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Gullah Geechee Families: Land and Culture

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Abstract. The legacy of Black land ownership and cultural autonomy is not a well-known narrative of Black history in the United States, which is reflected in the dearth of material addressing these legacies. This history presents a narrative of Black rural life in the United States that offers rural social work professionals another framework to understand the legacies of fictive kin and collective values often overlooked when engaging Black families and communities. Gullah/Geechee families represent a narrative of Black life in the United States that reflects the power of being left with opportunities to develop a culture and tradition of collective land ownership. This exploration addressed how the relationships of Gullah/Geechee families on St. Helena Island, South Carolina are changing due to shifts in how the state defines familial land rights. Drawing on a blend of ethnographic and archival research along with interviews conducted over a three-year period, this article will address how the cultural and familial legacies of Gullah/Geechee reflect a history of resilience that continues to present itself in narratives of Black families in the United States beyond the Sea Islands.

Keywords: Black rural life, Gullah/Geechee, rural social work

Introduction

Gullah/Geechee families represent an experience that is often overlooked in our narratives of Black history in the United States. Gullah/Geechee references both the culture and the language of a group of people residing off the Sea Islands located on the coasts of North and South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. Many of these families cannot only trace the region of their lineage to Sierra Leon based on language, but many have owned land collectively from as early as 1861 (Bekou-Betts, 1995; Day, 1982). The cultural emergences that are associated with Gullah/Geechee life in the United States capture the distinct effort of Black families to define the parameters of their relationships and their lifestyle beyond slavery and institutionalized racism. This project wanted to understand how a familial land ownership condition called heirs' property rights, in South Carolina, affects family relationships and the sustainability of the culture. Heirs' property rights facilitates the transmission of land without a will based on familial relationships, so more than two people can have an ownership stake in land (Opala, 1986).

Engaging this often overlooked part of Black history in the United States offers an opportunity for social workers in rural settings to recognize the capacity of Black families to sustain autonomy and self-determination through ownership of land. Gullah/Geechee families are organized largely based on proximity and care, and not as strongly by blood (Stack, 1974; Goodwine, 1997). A more detailed explanation of heirs' property rights is offered by the Center for heirs' property preservation:

“Heirs' property is a land owning condition of mostly Black families in the low-country of South Carolina who were deeded their land following Emancipation. Heirs' property enables multiple family members to own the land as tenants-in-common, so family

members own percentages of the land, not the whole land” (Center for Heirs’ Property Preservation, retrieved, 2007).

Though this land owning condition contributes to the vulnerability of Gullah/Geechee culture, the challenges facing families in this setting mirror those of families in many rural settings. These include an aging population, declining employment opportunities for youth and young families eager to return, and limited government supports to support smaller family farmers (Merchant et al., 2006). The unique circumstances facing Gullah/Geechee families offer social workers an example of the significance of land to familial identity, culture, and decision-making. This history also presents a different body of information to inform the history of Black life and culture in the United States.

Land is central to the organizing of familial and cultural life. Land provides the means for people to live in close proximity to one another, in some cases engage in revenue generating industries such as farming or fishing (McGuire, 1985; Pollitzer, 1999). Over time there have been changes to how the land ownership is defined by families, and its capacity to serve as the means for sustaining families independent of the resources and goods found off-island. As the desirability for ocean views and the simplicity of life became desirable to people outside of the Sea Islands, Gullah/Geechee families found the land owning condition once used to simplify the passing down of land left them vulnerable to predatory developers. These developers took advantage of family members who were unaware of their stake in family land. Over the past two decades families have had to move from an heirs’ property status to doing formal estate planning which requires designating ownership based on two owners or in some cases creating a limited liability corporation (LLC) to maintain a sense of collective land ownership (Center for Heirs’ Property Preservation, 2007). Since the introduction of tourism opportunities on Hilton Head Island in 1954, increased attention has been placed on the Sea Islands as desirable land for development given its ocean views and relatively easy access to urban homes (Danielson & Danielson, 1995).

Rural life on the Sea Islands of South Carolina is comprised of many families who have resided on these islands, who until the mid to late 20th century were isolated from the mainland due to the lack of bridges, and used the resources of the land and sea to produce material goods and food to support their needs (Pollitzer, 1999). Among the families there were systems of bartering and shared responsibility that supported the life of families and the culture on the islands (Krech, 1982). Within this distinct culture, family formation is rooted in legacies from a range of different tribes from different African nations, as well as the reality that the separation, violence, and kidnapping of ‘families’ throughout the period of the middle passage and eventually upon arrival to the colonies necessitated slaves on plantations to take care of one another to survive (Jones-Jackson, 1987; Joyner, 1984).

There is a silent history around the significance of landownership in narratives of Black identity, community, and culture in the United States deserving of interrogation in a way that considers the relevance of the historical moments that shape how families interact with the land. These are important interactions to investigate when considering the ways in which land has been used within the United States to mark the relevance of individuals, families, and cultures to the process of contributing to the representation of nationalist discourses concerning an

individual's right to "democracy, freedom, and liberty." Throughout the history of landownership on the Sea Islands aspects of this discourse are apparent, yet their association with slavery, Jim Crow, and legacies of racial discrimination in the United States has necessitated a shift of this discursive location from individual rights to collective rights. In order to create a discussion that maps out the varied ways timing impacts understandings of family and land, this paper will address the role of the first federal social welfare agency, the Freedmen's bureau in the history of land, describe heirs' property, and then highlight select narratives from family members interviewed.

Exploring how Gullah/Geechee families on St. Helena are being influenced by current strategies to retain ancestral lands and resist increased development for resorts and homes presents an opening to consider how this culture will sustain itself. This project looked specifically at heirs' property rights, another term used for partition law, which delineated the right of multiple individuals within a family to own a piece of property (e.g., 10 acres of land and 20 owners). Through meeting with non-profit advocates, social workers, representatives of the Gullah/Geechee Nation, local families, and regional research centers, this work explored the mediating conditions that influence the sustainability of Gullah/Geechee culture.

Historical Context & Gullah Cultural Formation

Reconstruction marks the moment immediately following the fall of the confederacy during the Civil War when the Union armies of the northern United States, abolitionists, and Christian missionaries began their descent upon the land inhabited by freedmen. Their intent was to offer the new freed educational and training opportunities that were meant to assist them with their acclimation to the values of being productive citizens of the nation (Magdol & Wakelyn 1980; Oubre, 1978; Rose, 1964). The federal government sought to coordinate these efforts by establishing the Freedmen's Bureau. Through Freedmen's Bureau programs, money and services were extended to those liberated from slavery in an effort to assist with their transition to freedom.

The Freedmen's Bureau and the Port Royal Experiment

"The Bureau supervised all relief and educational activities relating to refugees and freedmen, including issuing rations, clothing and medicine. The Bureau also assumed custody of confiscated lands or property in the former Confederate States, border states, District of Columbia, and Indian Territory" (African American Records: Freedmen's Bureau, 2016).

The central component of the Port Royal Experiment was to confiscate the abandoned property of planters and distribute the property or sell it to recently freed slaves (Magdol, 1977; Oubre, 1978). Through the confiscation of confederacy land they initially sought to lease the land to Blacks and whites, but in the process of their effort to organize freed slaves, General Sherman issued his Special Field Order Number 15 (Pollitzer, 1999). According to a letter to General Saxton of the Freedmen's Bureau in 1865 between January 1 and August 1 of 1865 approximately 17,000 freedmen traveled to the region of Port Royal, which encompassed St. Helena, Hilton Head, and Hunting Islands (African American Records: Freedmen's Bureau, 2016). This order stated the following: "The islands of Charleston south, the abandoned rice fields along the rivers for 30 miles back from the sea, and the country bordering the St. Johns

River, Florida, are reserved and set apart for the settlement of the negroes now made free by the acts of war and the proclamation of the President of the United States” (Oubre, 1978, p. 18). This action contributed to the role of familial land ownership as an important component of Gullah/Geechee life dating back to the beginning of Reconstruction in 1861 (Day, 1982; Rose, 1964).

Through this program the freed slaves throughout the Sea Islands had a narrow opportunity of two to three months to acquire land at \$1.25 per acre. This was abandoned land once owned by slave owners who had been taxed extra for their alliance with the confederacy (Oubre, 1978). The opportunity of this brief historical moment resulted in the acquisition of land by numerous Black families on the Sea Islands. These families were comprised of individuals who defined their relationship to one another according to how they supported one another more than on their biological connection (Goodwine, 1997; Pollitzer, 1999).

Families and friends pooled their money together to purchase land that resulted in the building of their homes on shared lots (Nathans, 1982). These purchases contributed to the ambiguity of what constituted friend or family. The clustering of these residences into what residents refer to as compounds further impacted the shaping of the culture itself. One’s relationship with the compound was bound by sharing responsibility for land, crops, shelters, and others (Cruz-Pearson, 2001; Mintz & Price, 1992). The clustering of homes and families supported a cultural and economic framework for Gullah/Geechee, sustaining an approach of agricultural cultivation that supported multiple families as a unit. In addition, the relationships developed between families further supported the raising of children and religious or spiritual practice. During Reconstruction freed slaves were presented opportunities to acquire technical resources from the federal government, yet the cultural infrastructure that had developed during enslavement continued to influence how land was used.

On St. Helena Island the Freedmen’s Bureau provided the monetary and educational support toward the creation of the Penn School, whose significance to the sustainability of Gullah/Geechee on St. Helena Island and beyond continues in the present (Rose, 1964). The Gullah/Geechee community on St. Helena Island benefited from the location of the Penn School, which offered technical and educational resources to freed slaves, as well as coordinated the land distribution efforts. The opportunity of freed slaves to acquire land served to support the maintenance of an insular community that was able to produce its own food and additional resources without going to the mainland.

The central goal of the Freedmen’s Bureau during this time was to manage the needs of recently freed slaves for the purpose of insuring their ability to be self-sufficient without reliance on the state (Rose, 1964). The work of the Freedmen’s bureau is described as the following:

“...it provided assistance to tens of thousands of former slaves and impoverished whites in the southern states and the District of Columbia. The Bureau was established in the War Department in March to undertake the relief effort and the unprecedented social reconstruction that would bring freedpeople to full citizenship. It issued food and clothing, operated hospitals and temporary camps, helped locate family members, promoted education, helped freedmen legalize marriages, provided employment,

supervised labor contracts, provided legal representation, investigated racial confrontations, settled freedmen on abandoned or confiscated lands, and worked with African American soldiers and sailors and their heirs to secure back pay, bounty payments, and pensions” (African American Records: Freedmen’s Bureau, 2016).

Gullah/Geechee culture fulfilled this goal, but it is not due exclusively to federal intervention, rather, it is reflective of their capacity to apply farming and fishing methods they either brought with them from their native countries or shared between people. Many of the Gullah/Geechee descendants were on the Sea Island based plantations because of their ability to grow rice and indigo on marshy and sandy land, that plantations owners did not know how to cultivate. The reliance of Gullah/Geechee residents on their land, water, and family frame the base on which the culture was able to thrive, not a narrative of dependence on federal resources. Though the bureau presented Gullah/Geechee residents with valuable educational opportunities, when the people and resources left the island(s) residents established their own money, forms of barter for goods, and were essentially self-sufficient due to their capacity to live off the land (Danielson & Danielson, 1995). What is important to keep in mind is that during this period on St. Helena and other Sea Islands that were fairly isolated, abandoned plantations generally meant that former slaves were able to occupy the various residences of former owners or had already begun building residences on the land long before the Union Army arrived. On St. Helena, there was a three-year period of independent residency before union armies began to arrive and begin establishing federally supported infrastructures for those recently freed (Pollitzer, 1999; Rose 1964).

St. Helena Island.

“My family has been on St. Helena my entire life. Even if family work or live off-island, both sides of my family have maintained land on this island since 1861. The land represents my family, it is part of the culture” (Anonymous 41-year-old Gullah/Geechee woman, interview by author, tape recording, 11 July 2007, St. Helena, SC). The families that have resided on St. Helena Island have a great deal of pride in the history of resilience that has contributed to the ability of families to address needs without the assistance of outsiders. Prior to Reconstruction and the Port Royal Experiment, St. Helena was home to 51 plantations, the largest one being the Frogmore Plantation (Rose, 1964). St. Helena was located in the Port Royal Sound area making it one of the central islands of arrival for enslaved Africans; therefore, St. Helena and nearby Hilton Head were especially vulnerable to the battles of war.

Fortunately, the Union defeat of the confederacy on these islands accelerated the opportunities for “freedom” of enslaved Africans, resulting in their labor being used to assist in the defeat of the confederacy by serving the interests of Union officers (Rose, 1964). Slaves brought to St. Helena spoke a range of different languages and while working on the plantations of St. Helena alternative forms of communication were developed so they could protect themselves—a development that simultaneously supported the creation of a distinct culture (Pollitzer, 1999; Goodwine 1997). The central alternative communication formed during this period was the development of Gullah. This shared communication facilitated coordinated efforts when white land-owners began to flee their plantations once they realized they were significantly outnumbered by their slaves and the confederacy was losing.

The departure of numerous white slave owners during the mid-summer when the climate of the islands became unbearable offered a particular form of autonomy that slaves on the mainland did not experience, yet it served those on the Sea Islands well when the confederacy fell and emancipation ensued (Pollitzer, 1999; Rose, 1964). Though white owners may have employed white overseers to remain during the summer, the necessity of slaves to demonstrate to white owners upon their return to plantations that work was completed through the field production contributed to a sense of trust and security of their slaves to follow through with the work. This contributed to narrow windows of autonomy which served the development of culture well. In addition, this autonomy presented an opening for the slaves to shape particular rituals and traditions that reflected the blend of African cultures of Senegambia-Senegal, Gambia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Windward Coast, Ghana, Liberia, and the Ivory Coast (Pollitzer, 1999). The slaves from these areas of Africa cultivated a specific type of rice and indigo compatible with the conditions of the Sea Islands contributing to their value to plantation owners.

The opportunity to continue cultivating land with the absence of slave owners for long periods of time, along with the violent conditions of slavery itself, required the creation of systems of communication and rituals that were able to sustain the livelihood of the enslaved. The land was the prison of African slaves, while it also represented their freedom (Goodwine, 1997). The collective forms of labor that contributed to the survival of slaves on island plantations sustained the cultural memory that supported the development of a societal infrastructure necessary for their survival in relative isolation from the mainland. Although the islands were fairly isolated from the mainland, the presence of missionaries, the Freedmen's Bureau, and the military continually penetrated the illusion of distance from the nation (Pollitzer, 1999). Though this illusion of distance was interrupted by the presence of outsiders, it is important to remember that the shaping of the Gullah/Geechee culture on the Sea Islands developed in the presence of bodily, emotional, and psychological violence during slavery. Given this history of resistance, the educational opportunities presented by the Penn School, combined with landownership continued the legacy of adaptability and hybridity that contributed to the shaping of the Gullah/Geechee language and culture.

While the history of the Gullah/Geechee culture often locates St. Helena as its center for the organizing of Gullah/Geechee history and initiatives addressing the islands and culture broadly, when addressing South Carolina it is important to note that each Sea Island has its own distinct history (Campbell, 2002; Goodwine, 1997). Gullah/Geechee families in the present are able to connect their legacies with the complicated and violent history of not only slavery, but also with the brief moment during reconstruction when an attempt was made to effectively support the opportunities for those freed to create lives in their own vision.

Methods

Participatory and ethnographic research approaches influenced the shaping of this project. The exploration of this work was accomplished through extensive archival research and individual interviews. Interviews were conducted in 2007 with nine individuals referred to the author through snowball sampling. These individuals represent families that reflect a variety of

situations with regard to how those individuals and families are addressing the processes to maintain control of their land. For the purposes of the research, family is defined as those who have been identified by those interviewed as being family, which sometimes means that those referenced are not related by blood, but by association. Those interviewed are individuals who are the designated *owners* of the land that is being discussed or that represented matriarchal or patriarchal leadership in the family. These interviews sought to address how family experiences managing their land influence their involvement and sense of connection to Gullah/Geechee culture, and how their relationships are shaped by the negotiations associated with the land. Through these interviews and archival work, this project explored the role of families in sustaining Gullah/Geechee culture, investigated how families are being impacted by the pressure to recognize family rights to land according to a western frame of biological lineage, and began to comprehend how the silence of Gullah/Geechee cultural realities has influenced constructions of Blackness within the United States.

Between 2005 to 2008, eight visits were made to St. Helena and surrounding islands. Since 2008 informal visits to the islands have happened bi-annually. The purpose of each visit varied, but they were all committed to developing relationships with individuals who represented institutions of community-based advocacy, governance, education, and law. While some of these trips were also interspersed with visits to the homes of relatives, each interaction with a person in the area provided a new referral, suggested places to visit, or information about what I should expect. Visits included spending time working with people, volunteering to support events, attending religious events and major festivals, as well as establishing more formal interviews and meetings with people based on the recommendations of people I met. These interviews included a social worker, attorney, historian, community activist, leader of the Gullah/Geechee Nation, and various men and women willing to discuss the nuances of family, land, and culture. The narratives highlighted reflect the pride of family legacy, culture, and self-sustainability.

Results

Family and Land: Narratives from the 21st Century

Our family has owned land here since the 1800s, we've bought more since then, but if the children should ever decide to sell, I hope I'm not here to see it.

–B., a 79-year-old resident

(An alias, personal communication, July 17, 2007)

Implicit to Gullah/Geechee elders is the role of the Freedmen's Bureau in establishing educational and community resources for residents through the Penn School. The narratives of elders reflect the value of the land. The effort of Gullah/Geechee elders to describe the significance of land to their families has frequently been shared with youth in order to heighten their awareness of the struggles associated with their family's landownership. Most recently this history is shared casually through elders sharing stories about how the family gained the land on the island, and increasingly, through cultural festivals sponsored by local organizations and the county library, contributing to the educational efforts on the island. All but one person interviewed knew the year their family purchased land, and everyone knew exactly how much was paid for the family land. The idea that individuals, regardless of their racial or cultural

identity, who are not embedded with the history of the land would be making decisions as to its future presents another historical moment for Gullah/Geechee culture that challenges them to test the resiliency of their community and culture. Throughout this work there has been ongoing discussion about the historical moment that made it possible for many Gullah/Geechee to own their land on St. Helena, as well as the other locations off the coast of Georgia and South Carolina.

Heirs' Property and Designating Family

Heirs' property enabled land to be passed down without a will to multiple familial stakeholders and facilitated intergenerational land ownership. This policy of land ownership functioned as a default for families who may not have had formal estate planning or the information regarding the broader legal implications of not designating formal ownership of land (Center for Heirs' Property Preservation, 2017). Social workers and non-profit advocates working directly on educating families on the ways heirs' property makes their family land vulnerable and are often placed in the position of having to navigate the culturally defined familial relationships versus those defined legally by blood relation (L., personal communication, July 20, 2008). These negotiations often place them in the position of not only having to honor both history and culture, but also to inform stakeholders that the state's definition of family does not necessarily affirm their family traditions (L., personal communication, July 20, 2008; Goodwine, 1997).

Heirs' property is more than a condition of landownership, but it represents a moment when family and land signified a sense of belonging and security during a time when it was exceptionally difficult for Black Americans to have a sense of ownership of space and autonomy. Families could be assured that regardless of the life stage that their homes on the land would remain. The effort of families to retain the land is also demonstrative of possessing a literal and figurative space that illustrates the successful resistance to the limitations imposed by slavery and forms of discrimination that have followed. The ability of a family to convey their value by understanding their legacy of landownership on St. Helena illustrates the success of the family. The idea that one can trust family members to prioritize the interest of the family over individual needs represents a shift in the relationships people hold with their families. Stack (1974) describes family as "the smallest, organized, durable network of kin and non-kin who interact daily providing domestic needs of children and assuring their survival" (pp. 30–31). Though Stack is describing family in the context of an urban environment, this understanding is similar to how elders discussed how families were organized on St. Helena between the 1930s and the present.

A description of family by a Gullah/Geechee community leader, Queen Quet best captures how others on St. Helena described family: "Family can be anyone you care about. Sometimes you won't see them for days or months, but you know they would always have your back if there were a problem. You can trust family" (Q. Quet, personal communication, November 4, 2004). One man I spoke with who is a 72-year-old elder stated, "If we don't have the land, we don't have our family and if we don't have our family, we don't have the culture" (Anonymous, personal communication, November 10, 2006). The necessity that is conveyed by the descriptions of Queen Quet and the elder highlight the dependence on family as the structure

around which the culture itself is shaped. The land in many ways becomes a metaphor for the stability of the family.

Understanding how land becomes a representation of a family's health frames how to reflect on the success and failure of heirs' property. Heirs' property is completely reliant on a shared trust by family members to follow the wishes and intent of elders. As the needs of each generation changes and must adapt to the shifting social and economic pressures, it becomes apparent how the bond of land has the potential to become a secondary or tertiary value to future generations. An interview with a 40 year old man, Mr. S. (alias) who had moved back to the island fairly recently stated, "Many young people just don't know what is happening with the land. They don't have a lot of say, like me with my grandmother. It's expensive to get this land, we just need to educate them about what it takes to take care of it" (S., personal communication, July 15, 2007). S. went on to describe the role of his grandmother, who is the family matriarch:

"My grandmother pays the property taxes for all of our family land. She is a strong woman. I want to change that but for now I can't afford the taxes. I got behind on taxes once and they put your name in the paper when your taxes, so when my grandmother saw my name it brought her a lot of shame and embarrassment so now she pays. She's started putting land aside for the great-grandchildren. Usually when people live out of state the property goes into heirs' property but my grandmother has taken care of all that" (S. [alias], personal communication, July 15, 2007).

If we consider the almost century-long period from 1861 to 1950, it is apparent that the families who initially acquired land during Reconstruction depended on heirs' property to insure the inheritability of the land to a family member since very few had formal wills. The majority of the elders interviewed for this project are initiating the process of establishing formal wills, land trusts, and limited liability corporations to protect the land. All these individuals inherited their land through heirs' property. Many elders described the trust that was once an expectation of familial relations and offered reassurance to past elders that the intent of passing down the land to future generations would be honored. Predatory developers who take advantage of vulnerable family members and weak legal protections have forced Gullah/Geechee families and in many ways the culture to negotiate its sustainability with dominant forms of U.S. culture.

The current elders are the children or grandchildren of the initial owners, and hold a relationship to the land and family on St. Helena that is closely linked with a living memory of the violence and lack of opportunities associated with U.S. slavery and racism. This memory, compounded with the markers of one's sense of belonging on the island, reinforces the link between family and land. "Land is closely aligned with kinship, and kinship is the primary social factor necessary for acceptance into island communities" (Jones-Jackson, 1987, p. 22–24).

Heirs' property functioned not only as a way to pass down land, but also as a gauge to determine one's acceptance on the island, which following the construction of the bridges in the 1950s became another layer of security for St. Helena residents to use to protect the culture from outsiders and resist efforts to develop. When reviewing the statement The Blake-Manigault Club presented to the Charleston County Planning Commission on August 28, 2006, the value of passing down the land through the generations becomes evident. On her deed to property

purchased on Johns Island in 1887, Lydia Manigault wrote, “Never cut the land. It is for the unborn generations” (Blake Maingault Club, 2006, p. 1). This mandate she set in place is still used by her family members to articulate the importance of the land and values embedded in the history linked to how the land was acquired when resisting current efforts of development (Blake Manigault Club, 2006). The values associated with the land were often articulated by elders, as mentioned above, to provide for the future of the family.

On St. Helena a similar sentiment was voiced by every individual I spoke with when it came time to discuss the land. One of the few people I spoke with who is in his late thirties replied, “my grandmother controls the land, she takes care of things because she wants to make sure there is something for us when her time comes” (A. [alias], interview by author, St. Helena, SC, July 1, 2007). The security that the land offers people who may be cash-poor but land-rich reflects the value placed on holding onto a physical space that one can use to influence their future.

“The land means too much to me. It is worth more than two million dollars. This land and the business will go to my son and his children when we pass. My wife’s father did the same for her and so did mine. I want to do the same for my own” (W. [alias], personal communication, July 15, 2007). W. is a man who was kind enough to talk to me for almost two hours after working on his boat all day in heat that got up to 98 degrees. As we sat on the plastic chairs on his dock he told me about his day and the changes in his business and specifically the changes to the land. W. learned shrimping from his father and now his son is learning from him. Despite the passing down of the family business it has not protected them from the complications of outsiders taking advantage of people who are willing to sell their property. In one part of our conversation he pointed to a dock and a house right next to his and proceeded to tell me about his neighbors.

“Those people who have that big boat there, they didn’t want me driving through their yard, so I had to put in a new road to get to my dock. Their place use to be ours and then one of my wife’s brothers got frustrated and sold off the land, so there are these people living in the middle of our family, I’m on one side and my wife’s other brother is on the other and we aren’t allowed to walk across their property even though it’s just woods. That used to be our land. That is why we’re doing things different now. I’ve got a will and I’m protecting this land. We’re probably going to set up a trust or maybe one of those limited liability corporations real soon” (W. [alias], personal communication, July 15, 2007).

W. and his family live on land that has been passed down to him and his wife through heirs’ property. He owns 20 acres of land along the waterfront as well as an additional 70 acres of land throughout St. Helena when you combine their family landholdings.

Though W. and his wife are taking steps currently to protect their land from the vulnerabilities of heirs’ property, their family illustrates how this form of landowning once was a valuable social contract. Each generation successfully passed the land down and when children married they kept the land to either build a house for new couples or to spread out the living spaces of elders. There were consistently family members residing on the land, thereby

heightening the investment associated with maintaining it as an option for everyone. The meaning of recognizing a social contract that was not confined by the juridical boundaries of what constitutes family afforded significant freedoms to Gullah/Geechee that reinforced traditions of sharing resources. The responsibility of future generations to pass down the ethos of collective ownership given the lack of geographic and cultural isolation, combined with the increased social and economic pressures of capitalist society, challenges Gullah/Geechee to figure out new ways to continue this legacy.

The children of W. will be the first in the family to inherit property based on the formal dictates of estate planning. The legacy of heirs' property still plays a role, despite the necessity of creating "assurances" to protect the land, as the economic pressures increase and the elders who possess the living memory of the land pass. The story that each family shares about the passing down of the land often emphasizes the family relations of the time when the land was purchased.

"My father got this land from his father who was a slave for a time, but he also bought more land over there [eastern section of the island] and my wife's family did the same. My father told me that we kids would own the land when he died and we didn't think anything of it when it actually happened. Now people need to think real hard about what they're doing" (W. [alias], personal communication, July 15, 2007).

The need to plan the future of family property further illustrates how times have changed. The passing down of this land is meant to function as a guarantee that one will never be defined by the limitations of others. The detailed planning is a confrontation to the assumptions that families may have once possessed about the intent of the heirs. This does not mean that people did not make arrangements in the event of death, but the formalization of the arrangements is what has changed for many.

Heirs' property had been a functional approach when family members resided in closer proximity to one another and when the cost of maintaining the land was much less. Given the heightened social pressures and the lack of isolation that once characterized life on St. Helena, it is harder to guarantee that people are not going to be influenced by social and economic pressures to sell the land as individual motivations begin to play a larger role in decision-making than family for some Gullah/Geechee.

Limitations and Challenges

Exploring the dynamics of family conflicts is difficult for any family, yet for Gullah/Geechee, it is especially charged. The history of suspicion that exists on the island towards academics, social workers, and attorneys was a persistent concern when seeking to better understand the role of land in the context of family relationships. These suspicions did limit the access to internal mechanisms used to address some conflict within the families. A major challenge of this project is that it only captured the insights of family members who are currently residing on the islands. Future work in this area would benefit from an exploration of how the transmission of cultural values and family relationships are influenced by family decisions of which family members own the land, shifts in how the transmission of cultural values associated with family are influenced by technology, and more interviews with younger family members.

Conclusions

The sustainability of Gullah/Geechee culture continues to be challenged by the forces of development and dominant structures of governance. The role of social workers who function as community advocates offer a linkage to resources for families to support their decision-making associated with collective land ownership. The importance of those working collaboratively with Gullah/Geechee families requires a deep understanding of the cultural values associated with the land and family. Gullah/Geechee families represent a legacy of Black families organizing themselves around the values and attributes that prioritize the caring of a collective over individual. Though heirs' property rights leaves family land vulnerable to predatory developers, its past ability to support the transmission of land ownership to groups of family members contributed to the sustained ownership of land in a fashion that did not require a rigid defining of family. In 2010, Representative James E. Clyburn with approval from Congress established the Gullah/Geechee Heritage Corridor. The development of this corridor was to support the ongoing sustainability of the culture through providing matching grants to institutions who are putting effort into supporting the preservation of Gullah/Geechee cultural life. The intention of the Gullah/Geechee Heritage Corridor is to identify partners who will invest in the sustainability and preservation of the culture and its families.

The history of Gullah/Geechee culture may not be widely known, yet collective land ownership and transmission of culture reflect the resilience of culture in the midst of profoundly violent moments in U.S. history. The narratives of residents combined with the history highlight the relevance of land to the lived experiences of family and culture. Though contemporary descriptions of Black families organizing resources may reflect survival strategies, it is critical to also recognize that familial land ownership was not solely about survival, but it is how families chose to organize their lives in a way that supported the strength of families. The goal to be independent was not the end goal of these efforts rather it was to strengthen the family as a whole. Land in many ways functioned as the insurance policy for families. Land provided food, it represented a space for homes to be built, and it also cultivated resources that could be sold for income. Gullah/Geechee families in many ways represent the strengths of prioritizing needs collectively instead of individually. Gullah/Geechee culture offers important insights into the strengths of a collective framework for understanding Black families and for that matter, for all families.

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