

Chapter 2

Sustainable Heritage Tourism Through Gullah Geechee Musical Performance

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ABSTRACT

The Gullah Geechee people originally came to the United States as enslaved Africans from the coast of West Africa. Because of harsh conditions along the sea islands, spanning from North Carolina to Florida, the enslaved were often left to work the land while plantation owners retreated to less hostile, inland environments. As a result, many Gullah Geechee cultural, linguistic, and artistic practices remained intact. Today, there is interest in preserving these rich traditions. Because of environmental and cultural threats, preservation efforts must focus on sustainability. This qualitative, critical theory research includes interviews with musical performers from the sea islands and details their perceptions of the role music plays in sustainable heritage tourism. The researchers explored if music performance could be used to promote preservation locally, through tourism to cultural corridor sites, and globally, through touring musical acts. Participants urged caution with traditional tourism models and emphasized the role of younger generations in preserving Gullah Geechee music.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, researchers, performers, and audiences have been interested in the musical traditions of the Gullah Geechee people. During the *Civil War*, Gullah spirituals including *Michael Row the Boat Ashore* (Allen, Ware, & Garrison, 1867), and *Kumbaya* (National Public Radio, 2012) were identified and catalogued. During this same period, the *Ring Shout* emerged from this same region, as a unique tradition of singing, dancing, percussive clapping, and stick banging (Library of Congress, 2010). As

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early as 1922, the *Society for the Preservation of Spirituals* began collecting, recordings, and transcribing the songs from the sea islands where the Gullah Geechee flourished (Reed, 2016). In the 1930s, the Gershwin's, DuBose, and Heyward debuted the opera, *Porgy and Bess*, which was influenced by their exposure to Gullah music (National Public Radio, 2000). Then, in the 1990s, children were introduced to Gullah Geechee music through the popular television show, *Gullah Gullah Island* (IMBD, 2019). Today, groups like *Ranky Tanky* and percussionist David Pleasant tour the globe, sharing the music of this region and preserving the sounds of the Gullah Geechee culture (David Pleasant, n.d.; National Public Radio, 2017).

While there are robust musical examples from the region spanning the past 150 years, it is unknown how to leverage performance of these musical offerings to effectively cultivate, represent, and preserve Gullah Geechee music. Moreover, with a growing interest in conservation and sustainable tourism practices, there is a need for research to identify how local musical performance and musical touring can support these efforts. The purpose of this qualitative study was to apply cultural studies and critical theory research to explore the complex relationships between inbound tourist exploration, performance exportation, and musical conservation, as a means of sustainable, cultural preservation.

This cultural study was designed to be anti-oppressive, to allow the researchers to look beyond what is taught and learned, to expose assumptions that underlie accepted, but oppressive ideas maintained by tradition (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). The researchers explored the findings with caution relative to the assumptions of cultural studies, including these tenets: Every society gives privileges to some while oppressing others; Nonprivileged identities result in oppression; Cultural texts are a powerful means of maintaining privilege imbalances; Music can be interpreted in relation to the cultural content of capitalist consumption and production; Power relations mediate thought; Facts are derived from prevailing assumptions and values; and research practices reproduce oppression based on cultural and demographic categories (Gall, Gall, & Borg).

The focus of this research was to explore Gullah Geechee musical performances and their implications for sustainable heritage tourism. UNESCO (2006) noted links between musical and economic diversity. The researchers found that music is a tool to alleviate conditions contributing to poverty in the following ways: music is a source of funds, is a tool for advocacy, is a lure to involve individuals in development programs, and is a way to build tourism. Musical performances attract visitors to the region through attendance at local events and through cultural awareness via exposure to Gullah Geechee touring acts. Thus, music draws interest to heritage and culture, which can support the perpetuation of longstanding musical traditions developed by the Gullah Geechee people.

A qualitative, critical-theory approach was identified as the optimal methodology to evaluate the perceptions of musicians within Gullah Geechee culture regarding the possibility of sustainable heritage tourism through musical performance. Cultural studies and critical-theory research allow researchers to explore social structures of power as a lens to evaluate lived experience (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). To capture qualitative data around the topic, a semi-structured interview guide (Appendix A) was created and field tested using a panel of experts to ensure trustworthiness. The instrument was created to capture the experiences of Gullah Geechee musicians. The researchers used critical theory as an interpretive lens to address social structures and issues of power relative to the findings. In order to ensure alignment, interview questions were mapped to the following overarching research questions:

Research Question One: What strategies can be used to promote Gullah Geechee musical conservation?

Research Question Two: What role can music play in supporting sustainable heritage tourism?

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