

# ARTS MIDWEST WORLD FEST

## Study Guide Gullah History & Culture

### Where do the Gullah live?

The Gullah culture is one of the oldest surviving African cultures in the United States. It has its origins in descendants of Africans brought to the Carolina Colony in the 1500s. There are over 500,000 Gullah living between Jacksonville, North Carolina and Jacksonville, Florida today. This 500 mile stretch along the Atlantic Ocean is home to the Sea Islands. The Sea Islands are a chain of barrier islands on the Atlantic Ocean coast of the United States. They number over 100, and are located between the mouths of the Santee and St. Johns Rivers along the coast of South Carolina, Georgia and Florida.

### Gullah History

The Gullah culture is testament to the strength, ingenuity and adaptation of African slaves brought to the United States. It began along the West African coastline where captured Africans destined to be sold as slave labor for American rice and cotton plantations were imprisoned in holding cells before their harrowing journey across the Atlantic Ocean. This imprisonment brought a large number of Africans from different countries and cultures together. The largest group of Africans sold at the slave markets of Charleston, SC and Savannah, GA came from the West African rice-growing region, which stretches from what are now Senegal, Gambia, and Guinea-Bissau in the north to Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Liberia in the south. “Gullah” culture evolved as a hybrid of the different languages, customs, beliefs and traditions of these regions.

The term “Gullah” is said to be a version of the country named Angola, from which nearly half the slaves brought to the Carolina Colony came. Many elders in the Gullah culture believe that the term refers to the African story of the Golas and Gizzis—two cultural groups living near Liberia during the time of the slave trade that also had large numbers captured and brought to this part of the United States. In South Carolina, this group of African-Americans and the language they speak are referred to as Gullah. In Georgia, they are called Geechee.



This famous painting (c. 1790) shows Gullah slaves on a plantation dancing and playing musical instruments derived from Africa.

West Africa during the time of the slave trade was a rice growing culture. Thus, the farmers from this part of the world were an invaluable source of knowledge and cheap labor to rice plantation owners. Gullah slave farmers formed the backbone of the rice and cotton industries of the Carolina Slave Coast. After emancipation following the Civil War, most Gullah remained in the Sea Islands choosing to preserve their heritage in spite of being forced to work as cheap labor by Jim Crow laws. By the 1940s, the shift from agriculture to tourism made them the dominant labor force in and of the hospitality industry, the chief income in every state wherever they reside in large numbers today.

### Gullah Culture

Gullah storytelling, cuisine, music, folk beliefs, crafts, farming and fishing traditions exhibit strong influences from West and Central African cultures. The Gullah “root doctors” are like African medicine men, protecting their people against dangerous spiritual forces by using ritual objects and traditional African herbal remedies. The Gullah perform religious rituals that harken back to their African heritage, including the Gullah “seekin” ritual which is similar to coming of age



Source: <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Seaislandmap.png>

rituals in West African secret societies and the “ring shout” which has its origin in the ecstatic religious rituals of West and Central Africa. Like their African kin who believe in witches and devils, the Gullah hold strong beliefs about "hags" and "haunts."

## Gullah Language

The Gullah language is a testament to the adaptation, evolution and survival of the slave culture’s African heritage in the face of forced assimilation. Slaves came from many different countries and tribes and spoke many different languages. The Gullah language was born on African soil as a “pidgin,” or common language developed for communication between people who did not share a language in common. By the height of the slave trade, pidgins were firmly placed among African groups. When different Africans were captured and housed together in West Coast holding cells, the pidgins spoken in freedom became their method of communication in captivity. As time went on, the most prominent pidgins combined into one language which combined linguistics features and speech patterns common among them with the English words and vocabulary spoken to and about them by white American slave owners. This language became “Gullah.” People who speak Gullah sound like people who speak Krio, one of the common languages spoken among the people from Sierra Leone, West Africa.

Here are some common Gullah terms compared with their English and Krio counterparts:

Gullah	English	Krio
de	the	di
ooman	woman	uman
nebbuh	never	nohba
yez	ears	yeys

## Gullah Food

Gullah food is one of the oldest world traditions being practiced in America today. It is informed by need, availability and environment. The Africans brought to the Carolina Colony used the similarities between culinary environments of the low country and the West Coast of Africa to create a food culture that has come to characterize the regions where they live. One pot dishes, deep frying, rice dishes, seafood, boiling and steaming, baking in ashes, basic and natural seasonings, and food types consistent with those received in the weekly rations on plantations are all characteristics of Gullah food. Gullah food is characterized by the consistent use of rice and a distinct “taste” present wherever Gullah people are cooking. Simply speaking, Gullah food is about ancestral ties and American living, adaptability, creativity, making do, “livin’ ot da waddah and on the lan.”

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Ultimate Gullah: Gullah History  
<http://www.ultimategullah.com/culture.html>

Wikipedia entry for Gullah  
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gullah>

Gullah Net: Explore Gullah culture in South Carolina with Aunt Pearlie Sue  
<http://www.knowitall.org/gullahnet>