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**Title**

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**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5wg9q3vb>

**Journal**

American Anthropologist, 43(1)

**Author**

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**Publication Date**

1941-03-01

Peer reviewed

ACCULTURATION AMONG THE  
GULLAH NEGROES\*

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THE analysis of the accommodation of African and European customs in the New World presents a particularly difficult problem in the United States because the processes of acculturation have gone much farther here than in other regions. In dealing with the Negro cultures in South America and the West Indies, the African traits that have been retained are specific enough and numerous enough to make possible the identification of the tribes whose cultures have been involved. But even among the Gullah in the coastal regions of South Carolina and Georgia,<sup>1</sup> where the Negroes have been as isolated as anywhere in the United States, resemblances to specific African tribes are very rare. For the most part the similarities are to those elements which are common to West Africa as a whole—to the common denominators of West African culture—and not to those aspects of culture which are distinctive of the tribes within that area. It is therefore extremely difficult to determine what particular West African cultures have contributed to the present situation.

It is now recognized that the differences in the general pattern of the cultures of Africa and Europe were not great; in fact their fundamental similarity justifies the concept of an Old World Area which includes both Europe and Africa. There were a number of institutions common to both regions, including a complex economic system based on money, markets, and middle-men, as well as a large number of crafts among which iron-working was important; a well developed system of government based on kings, and courts of law in which cases were tried by specialists (lawyers) and in which ordeals were employed to decide certain cases; a religious system with a complex hierarchy of priests and deities; a common stock of folklore and a common emphasis on moralizing elements and proverbs. Aside from writing, the wheel, the plow, and Christianity, most of the distinctive traits of Western civilization seem to have followed the industrial revolution.

This similarity between the fundamental patterns of Europe and Africa has further complicated the problem of assessing the relative influences of these areas in the culture of the Gullahs. Since most African traits of a specific nature have disappeared, what is to be found is, for the most part, a series of institutions which differ from the European forms only in their

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\* Read before the Central Section, American Anthropological Association, Indianapolis, April 26, 1940.

<sup>1</sup> Field work in Georgia and South Carolina during the summer of 1939 was made possible by a grant-in-aid from the Social Science Research Council of Northwestern University.

African flavor. To a person who is not familiar with West African cultures, it might seem possible to explain Gullah customs entirely in terms of European influence. The resemblances that are to be found might well be rejected as too general and too indefinite to prove diffusion from Africa to the Sea Islands, if taken by themselves. But we have the historical record of contact with Africa through the importation of African slaves into this region, so that the problem becomes not one of proving that there has been contact, but of assessing the importance of a known factor.

The result of the contact of the Negroes with the whites, both in slavery and in the period of freedom, seems to have been that in those cases where there was a difference or a conflict between African and European customs, the African customs have for the most part disappeared. But those institutions which were present in similar forms in both Africa and Europe, while manifesting a great many specifically European details, have retained an African stamp and have had a place in Gullah life the importance of which cannot be explained in terms of European forms alone. In these cases the two streams of tradition have reinforced one another.

An excellent example of the operation of this process is to be found in the institution of cooperative work among the Gullahs. In West Africa, cooperative work is a widespread and important institution, which among the Yoruba,<sup>2</sup> for example, takes two forms. There is first of all the *aro* which is a simple labor exchange between two or three farmers who have small families and are too poor to own slaves or "pawns." Such men work a certain amount of time on the farm of one, and then the same amount on the farms of the second and third. The other form of cooperative work is the more spectacular social event, *owe*, in which a man calls upon his friends, relatives, or society members to help him with the work he is required to do for his father-in-law: hoe the fields, thatch the house, build its mud walls, or whatever may be required. On such occasions a large number of men work together while the host directs the activities. Meanwhile the wife, who has called her friends and society together to help her, prepares a large feast for the men with palmwine or gin, if her husband can afford it. In this case there is no attempt to keep track of the amount of work accomplished or time spent, as is done for *aro*.

In Dahomey,<sup>3</sup> besides the cooperative work done by members of the same guild, there is the *dokpwe* which is the equivalent of the Yoruba *owe*

<sup>2</sup> Discussion of Yoruba material is based on field work in Nigeria, carried on during 1937-38 under terms of a fellowship grant from the Social Science Research Council of New York City.

<sup>3</sup> M. J. Herskovits, *Dahomey* (Augustin, New York, 1938), Vol. I, pp. 63-77.

or working bee. The *dokpwe* is apparently even more closely associated with the society, however, and it differs in that the host hires a drummer to set the pace for the men working in the field, so that all the workers keep step and finish their rows at the same time. The Yoruba work in a line, so that each man hoes his own row, but they do not work in unison to music, although they are familiar with this procedure from contact with the Hausa. This Dahomean form of cooperative work, complete with hoeing in unison to a drummer, is a pattern which has been retained among other New World Negro cultures. It has been observed by Herskovits in Haiti,<sup>4</sup> by J. C. Trevor in the Virgin Islands,<sup>5</sup> and by Miss Katherine Dunham in Jamaica.<sup>5</sup>

Cooperative work, on the other hand, is not foreign to the European pattern. Certainly it played an important part in American colonial life in the form of house-raising, quilting bees, log-rollings, husking bees, and the general pattern of neighborliness. According to informants, the white masters frequently loaned their slaves to one another for occasions of this sort, so that the Gullah had first hand contact with the European forms. Memories of the house-raising, log-rollings, quilting bees, and even the associated candy pulls which the Negroes held on their own accord after freedom are still vivid in the minds of the older individuals. But at the same time certain forms of cooperative work show a closer correspondence to the West African pattern, especially with regard to hoeing side by side, hoeing in unison to music, and the association between cooperative work and the societies.

On Sapelo Island in Georgia informants remember large groups, apparently of between 30 and 50 persons, hoeing side by side in the fields. This in itself is significant, since, during the period of slavery, work was assigned by the task in this region so that each slave worked out a separate area by himself. Furthermore, after freedom when a man got behind in his work, he would call on his neighbors or his society for help; and even today, on Sapelo, people will still "jump right into the field and help you out." In the old days the man would give a big dinner on a long table under a tree, but nowadays people are invited into the house. In hoeing each person takes his own row, and while the host did not hire a drum for use in the fields, the people frequently sang church songs and worked in unison, finishing their rows at the same time. When they worked without singing, couples talked and fell behind so that they did not all finish together. As in Africa, working together is said to make the work more pleasant and to

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<sup>4</sup> M. J. Herskovits, *Life in a Haitian Valley* (Knopf, New York, 1937), pp. 70-76.

<sup>5</sup> From unpublished field notes.

make it go faster; as one informant put it, "You're really cuttin' grass then."

Similarly, if a man needed help, he might call upon a neighbor, and this favor would be returned when requested. This resembles the Yoruba *aro* except that no strict account was kept of the amount of work done. The person called upon might be a relative, or a good friend, or just a neighbor. Significantly, these arrangements were more or less permanent, so that a man would always call upon the same person to help him out. Usually the host gave the helper a meal; but if he were alone and ill, this was omitted.

On the island of Hilton Head, South Carolina, cooperative work has disappeared, but shortly after slavery it existed in two forms. In the first place neighbors might help each other even when they were not ill, working first in the fields of one family and then in the fields of the other. In the second place, the societies such as Mutual Friendly Aid would come without being asked to help a member who fell behind in his work. In this case they did not take note of the amount of work done, but just went in and "hoed him out," while the host provided a dinner for his helpers, serving whatever he could afford. When several people hoed the fields together, each took his own row, and when they sang their hoeing was in unison and was said to go faster and with less effort. In recent times the Hilton Head societies have been primarily "policy clubs" of the type so common in the South, and the function of working in the fields has been abandoned.

African elements are not so evident in other parts of the coastal regions as they are in Hilton Head and Sapelo. On St. Simons Island, Georgia, neither neighbors nor societies helped in the fields; and while several members of the same family might hoe side by side, each taking his own row, even when they did sing they did not work in unison. On St. Helena, South Carolina, it is said that neighbors never worked each other's fields, but on this island the society called Knights of Wise helped members who were not well and fined those who did not show up to work. Members of the Sisters of Zion were likewise expected, but not forced, to turn out to work the fields of a sick member; if the man proved to be lazy instead of ill, he was given a mock whipping. There was no singing while farming on St. Helena, where they say they had to "sing with the hoe." About Darien and on Harris Neck, on the Georgia mainland, the pattern of cooperative work was once strong, but the forms it took were mainly European, with log-rollings, quiltings, and the like. People would come to hoe the fields of a neighbor who was not well, but the work was not done in unison to music, and while societies were important shortly after slavery, they did not help their members with their work.

It is difficult to explain these local variations in terms of the information at hand, but explanations are probably to be sought in differentials in isolation, the rules laid down by individual slave owners, and perhaps the African sources of the slaves and the dates at which slaves were last imported directly from Africa. While cooperative work persisted in these localities for a long time, it has disappeared in all of them except Sapeloe Island. In all these places except St. Simons, informants respond with conviction to the suggestion that people were more neighborly in the old days than they are now.

Friendship is another institution which is common to both the European and African tradition, but in West Africa it takes a slightly different form and is considerably more formalized than it is in our society. Among the Yoruba there is a distinct emphasis on the best friend (*korikosun*) with whom every contemplated undertaking is discussed, and whose advice in financial matters, or affairs with women, or any matter whatsoever is very seldom disregarded. The best friend is told how a man wants his property to be divided and is called in by the family to see that these wishes are carried out when his partner dies. There are folktales which show that a man's best friend is more to be trusted than his own mother; and the best friend is told things which a man does not confide to his wife. A man's wife or members of his family would attempt—supposedly always without success—to find out a man's plans by "pumping" his best friend.

The affection between best friends is legendary. A man speaks of loving his best friend "like a woman," and there are stories of men dying of grief at the passing of their friends. The Yoruba belief is that women's mouths are "too big" to keep a secret; they do not remain faithful to any friend, but go through life with a series of them. In Dahomey<sup>6</sup> the same general pattern holds but the institution is itself more elaborate in form. Each man has a first best friend in whom he confides everything; a second best friend to whom he tells slightly less; and a third best friend who receives only a part of his confidence.

In the Sea Islands the European practice of writing wills has been accepted completely so that an important and distinctively African function of friendship has disappeared. At most a man asks his friend's advice about the way his property should be divided. A few informants in their discussion of friendship, did, however, give an emphasis to the institution which seems characteristically African.

On Hilton Head men used to have one or two "sworn friends" upon

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<sup>6</sup> M. J. Herskovits, *Dahomey* (Augustin, New York, 1938), Vol. I, pp. 239-242.

whom they could depend and to whom they told all their secrets. These friends interpreted each other's dreams, gave advice on financial ventures, and criticized each other's behavior, for instance, in such matters as having "affairs" with women. A man's wife or even his parents might go to his sworn friend in an attempt to find out what plans he had in mind, and in some cases a wife's persistence in this led to a gradual breaking up of the friendship, since the man would stay away from the house rather than be forced to betray his confidence.

Such friendship had a special importance in the time of slavery when slaves banded together against the master. They continued for a time after slavery, but in succeeding generations people came to confide in too many individuals—having too many sworn friends—so that secrets soon spread. The inability of women to keep a secret was blamed in part for the disappearance of the institution, for "as soon as you tell a girl, your secret is gone."

An African influence can be seen in the present form of a number of other institutions which will simply be enumerated. It is apparent in the functions of the local clubs or societies such as the Mutual Friendly Aid, the Jolly Boys, the Golden Link, the Seaside Branch, and the Union Gospel Travellers on Hilton Head. In most other regions these local societies were followed by the well-known, national, chartered lodges, which in turn have almost disappeared. In the structure of the Gullah family there seems to be a certain matrilineal emphasis for which there are counterparts in West Africa. For example, there is the feeling that an individual is somehow more closely related to his mother than to his father. There are several rationalizations for this, but one is the same as that offered in Africa, namely that a person is fed on his mother's milk.

The emphasis on special circumstances of birth is characteristically African. Parsons<sup>7</sup> has already pointed out how children born with a caul, children born "foot fo'mos'," twins, and the seventh child are all believed to have special qualities or abilities. The Gullah, like the West Africans, bury the navel cord in the yard, and frequently nursed their children for one, two, or three years in the old days. One woman was said to have nursed her child after it was old enough to help her in the fields. And people today remember women who carried their children on their backs, in some cases when working the fields. Certain Gullah beliefs are obviously comparable to the taboos of the West Africans; for example, the idea that a nursing mother should not eat beans, green corn, crabs, prawns, or net fish (channel

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<sup>7</sup> E. C. Parsons, *Folk-Lore of the Sea Islands, South Carolina* (Memoirs of the American Folk-Lore Society, Vol. XVI, Cambridge and New York, 1923), pp. 197-198.

fish caught with hook and line are all right), because it is not good for the baby's stomach.

The interpretation of dreams in order to predict the future is important in West African as well as in European tradition and it is wide-spread in the Sea Islands. Magic likewise is not foreign to the European tradition, but certain details of the practice are specifically African; the importance of "grave-yard dirt," of "foot track dust," and of hair and nails in working conjure; and the importance of "frizzled chickens" as a means of detecting charms buried in the earth.<sup>8</sup>

The belief in multiple souls, the very vivid belief in ghosts, the special burial rites for persons who die by drowning, lightning, small-pox, and suicide, all resemble African beliefs more closely than they do European. A baby that is taken to a funeral must be passed across the coffin so that its soul will not accompany that of the deceased.<sup>9</sup> When a mother starts home after a visit she takes her baby in her arms, and then calls its name so that its soul will not be left behind.<sup>10</sup> As in Africa, a distinction is made between ghosts and witches, who take off their skins and can be caught either by sprinkling pepper and salt about the room in good African tradition,<sup>11</sup> or by the distinctly European method of putting a Bible under the pillow.

Turning once more to agriculture, we find that a specifically West African form of motor behavior has been retained widely in this region. In the planting of several crops, and especially of rice in the old days, the hole into which the seed was dropped was first made with the heel and then covered over with the foot. Moving pictures taken in West Africa and in Haiti by Herskovits<sup>12</sup> show very plainly this West African procedure which, as far as can be ascertained, was entirely foreign to European tradition.

Gullah speech, which has long been recognized as distinctive among Negro dialects in the United States, has a number of African idioms and grammatical peculiarities. A detailed analysis may show African influences in the phonetic system as well. Dr. Turner of Fisk University has listed several thousand words which he believes to be of West African origin.<sup>13</sup> These are mainly in the form of nicknames and words for plants and animals, and are

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Drums and Shadows* by the Savannah Unit of the Georgia Writers' Project (University of Georgia Press, Athens, 1940).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. E. C. Parsons, *op. cit.*, p. 213; G. B. Johnson, *Folk Culture on St. Helena Island, South Carolina* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1930), p. 172.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. E. C. Parsons, *op. cit.*, p. 199; G. B. Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. J. Peterkin, *Black April* (Grosset & Dunlap, 1927), p. 100.

<sup>12</sup> See M. J. Herskovits, *Life in a Haitian Valley* (Knopf, New York, 1937), illustrations facing p. 100.

<sup>13</sup> By personal communication.



used only within the family circle so that they would not be noticed unless someone set out to look for them. Lastly there are the very specific correspondences between the animal tales of the Gullah and those of West Africa, the first aspects of Gullah culture to be recognized as having an African origin.

In conclusion then, while it is impossible in the case of the Sea Island Negroes to assign African influences to particular tribes, and while we are dealing with the problem of the relative influence of European and African culture on institutions common to both traditions, rather than with African origins of non-European institutions, these influences can be recognized in many aspects of present-day Gullah life. It would thus seem historically incorrect as well as methodologically unsound to explain Gullah customs by reference only to European culture. It is quite true that, as elsewhere in the United States, the European elements outnumber by far the African elements which have been retained, yet that Africanisms can be traced indicates the importance of the study of this society as an aid in the analysis of acculturation.

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