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Articulating Cultural Belonging at the Border of the Heritage Corridor: Public Communication and the Preservation of North Florida's Gullah/Geechee Culture

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Abstract

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 who are known to have retained more of their African cultural and linguistic heritage than any other African American community. This interpretive ethnographic pilot study examines contemporary issues of public communication and the preservation of Gullah/Geechee history and culture occurring in the North Florida "border area" of a Gullah/Geechee Heritage Corridor that was recently designated through the Federal Gullah/Geechee Heritage Corridor Act (Public Law 109-338, 2006).

Introduction

From the times of slavery until the later part of the twentieth century, Gullah/Geechee communities lived in relative geographic and social isolation from the U.S. mainland, often constituted majority populations, and occupied a coastal landscape remarkably similar to the shores of West Africa. These conditions facilitated the survival of rich African traditions of folklore, religion, arts and music, land use, foodways, architecture, and health practices, and according to William Pollitzer, "So many Africanisms survived in Gullah culture that to some degree it was a re-creation of Africa within the New World (in Cross, 2008, p. 229).

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 (Graves, 2013; Hargrove, 2002; Cross, 2008; Faulkenberry, Coggeshall, Backman & Backman, 2000).

As a response to the response to the recent and rapid loss of Gullah/Geechee land and culture (National Heritage Areas, 2003), the 108th U.S. Congress passed a Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Act for the purpose of identifying and preserving key Gullah/Geechee historical and cultural sites, data, and artifacts (Pub. L. No. 109-338, 2006). The Corridor includes a 30 mile wide stretch of coastal land that stretches from the northern border of Pender County, North Carolina to the southern border of St. Johns County, Florida.

Within the context of the southern Gullah/Geechee "border" that the Heritage Corridor marks, North Floridians of Gullah/Geechee descent face unique challenges in

terms of identifying Gullah connections and defining their culture, particularly as attaining resources through the Corridor depends on demonstrating a status of cultural belonging. While numerous studies have been conducted on Gullah/Geechee history and culture in South Carolina and Georgia, relatively little research has been produced in Florida, with the exception of a number of historical studies that have identified the unique historical context of northern Florida's Gullah/Geechee culture, which formed in a distinctive merging of Seminole and maroon populations (Amos, 2011; Mulroy, 1993; and Ogunleye, 1996).

As the efforts of the Corridor increasingly bring Gullah/Geechee culture into public consciousness, the researchers of this study aim to understand how the unique historical and social contexts of Gullah/Geechee culture of the North Florida region shape the current challenges and opportunities for preserving the culture. More specifically, the study addressed two primary research questions:

RQ1: Are there specific challenges to defining Gullah/Geechee culture within a boundary area of the Gullah/Geechee Heritage Corridor? If so, what are these?

RQ2: What challenges and opportunities does the Corridor present in terms of preserving Gullah/Geechee culture in Florida and educating outsiders about its value?

Methodology

The study relies on an interpretive ethnographic approach with the purpose of developing "grounded theory" for understanding the practical relationships between public communication and Gullah/Geechee cultural preservation within the North Florida Corridor region. As a methodology, grounded theory "evolves during actual research, and it does this through continual interplay between data analysis and collection (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 158). Within this inductive approach, researchers begin by collecting data in order to develop a theory or model about how communication is practiced within a particular social context. After formulating and investigating preliminary research questions, researchers continually return to the field to check their results for reliability and construct refined research questions for further investigation. As a pilot study, this investigation represents the first step in that interpretive research process.

As a data collection method, the researchers performed ethnographic interviews according to Fetterman's (2010) design for ethnographic research and fieldwork, in which data is collected from an emic perspective of interview subjects and categorized and interpreted according to the etic perspective of researchers (p. 11). In constructing research questions, the study utilized Giorgi's (1997) method of using broad and open-ended questions, "so that the subject has sufficient opportunity to express his or her view point extensively" (cited in Bevan, 2014, p. 137). As an inclusion criterion, key informants for the study were selected according to Jarrett and Lucas's (2002) research model in which research subjects are representative community spokespersons with informed opinions and insights into the research topic under investigation.

The key informants for the study are Florida Gullah/Geechee descendants and Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission members that include Sandra

Robinson Morene, Vice President of Operations, Jacksonville Gullah/Geechee Community Development Corporation and Alternate on the Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission; Dr. Anthony Dixon, member of the Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission and historical archivist; and Jermyn Shannon El, direct Gullah descendant, member of the Jacksonville Gullah/Geechee Nation, cultural preservationist and presenter at the 2014 Gullah Fest in Jacksonville, Florida. The researchers interviewed the key informants at the Jacksonville Gullah Fest, an annual celebration of Gullah heritage in Jacksonville and surrounding areas, all of which are located within the prescribed limitations of the Gullah Geechee Heritage Corridor. Data collected from the interviews was organized and analyzed by the researchers according to common themes with the goal of identifying and discussing key areas for further interpretive research investigation.

Findings

In response to Research Question 1, which examined specific challenges to defining Gullah/Geechee culture within a boundary area of the Gullah/Geechee Heritage Corridor, respondents named specific areas and communities that exist outside of the prescribed limits of the Corridor in Florida, but nevertheless have significance to broader Gullah/Geechee history and culture. For example, Sandra Morene pointed to Alachua County, Florida, as one such site which includes a rich Gullah history but is not included in the Corridor:

We have Alachua County, which is one county that has a lot of rich history and it is not included in the Corridor. It is around the Gainesville Miccosukee area. Going further down south along the coast, we find a lot of the melting pot from the Caribbean—you would think the Caribbean was coming up, but actually the North was coming down. So you got several connecting places and if you take a look at transatlantic slave trade and see where all those ships went, you would see the creole from Louisiana; there is a lot of connecting those communities. (Sandra Morene, Personal Communication, October 25, 2014).

Dr. Anthony Dixon, who spoke during the Jacksonville Gullah Festival on the diaspora of the Gullah Geechee people throughout the Southeastern United States and into the Caribbean, also mentioned traces and evidence of Gullah people that exist beyond the Corridor's borders:

We know now that if you want to hear close to the original Gullah speakers, we go to Red Bay, Bahamas, not in South Carolina. Those black Seminoles in Red Bay still live isolated. Many of them still don't have electricity, and it is by choice. They choose to live the old way. We also see their [African] basket weaving technique there. (Dr. Anthony Dixon, October 25, 2014).

Interviewees also spoke of the challenges involved in identifying what particular

cultural practices constitute “Gullah” in Florida, particularly in terms of personal identification and public education about the culture:

[I]dentifying is one of the biggest things...and that is because we may not eat collard greens and cornbread with our fingers, but we may take the corn bread and put it in the pot with the greens and eat it with a fork. It is just identifying what you love and preserving it and enveloping it, and in Jacksonville we have this challenge of identifying the culture. (Saundra Morene, Personal Communication, October 25, 2014).

According to Jermyn Shannon El, these challenges also include raising awareness within Gullah/Geechee communities themselves, particularly within the historical context of the destructive power of slavery and the denigration of the culture, including negative connotations of “Geechee” as signifying backwardness:

The challenge is directly linked to the livelihood of the culture itself. African-Americans who grew up in Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina suffered the most brutal treatment ever to a people in the history of mankind. Pretty much, African-Americans throughout the nation when they look back in terms of their great, great grandparents, they came from generally one those four states, in most cases. Everything we read about in association with slavery and the heinous crimes that took us away from our language, our god, our religion, our culture, the seat of all of that is right here... most African Americans don't know what Gullah, what Geechee is. Geechee was a negative term when I was growing up. When you called someone Geechee, those were fighting words. But now we have to be smarter. We have to look deeper into those pages... we can articulate western language very well, but many of us have been cut off from our Mother Tongue. (Jermyn Shannon El, Personal Communication, October 25, 2014).

Morene mentioned that her mother did not seem to want to teach her and her siblings anything about the culture, and hypothesized that this was because her mother grew up having to make baskets for a living, and wanted her children to experience something more. She also stated that education was stressed as the most important thing in her household, and that the “economics of basket weaving didn't hold as great as the economics of education” (Personal Communication, October 25, 2014).

In terms of Research Question 2, which dealt with identifying the challenges and opportunities that the Corridor presents in terms of preserving Gullah/Geechee culture in Florida and educating outsiders about its value, interviewees expressed that certain areas of African American history and culture need to receive greater attention in terms of public education:

...the state of Florida is really doing a lot, but not enough. I say that the culture and the history is still somewhat mysterious. We need to do more in terms of making

sure that the heritage is taught in schools, because, of course, the youth are our future. For myself growing up, we learned about the Indian wars, the Civil Wars, we learned about Civil Rights, you know. But we never really learned the truth about ourselves, our culture, our heritage, and what we contributed beyond the minor inventions. So now this is a renaissance period for us. This is a golden age for us to really look at how we built America and how it was pretty much a civilization way before Columbus got here. (Jermyn Shannon El, Personal Communication, October 25, 2014).

Morene explained that Florida faces unique challenges in terms of preserving the culture through the Corridor that stem from its differences to other areas that are more commonly recognized as “Gullah.”

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. (Saundra Morene, Personal Communication, October 25, 2014).

Interviewees also discussed the role of cultural tourism within the Corridor as a way to increase public awareness and preserve the culture as well as contribute to economic development. Morene explains that Gullah/Geechee-related tourism currently only makes up a very small percentage of overall tourism in the State of Florida, but has the potential to increase if it is marketed correctly within the Corridor. Jermyn Shannon El explains that there are direct connections between Gullah/Geechee cultural preservation, tourism, and economic development in the region:

[W]hen people come to Florida they are looking for authentic people to tie into authentic culture. They want the food, they want the feeling, the experience, the music just like if you were going to Jamaica, Bahamas. Florida is that creole, beautiful paradise that people can escape to. But again, we have, as a culture, African-Americans have been, somewhat detached... this is the seat of the first black beach here in Jacksonville, first black insurance company, first black high school, first black college, and first black community. So all of that says something to the origins of Florida overall. And I think now that the information is so overwhelming, so powerful, and you can Google pretty much anything you want and get the truth. So our job now is to create the genealogy classes and heritage tours so people can attach that knowledge with something tangible. (Jermyn Shannon El, Personal Communication, October 25, 2014).

While the tourism industry can help to raise public awareness of the culture, Dixon emphasized that tourism projects should be developed in close collaboration with local communities so that they primarily serve the communities' economic and cultural interests. He also discussed the additional challenge of outsiders laying claims to the culture as a major hindrance:

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, October 25, 2014).

Discussion

After interviewing the key informants and analyzing the research findings, the researchers discovered several main themes related to public communication challenges faced by Gullah/Geechee descendants within the North Florida region of the Heritage Corridor. The first theme centers on potential obstacles to increasing public awareness about the culture. While the Heritage Corridor may encompass the Gullah/Geechee region of the Southeastern region within a neat "borderline," culture is always permeable and dynamic, and interviewees demonstrated ways in which Gullah/Geechee connections stretch not only further south into Florida, but also into the Caribbean, Bahamas, and beyond. As a future research project, the researchers plan to explore these connections further, with the goal of expanding public knowledge about Gullah/Geechee culture in areas outside of the Corridor.

The researchers also found that 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, displacement, the historical destruction and denigration of the culture, and the failure of public education have all eroded ties to the culture within African American communities. As another area for further study, the researchers plan to examine how current cultural preservation efforts within the Corridor are working to facilitate a contemporary renaissance of Gullah/Geechee culture within African American communities of the North Florida region.

Finally, the researchers discovered a key research theme related to the opportunities and limitations of cultural preservation and public education about North Florida's Gullah/Geechee culture through tourism. 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. As third area for further study, the researchers plan to more closely examine the tensions between the private

interests of tourism and the public interest of Gullah/Geechee cultural preservation in the region.

Conclusion

While the Gullah/Geechee Heritage Corridor represents a promising step in cultural preservation and public education about Gullah/Geechee history and culture in the North Florida region, current efforts to limit the corporatization of the Sea Islands and protect their ecological and cultural life remain incomplete. As a pilot study, this interpretive ethnography attempts to identify key research issues related to public communication and the preservation of Gullah/Geechee culture within the North Florida region of the Heritage Corridor. Through the study, the researchers were able to identify three key areas for further interpretive investigation: 1) further identifying and exploring public history interpretations of connections to North Florida's Gullah/Geechee culture that extend beyond the Heritage Corridor's borders, 2) attaining a deeper understanding of how the Corridor's current public history efforts are helping to raise public awareness about Gullah/Geechee culture within North Florida's African American communities, and 3) examining the challenges and opportunities of Gullah/Geechee cultural tourism as a form of cultural preservation and public education in the State of Florida. Through the continuing investigation of these research topics, the researchers aim to not only further develop grounded theory about the efficacy of public communication surrounding current Gullah/Geechee preservation efforts in Florida, but also produce practical knowledge that can help to guide them.

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