

Gullah People of the Sea islands

Sandra Harris /East Tech High School  
Social Studies grades 9-12

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this unit is to explore with students the topic of the Gullah people of the Sea Islands of South Carolina. This unit will look at the language, history, culture and origin of the Gullah people. This unit will demonstrate that even though the Gullahs had been separated from Africa for hundreds of years, there are many examples of African retention in culture.

This unit is the result of the Great Migration Project that was created by Kenyon College historians Peter Rutkoff and William Scott. The project studies twentieth century migration of African Americans from the rural south to the urban north. Elementary and high school teachers were chosen from the Cleveland Municipal School District to participate in this project. The participants gained knowledge of the Gullah Culture by being involved in workshops at Cleveland State and visits to Charleston and St. Helena Island South Carolina.

The Gullah people are descendents of enslaved Africans who live in coastal South Carolina and Georgia. The Gullah people made up a majority of the region's population. Imported from West Africa to work in low country rice plantations, prior to the Civil War, African Americans comprised nearly 95% of the South Atlantic coastal region.

The Gullah people are one of the most distinctive cultural groups. Isolated off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia coast for nearly three centuries this native African American population of the Sea Islands has developed a vibrant way of life.

These original African Immigrants were the primary builders of the lucrative rice trade of early Colonial America. The skills they had utilized while developing a flourishing culture in Sierra Leone and other West African countries gave them the know how to adapt these agriculture talents to the marshlands of South Carolina. Rice planting steadily increased in importance after 1865. By the mid-eighteenth century the labor of rice plantations slaves in South Carolina low country afforded their masters the highest per capita income in the American Colonies and continued to earn huge profits for their masters until the civil war.

Still surviving in communities around Charleston, Hilton Head and Georgetown the Gullah Island lifestyle is simple but rich in heritage. It is on these barrier islands among the Gullah community that traditional story telling, cooking and crafts thrive and intrigue visitors to the Charleston area. The world famous Sweetgrass basket, a 1000 year old art form survives and a visitor can watch the basket ladies as they use weaving tools to preserve

the old craft. The patterns found in the woven pinestraw, palmetto, and sweet grass are the same as those in West Africa.

The Gullah people are also known for their folktales, music and song, religious beliefs and their most interesting dialect. The Gullah language is what linguists call an English-based Creole language which means a mixture of languages thrown together in order to communicate. This hybrid language served as a means of communication between British slave traders and local African traders. Many linguists argue that this early West African Creole English was the ancestral language that gave rise to the modern English-based Creoles in West Africa as well as to the English based Creole spoken by black populations in the Americas.

The Gullah still form a strong, cohesive community in South Carolina and Georgia today. The Gullah still hold on to special identity, and they still take pride in their common heritage. Those who have moved away often return for family gatherings to expose their children to grandparents and Gullah folklore, and to the local life. Gullah traditions still continue in many rural areas of coastal South Carolina and Georgia and many people still speak the Gullah language.

Studying the Gullah people of the Sea Islands will serve to expose Cleveland Municipal school students to a culture within the

Border of their own country but probably little known to them. Learning about the Gullah culture demonstrates that even though Gullahs have not seen the shores of Africa in more than two hundred years, African Culture has endured and been preserved.

The overall objective of this unit is for students to develop a familiarity with, and appreciation of an ethnic group of the United

States with whom most are unfamiliar.

Social studies standards will be fulfilled by the students as follows, however, because these are special education students,

exists certain deficits in learning and learning styles that the individualized education plan for each student needs to

be addressed .

1. Students will explain the effects of migration on society in the United States in language and religion

2. Students will use knowledge of geographic locations

3. Analyze the cultural, and physical characteristics that define regions

4. Students collect, organize, evaluate and synthesize information from multiple sources to draw conclusions

5. Students can communicate information using appropriate social studies terminology, in oral, written or multi-media

form and apply what they have learned to societal issues in simulated or real-world settings

To engage the students and to accommodate a variety of learning styles and academic levels, material will be

presented in several forms. This will include computers, puzzles, maps and teacher made materials