that they could not."[45]

[43] Wood, 170.
[44] Joyner, 208.

[45] Wood, 186.

The Gullah language also became a tool, a method of passive agency, it was a language few whites could fully understand and one in which the whites diminished as primitive causing them to underestimate the abilities of the slaves "it was an outgrowth of ingenuity, not of their ignorance and it served its function well."[46] A slave who taught Gullah to their children was passing along West African culture, with many of the mores, values and customs. This action was not out rightly antagonistic to their captors but gave the Low Country slaves control over one aspect of their lives.

Language as an indicator for culture is not just limited to a separate dialect or language, it encompasses the code that exists beyond the words. The way a word is said, the facial expression associated with it, and a multitude of other factors change the meaning and impact of words. The passing down of lessons and morals through stories is ubiquitous throughout cultures. Languages in general use metaphors, stories and parables to convey messages and meanings that existed beyond the words spoken, if a person understands the vocabulary but not the culture he will derive no meaning from the saying, the moral will remain lost in translation, such as the slang modern English saying "get your goat" which in literal terms means to collect an individual's farm animal and in actual terms means to irritate or annoy. The sayings exist to convey wisdom down to the next generation, to teach them the good and bad of the world and what approach a good person should take. The Gullah language was able to pass down lessons through language through traditional parables and tales for example "mus tek cyear a de root fa he de tree" translated to take care of the roots in order to heal the tree.[47]

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[46] Ibid., 191.
[47] Wilbur, 144.

The West African tradition of using cryptic allegories to teach lessons also emerged in Gullah parables and stories. A multitude of sayings and platitudes made their way from the African language through to Gullah such as a Hausa saying "Nightwalkers meet nightwalkers" which translates to it takes a thief to catch a thief. [48] The Fante proverb "No one needs to teach the leopard's child how to spring" conversely compares to the Gullah proverb "Chip don't fall far from block"[49] The passing of such sayings may seem trivial but they prove that a strong influence of African culture was passed on generation to generation of Gullah speakers, who in turn diffused the sayings into the larger American culture such as the saying the apple does not fall far from the tree.

The most common Gullah sayings that conveyed advice to continuing generations dealt with the rigors of slavery and how to best keep yourself in an advantageous position. Gullah is separated from African cultures in this respect because the sayings that spoke to the slave's current condition of servitude had the best chance to survive and be passed on, as others fell by the wayside. "Still waters run deep" and "trouble made for man, ain't goin fall on the ground goin fall on somebody." [50] These sayings were very powerful when used within the context of slavery. A slave who did not show anger and controlled emotions was exercising power and control and not simply succumbing to the master's orders. The advice passed on to future generations gave the Gullah ways of agency of passive resistance to slavery that kept their offspring safe but with some semblance of control over their lives.

The control and influence over the future generation is an integral part of culture, one generation missing the culture can end its existence. The naming of offspring was an important

[48] Joyner, 209

[49] James Christensen, *The Role of Proverbs in Fante Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1958), 523.

[50] Joyner, 213.

African tradition that occasionally met resistance from slave owners but depending on the situation a compromise was reached. The West Africans turned Gullah usually wanted to follow the day-name tradition in which the day of the week a child was born was their name. A slave would name their child Cudjo (troublesome boy) and was often called Joe by the master and Cudjo among the slaves.[51] The African equivalent of some English words were also sometimes used names like Hercules was acceptable to both parties the English in reference to the Greek god and the Gullah a reference in Mende as (Hekeless) that meant a "a large wild animal."[52] A slave that has a master that did not accept the African name and would call him by whatever English name the master wanted; most surviving African names had close English equivalents that lent to this compromise. The slave would then be referred to by the African name among the slaves and have English name only to the whites. The white's ignorance of African traditions of naming in conjunction the slaves limited understanding of classical names of English culture allowed for enough room for the compromise for example "Phibbi, the name often given a female child born on Friday was easily heard and perpetuated as Phoebe by Europeans."[53] The dual names provides an example of passive agency as the enslaved person would adhere to the strict tenets of slavery only when necessary and exercise their autonomy when among the Gullah. The slave exercised the power of keeping West African naming practices in cases where the owner refused to use the West African influenced name the Gullah would use the name out of earshot of the plantation owner. Virginia, which did not have the consistent influx of West African's and practiced the 'gang' system of slavery saw the disappearance of most of the native

[51] Wood, 182.

[52] Lorenzo Turner, *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect* (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 92-109.

[53] J. L. Dillard, *Black English: Its History and Usage in the United States* (New York: Random House, 1972), 129-130.

African names during the 1790's as Morgan states "fewer than 5 percent of slaves had African names... and declined rapidly thereafter" In comparison in Low Country plantations the official lists of names held up to 25 percent African names, and many Africans in South Carolina continue to use a 'country name after their masters had christened them...lists of Anglicized names could conceal the continued use of African names" but not prevent them from being used by the slaves during communication with each other.[54]

The oral tradition of passing down parables and stories to future generations is a tenant of many cultures. The trickster tales were not unique to the Gullah experience but they played a larger role in much of the North American slave population. [55] The use of satire to describe and criticize the treatment and conditions of slavery gave an artistic outlet, as well as lesson format, for slaves that had to endure servitude. The origin of the tales can be traced not only to Africa but to Europe and Asia, this has more to do with comparative tales that criss-cross cultures and prior cultural diffusion than simply copying the English stories.[56] The Gullah liked to use tales involving animals that were good at tricking a seemingly more powerful adversary into doing what the trickster wanted. Africans who found themselves enslaved all over North America used tales such as these to fight against the rigors of slavery. The Gullah were no exception the large amount and consistent influx of slaves, directly imported from West Africa helped replenish the stock of such stories. Anthropologist R.S. Rattray who was one of the first scholars to give serious scholarship to trickster tales stated "beyond a doubt that West Africans had discovered for themselves the truth of the psychoanalysts theory of 'repressions' and that in these ways they

[54] Morgan, 451-454.

[55] A trickster tale is a story which most often uses animals as the central story characters, in the story the trickster character, often a rabbit, spider, tortoise or some other seemingly weak animal tricks and beats a seemingly strong animal such as a bear or wolf, "the strong assault the weak who fight back with any weapons they have".

[56] Joyner, 210.

sought an outlet for what might otherwise become a dangerous complex."[57] The tales gave the slaves an avenue for agency because through stories they could describe their own exploits against the master through an animal tale avoiding any consequences.

The comparison of characters in trickster tales to slaves under a master is an easy appraisal. In the various tales the trickster is constantly outwitting his stronger and supposedly superior opponent, though in many cases the trickster does not win but escapes to fight another day. The trickster wins because he is cleverer and is vastly underestimated by the supposed stronger character. The enslaved person had to use his wits and cleverness to gain an advantage over overseers and plantation owners because outright defiance would only cause the slave harm. A slave who was brought up with theses stories as morality tales would be comfortable morally to deceive and trick the master to gain advantages. The slave has to be subordinate and not fight an adversary directly but can still win and attain some control over their existence as Joyner states "the lesson is clear when dealing with the powerful, one has everything to gain and little if anything to lose by adopting the value system of the trickster."[58]

The majority of trickster tales has to do with food in some fashion and it stands to reason that the most accessible form of material comfort a slave could steal and be easily disposed was food. The other tales also included morality tales such as of the dangers of greed and the other easily accessible luxuries to slaves; sex. A tale told by the Gullah involved Buh Rabbit and Buh Partridge competing for the affection of the same girl." Rabbit and Partridge are competing for the favors of a particular woman as the Gullah would say 'Dy lakin de same gal.' Rabbit finds Partridge sitting on a stump with his head tucked under his wing. Partridge pretends that his head

[57] Lawrence Levine *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press 1977), 102.
[58] Joyner, 176.

has been cut off and grandly extols the virtues of headlessness. He is even going to the dance without a head. Rabbit, therefore, wants his head cut off too but neither his wife, mother nor daughter will oblige him. Eventually Partridge agrees to behead Rabbit then takes his own head out from under his wing and goes to the dance where he will have the woman all to himself."[59] The Rabbit most often plays the part of the trickster but in this instance he is the one conned, the moral of the tale is to not be so vain, because it makes you stupid. Tales such as this were passed along to teach values and mores and how to use intelligence to outmaneuver a person who seemingly has control over you. The passing down of tales, much like the idioms and parables, is essential to not only the agency of slaves but to the survival and existence of culture.[60]

The Gullah language is the best indication of a unique culture but evidence that is nonverbal exists as well, it is important to discuss one of the other elements of Gullah culture and the most succinct and convincing are the skillsets of the Gullah. The West African who was enslaved on a Virginia tobacco plantation did not pass along sweetgrass basket making to future generations and that constituted a loss in culture. The teaching of the making of baskets and the other skills was a way of passing knowledge given to the individuals from Africa from their forebears and transferring that culture to their progeny. The survival of West African culture passed on to what would become the Gullah people is the best example of 'black consciousness' to survive slavery. The Gullah people succeeded in protecting and distributing a culture from the Middle Passage to the modern day. The language and skill sets constitute just a small sample of the many things that survived from Africa but they provide the clearest examples and greatest cultural markers.

[59] Ibid, 179.

[60] It is important to note that each situation is unique and not all slaves were potentially in any of the possible categories of agency, some slaves were actively agent, passively agent, actively non-agent and passively non-agent. When discussing a culture of people it is a mistake to lump them in a set of beliefs without expressing how each individual through each generation make their own choice how they dealt with the circumstances of slavery and how during a lifetime and individual may switch between any and all of the possibilities.

## Skill Sets

The cultural skills that were brought from Africa and amalgamated into the Gullah society were not limited to products that were associated with the production of rice. Musical instruments such as drums and banjos were commonplace and other skills such as wood carving, quilting, boatbuilding, blacksmithing and netting. While Africans who were enslaved all over the New World brought their cultural traditions as well, the Low Country proved to be the most stable region in preserving and passing down the cultural traditions avoiding cultural diffusion. The banjo which is often seen as an Appalachian instrument had its origins in Africa and was transferred to the Americas via the slave trade and dispersed through American culture through African slaves. The banjo was recreated in the American colonies by slaves and then passed along as a form of instrument to whites who later travelled and settled in the Appalachians as Thomas Jefferson attests "The Instrument proper to them [Blacks] is the Banjar which they brought hither from Africa and which is the origin of the guitar."[61]

The drum is a ubiquitous cultural icon throughout the world, though the Gullah drum connects so closely to its African ancestry that "in form, decorative content and technology this slave drum is identical to an Akan, a group of West Africa, drum."[62] The drum and the banjo are representatives of African musical tradition that was interwoven into Gullah culture. Music was a large part of a slave's life and it connects the language aspects of culture to the skill sets. The Gullah passed down songs played by instruments with West African origins. The Gullah

[61] Thomas Jefferson Thomas and Adrienne Koch, *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Modern Library 1944), 258.

[62] Vlach, 22.

practiced call and response style songs while working in the fields and used the drums and banjos among other instruments just like their ancestors in West Africa.[63]

The slaves brought the expertise of propagating a successful crop as well as the dispensation required to make it a viable and profitable food source. The processing included but not limited to weaving sweetgrass baskets but fanning the rice to separate the grain and chaff. The handling included tools and skills that was integral to life in West Africa and which were allowed and encouraged to exist in the Low Country. The skill sets and tool knowledge passed on became an integral part of Gullah culture.

Rice is inherently tied to the success of the Low Country economy during the antebellum period. Rice production and exportation provided up to two-thirds of the entire economy; as rice is integral to the economic success of the Low Country so too is rice enmeshed with West African originated slaves. It was a never ending cycle of rice plantation owners to acquire slaves that by the mid 18th century planters and observers made comments as "the labour required for rice is only fit for slaves" and "Rice is raised so as to buy more negroes, and negroes are bought so as to get more rice."[64] The sowing of rice was expected by the plantation owners to be done according to European techniques which required creating trenches in which to place the seed. Slaves whose limited English skills may have misunderstood the expectation planted rice using a heel-and-toe method that was practiced in Africa. The slave owners and overseers attempted to change the techniques of the slaves but the heel-and-toe method proved to be effective as "Sea Islanders were still practice the heel-and-toe method in the nineteenth century" after many decades of rice cultivation. [65] The other aspects of growing rice did not necessarily require

[63] Rutkoff, 26-30.
[64] Morgan, 148.

[65] Wood, 61.

previous knowledge such as constant picking of weeds and standing guard over the field scaring off birds but they were part of the labor intense and harsh conditions that caused many slaves to run away, at a greater rate than in other forms of slavery. There were also maroon groups that formed in the dense and unused portions of the swamps "In the Low country, more Africans, a black majority, and extensive swamplands were greater encouragements to maroon bands."[66]

The movement from using inland swamps to plant and irrigate rice to using the tide in rice cultivation by the early 1730's was both a positive and negative for slaves.[67] The tidewater method required the creation of large and extensive ditches and canals which required backbreaking labor to create. The positive that came from the use of tides in rice cultivation is it did reduce some of the time spent on weeding and maintaining the fields. The reduction in arable rice land due to the need to be on the coast therefore condensing rice plantations which helped create the incubation chamber for Gullah culture. The area in which rice was profitable to be grown shrunk, with the new tidewater method, this movement towards the coast and the preference for experienced rice growers from West Africa concentrated the Gullah culture.

The technology to properly control the level of water within the tidal swamps was a West African technology the hollowed log and plug which served as sluice gates letting water in and out when needed "Sluice valves in West African rice culture were frequently constructed from hollowed silk cotton tree trunks."[68] The Gullah's use of technology that descends from West Africa such as the sluice gate proves the passing down of rice growing skill sets throughout the generations.

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[66] Morgan, 450.

[67] Ibid., 156.

[68] Ibid., 157.

The collection of rice and the drying and stacking also did not require specialized skill but in the next few steps African technology and know-how proved instrumental in the success of rice as a cash crop. The process of taking dried rice stalks to a useable product required the use of African skill and expertise while whites were "ignorant for years how to clean it."[69] The rice crop may have been deemed to difficult to produce a profit as a cash crop without the knowledge and skills of enslaved West Africans. The process in which rice is grown is very complicated, the processing of rice is just as elaborate and takes considerable skill to conduct properly.

The West African large rice mortar and pestle was used to remove the husk around the rice grain, this apparatus was much larger than the similar European version which had never been used in rice production. The fanning baskets that were instrumental in completing the first step of rice production was a technology that originated in Senegambia were recreated in the Low Country by slaves using the sweetgrass that grew naturally in the region, John Vlach in *The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts* states "Utilizing the natural materials of their new environment, Afro-Americans made fanners and other large agricultural baskets out of black ruch, an abundant marsh grass, bound with thin splits of white oak or strips from the saw palmetto."[70] The rice 'fanners' were used to separate the husk and the remaining grain using the wind as the removal device in a process called winnowing, Dale Rosengarten who wrote an in depth study of sweetgrass basket making called *Row Upon Row: Sea Grass Baskets of the South Carolina Lowcountry* stated

"From the start low country plantations proved to be friendly environments for the production of Afro-American sea grass baskets. Indeed rice could not have been processed

[69] John Vlach, *The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts* (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1978), 171.

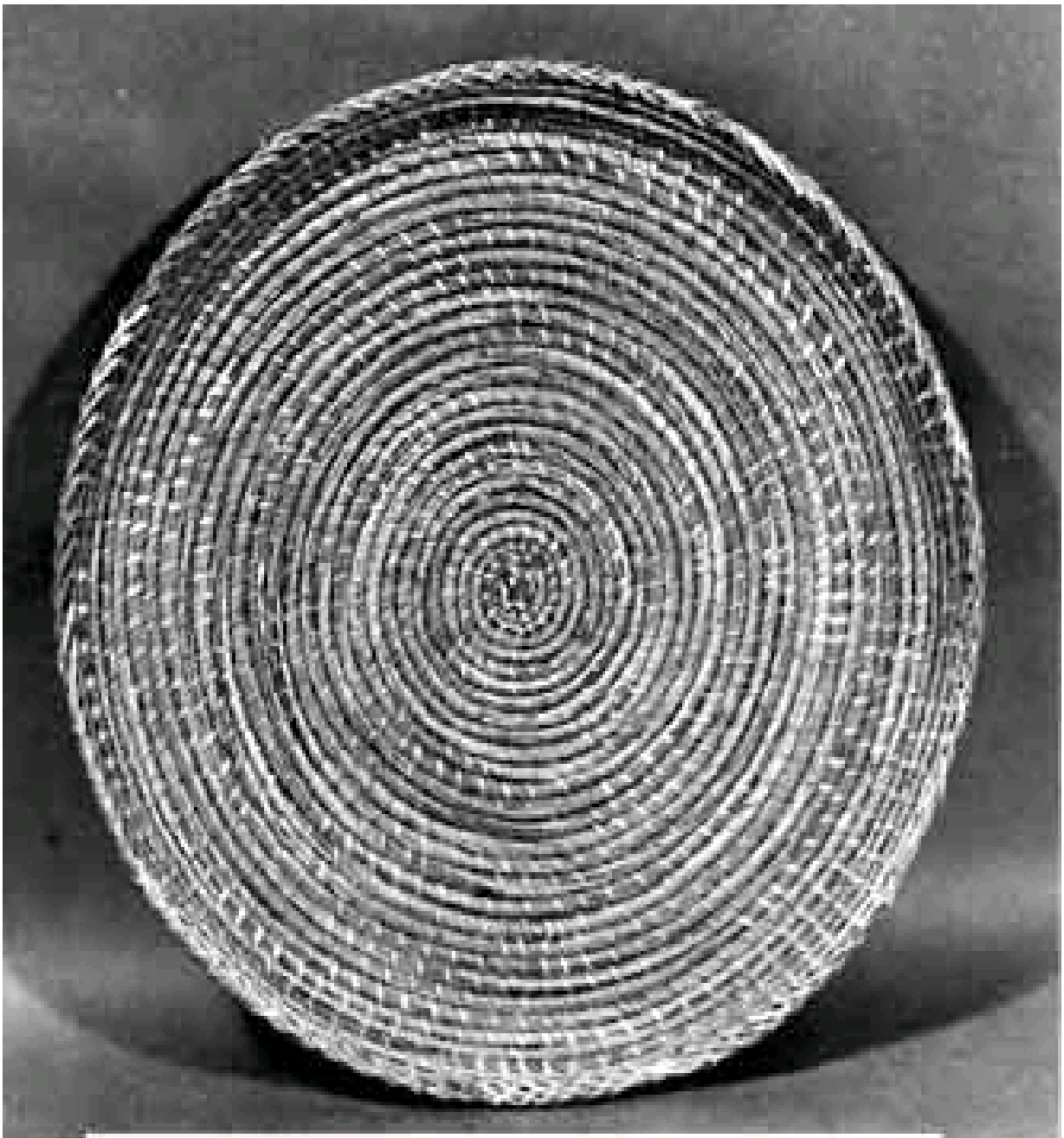
[70] Vlach, 9.

without a particular coiled basket, called a 'fanner' The fanner was a wide winnowing tray used to fan rice-that is to throw the threshed and pounded grain into the air or drop it from a basket held at a height into another basket allowing the wind to blow away the chaff."[71]

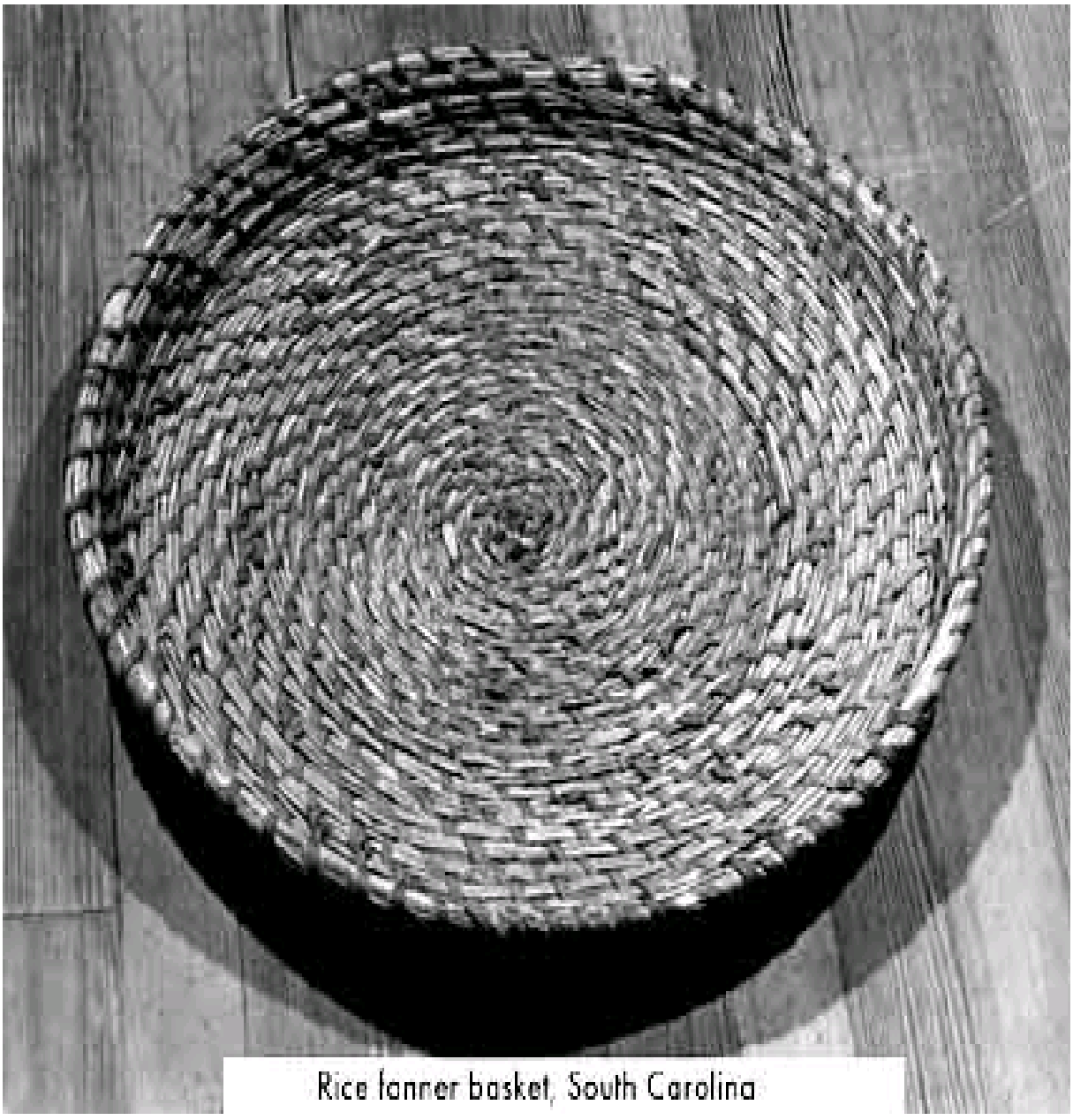
The sweetgrass baskets are intricately woven and each one takes many hours to complete, indeed a large fanner may take several days of continuous weaving to create. The baskets also served as an artistic outlet as each one while being produced for a practical purpose is patterned after the craftsperson's own preferences, "The blending of craft and art with the passage of time is a theme in Afro-American decorative arts."[72] The tradition of weaving and using sweetgrass baskets originated in West Africa and survived the Diaspora to be continued and passed down through the generations of Gullah.

[71] Dale Rosengarten, "Row Upon Row: Sea Grass Baskets of the South Carolina Lowcountry," *Southern Changes* 8, no. 6 (1986): 17-24. Accessed March 9, 2015, http://beck.library.emory.edu/southernchanges/article.php?id=sc08-6_003, 17.

[72] Vlach, 19.



Rice fanner basket, Senegal



Rice fanner basket, South Carolina

Rice Mortar South Carolina, Mid 19th Century[73]

[73] "America's Reconstruction: People and Politics After the Civil War." America's Reconstruction: People and Politics After the Civil War. Accessed March 9, 2015, http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/exhibits/reconstruction/section3/section3_05.html.

Rice Mortar Sierra Leone 2004[74]

The climate in the Low Country was very similar to that of many parts of West Africa and things such as shrimping using nets were commonplace in both environments. The weaving of shrimping nets is very time consuming, like weaving sweetgrass baskets, and requires great

[74] "Women in Sierra Leone Get Grain without Pain." UNHCR News. Accessed March 9, 2015, http://www.unhcr.org/41af23e34.html.

skill. The Gullah of modern day Low Country still practice the creation of both sweetgrass baskets and the shrimping nets, like their African forbearers, exemplifying the success of the passing of culture generation to generation.[75]

The creation of the Gullah culture was unique to the circumstances of the Low Country. The agency and culture of the Low Country slaves is only one example, albeit the most pure, of how African culture survived slavery and influenced modern American culture. Slaves in all regions were able to hold on to at least some parts of African culture in a meaningful and purposeful way but the specific region of South Carolina provided an nearly unadulterated combination of West African culture that eventually emerged to assimilate into American culture and in doing so affected the white population as much as the former slave community was affected by it. America is lovingly referred to as a melting pot but it is more aptly described as a gumbo, with all parts both accepting and transferring flavor to the entire pot. The Gullah culture provided the American gumbo a heavy serving of West Africa. The Gullah culture still has a strong presence, a person crossing the Sea Islands Parkway which connect the city of Beaufort to St. Helena Island a visitor will soon have to halt at the island's only stoplight. To the left stands Gullah Grub owned and operated by Bill Green who keeps the culinary history of the Gullah alive and well, Ms. Jeri weaves and sells sweetgrass baskets as an elderly man sits on a nearby rocking chair weaving shrimping nets. Down the street stands the Penn Center, a school started by religious northerners to educate former slaves, or the museum dedicated to Gullah and rice culture. The conclusion of this study is that a Low Country slave survived severe conditions and overcame, with a vibrant culture, surviving the harsh and inhumane treatment generation to generation. The slaves of the Low Country rice plantations were forced to deal with the demands

[75] Vlach, 107.

of their masters but due to the particular circumstances of their servitude they were able to keep a substantial part of West African culture alive.

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