

STUDENT RESOURCE FOR BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT: Introducing Students to the Gullah People of South Carolina and Georgia and Melanie’s Connection to Stick Pounding

INTRODUCTION

This short and sweet resource is intended to provide students some background context and framework for experiencing and learning about the Gullah art of Stick Pounding, which will be featured as part of the WITNESS Young People’s Concert performances. Students will learn about who the Gullah people are, why their unique culture retains many African cultural traditions and customs, and why pounding sticks replaced drums that were taken away from their enslaved ancestors. While this year’s theme focuses on empowering students to “lead with love”, it will be important for them to bring their understanding of this historical context into the Young People’s Concert experience.

PROCESS

1. Distribute copies of the article.
2. Have students take turns reading as a class, or ask students to read quietly, alone or in pairs.
3. Facilitate a brief class discussion, asking students to share some of the things that they learned about the Gullah people and about Melanie DeMore’s connections to Gullah culture and the art of Stick Pounding.

LEARNING GOALS

Students will read the article individually, in small groups or together as a class to learn a big-picture history of the Gullah People of South Carolina, Georgia and the neighboring Sea Islands, and make connections to WITNESS guest artist Melanie DeMore and her expertise in the Gullah art of Stick Pounding. Students will carry this background knowledge with them to the Young People’s Concert where they will experience the performers stick pounding.

MATERIALS

- Copies of the student article “An Introduction to the Gullah People of South Carolina and Georgia”

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT:

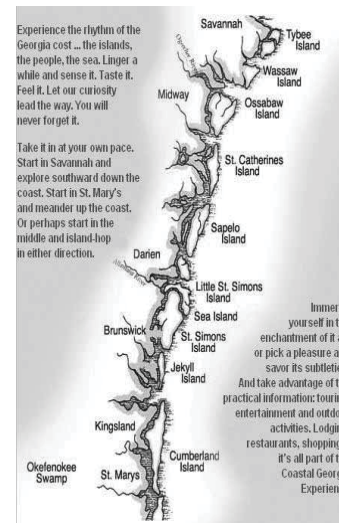
An Introduction to the Gullah People of South Carolina and Georgia and Melanie’s Connection to Stick Pounding

WHO ARE THE GULLAH & WHERE DO THEY LIVE?

The Gullah, called Geechee in Georgia, are a community of African Americans who live in rural areas along the South Carolina and Georgia coast and on the Sea Islands just off the coast. The Sea Islands are a group of coastal barrier islands stretching from Georgetown, South Carolina in the north to the Georgia-Florida border in the south.



South Carolina Sea Islands

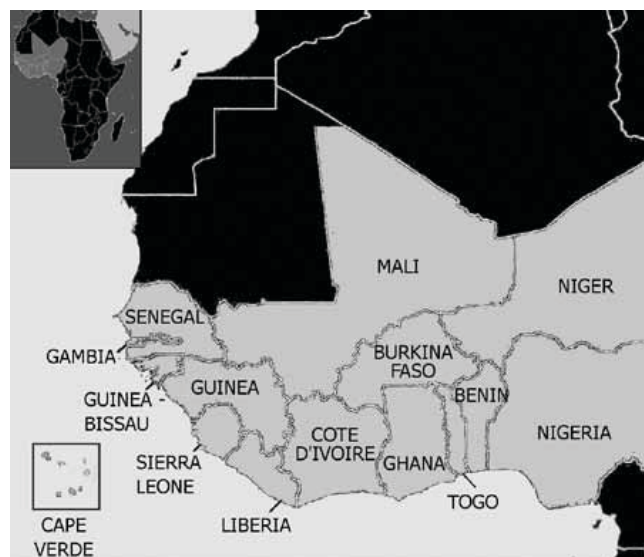


Georgia Sea Islands

AFRICAN ROOTS

The Gullah’s ancestors were taken from West Africa during the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries to be enslaved on large southern rice plantations. They were from many tribes including the Mandingo, Bamana, Wolof, Fula, Temne, Mende, Akan, Bakongo, and Kimbundu. The name, “Gullah,” may have come from “Angola,” the name of a Southern African Kingdom from which enslaved Africans came in the early 1800s. Today Angola is the Republic of Angola. “Geechee” may have come from a tribal name in Liberia.

West Africa had a reputation for growing rice. Stretching from the countries now known as Senegal, Gambia, and Guinea-Bissau in the north to Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Liberia in the south, it was also called the Windward Coast or the Rice Coast. Enslaved Africans from this rice-growing region were in high demand in South Carolina. They were the largest group of Africans sold at the slave markets of Charleston, SC and Savannah, Georgia.



WHY WERE THE WEST AFRICAN COAST RICE FARMERS SO VALUABLE TO PLANTATION OWNERS?

The Low Country and Sea Islands have a semi-tropical climate with high humidity, lots of rain, hot summers, and mild winters, similar to the geography and climate of Sierra Leone. Around 1700, the English-speaking colonists discovered that it was just right for growing Asian rice in the Low Country swamps. Rice soon became the main crop of South Carolina. It sold well in England and the colony prospered, becoming one of the richest in North America. When rice cultivation spread south into Georgia, it also did well.

The plantation owners didn't know much about rice cultivation. They achieved their success through the skills of enslaved African captives from the Rice Coast of West Africa, a thriving rice-growing area. The enslaved Africans were the skilled workforce who had the abilities to develop the fields, build the canals and dikes, plant, nurture, and harvest the rice crop. As they purchased more slaves, plantation owners sought out those from the Rice Coast of West Africa. They were quite willing to pay higher prices for those who had these specialized skills.

HOW DID THE UNIQUE GULLAH CULTURE DEVELOP IN NORTH AMERICA?

As enslaved Africans did the hard work on the rice plantations in South Carolina and Georgia, they began to create a unique culture from the many tribes and traditions they represented. Essential cultural elements progressed in all the places that enslaved Africans lived. But what developed in the Sea Islands and Lowland areas was **more complete and complex** than in any other place in North America.



Handcrafting a sweetgrass basket

The Gullah created what is now recognized as a language, a set of beliefs, customs, arts, handcrafting, music, foods, and a specific community structure.

Important factors helped this culture remain firmly rooted in an African heritage:

- **Geographical isolation** – they lived in rural areas and on islands without bridges.
- **Social isolation** – most of the white people did not live on plantations.
- The large number of enslaved peoples that came from a specific region of Africa.
- The arrival of newly enslaved people from the same region in Africa grew and a larger workforce was needed. This provided continuous renewal of language, roots and traditions from African cultures.

A NEW LANGUAGE EMERGED

Gullah	English	Krio (Sierra Leone)
de	the	di
ooman	woman	uman
nebbuh	never	nohba
yez	ears	yeys

4 common words in 3 related languages

There were and still are many languages spoken on the African continent. In order to interact, communicate, and work together, the enslaved Africans created a new language – a **creole** language that consisted of words from all their languages mixed with English vocabulary from their white owners and overseers. This language is also called Gullah. Some consider Gullah a very musical language – one that depends on alterations of the spoken pitch, the rhythm of the words, and physical gestures to be fully understood. Their children were given African names; the stories told in Gullah had African origins. Gullah music sounded like the music they and their relatives made in Africa, and their handcrafted objects looked like and were inspired by those made in their home countries in Africa.

SOCIAL ISOLATION

The same climate that supported rice cultivation was also the right climate for the spread of tropical diseases such as malaria and yellow fever. Enslaved peoples who brought these diseases from Africa were resistant to them, to some degree. But plantation owners and their families were very susceptible. To protect themselves, plantation owners built houses away from coastal areas and the rice fields, and adopted the custom of leaving their farms altogether during the rainy summer and autumn months when fever ran rampant. The plantations were run on a day-to-day basis by a few white managers who were assisted, quite often, by certain talented and trusted slaves working as foreman or “drivers.” So the day-to-day life of enslaved people on rice plantations was different in some ways than that of other areas in North America. Because they were mostly isolated from white people, there was more interaction amongst the people from different West African cultures.

The isolation factor continued far beyond the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. Gullah on the mainland continued to work on the rice plantations and many now earned wages. Others bought small pieces of land, part of the very plantations upon which they had once been enslaved. The ten-acre farms were purchased with the pooled resources of a family. The Gullah inherited a land that no one else seemed to want, and learned that they could live off their crops, the fish in the waterways, and the game they hunted.

Up until the middle of the 20th century, the Gullah continued to live as they had for hundreds of years. That began to change in the middle of the 20th century. Though the first bridges were built in the 1920s, it took three or more decades before enough bridges were built to link most of the islands to the mainland. Today the largest industry of this region is tourism.



Beaufort Swing Bridge between Beaufort S.C. and St. Helena Island. Used in the movie Forrest Gump.

The islands that “no one wanted” but the Gullah in the 19th century have become the islands everyone wants today. The pace and scope of development is enormous and has displaced many Gullah. Some rather shady land acquisition practices have resulted in cheating people out of their land, or cutting them off from local roads and services. Activism for justice has begun to stem the tide somewhat, but the Gullah of the Sea Islands is an endangered culture.

STICK POUNDING — MELANIE DEMORE’S GULLAH ROOTS

Melanie DeMore’s father is originally from South Carolina, and so her connection with Gullah/Geechee culture runs deep. In the documentary “Stick and Pound”, Melanie describes how, during a revolt on the plantations by the enslaved Africans, drums, which were used as a means of communication, were outlawed and destroyed as a form of punishment and as a means to strip away more of their African culture. And so, the enslaved Africans found other ways to embed rhythm within their daily lives. For example, many would use wooden pestles to grind corn, rice and other crops into flour using a stone mortar (the vessel), pounding to a steady rhythm. Those working in the fields using long-handled farm tools, such as hoes or shovels, would do so to a steady rhythm. By embedding rhythm in their daily tasks, it made those tasks easier to do. Pounding sticks of various origins were incorporated into use in religious settings as well, such as Ring Shouts, to call and to drive the spirits of the faithful.

In the present day, Melanie believes that by introducing people of all walks of life to the Gullah tradition of stick pounding, they can become more connected to that inner, primal rhythm that is embedded within each person from the time of birth. In contemporary practice, Melanie encourages communities that embark on creating pounding sticks to do so together in a group setting with one another. Each dowel is to incorporate one piece of the same type or pattern of fabric near where the hand is placed, which represents oneness and unity within that particular community. Then, using other fabrics, paints, crafts and found items, individuals personalize their pounding stick with things that they find meaningful. When pounding together, there are certain rhythms that each person follows. It is through this communal act that Melanie says people can invoke the power to connect with one another as a “human tribe”.



Melanie and members of VocalEssence with decorated pounding sticks.

RESOURCES FOR THIS ARTICLE:

- Opala, Joseph. The Gullah: Rice, Slavery, and the Sierra Leone-American Connection <https://glc.yale.edu/gullah-rice-slavery-and-sierra-leone-american-connection>
- Miller Branch, Muriel. The Water Brought Us
- Cross, Wilber. Gullah Culture in America
- Articles on the official site of The Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor (the Corridor), <http://www.gullahgeecheecorridor.org/?Itemid=102>
- “Stick and Pound” — a Documentary on Melanie DeMore and the Gullah Art of Stick Pounding <https://youtu.be/mQlg-UomM8k>
- “Melanie DeMore on the History of Stick Pounding” — a brief video narrated by Melanie DeMore, including maps, and other images that describes the history of Stick Pounding <https://youtu.be/9QafgYTItgw?si=hNiSWcQ-J2BQ8ykma>
- The Corridor was designated by an act of Congress on October 12, 2006 (Public Law 109-338). It was authorized as part of the National Heritage Areas Act of 2006. As a national heritage area, the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor is not part of the national park system; however, the act authorizes the secretary of the interior to provide technical and financial assistance for the development and implementation of the management plan. The 400+ page report provides some of the most extensive and current research and writing about 21st century Gullah communities and the challenges they face.