

Gullah Geechee Indigenous Articulation in the Americas

Research Abstract

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My research focuses on indigenous identity, livelihood and autonomy. I conduct an analysis of sovereignty that extends beyond legal boundaries that privilege biological ancestry to encompass an ontology of human and nonhuman kinship ties in relation to a particular landscape. My critique thus uses a geographical and social type of hybridity, in lieu of a biological hybridization inheritance analysis. In so doing, I argue that sovereignty can be constituted culturally in addition to traditional ancestral claims ratified through treaties or a myriad of additional legal constructs, as are most indigenous claims. I use a historical and ethnographic framework to critique the emergence of a new people as a result of distinctive linkages to and practices in a particular place. In framing indigeneity as a dialectic, whereby indigeneity is linked to the land and cultural practices, my intent is in challenging the dominant assumption of what constitutes indigenous identity.

The ecological similarities of Sierra Leone's coastal region facilitated the importation of African traditions into what became South Carolina, thus resulting in land-based cultural practices that can be defined in an unexpected way as indigenous. My work focuses on the Gullah Geechee who are the descendants of enslaved West Africans of the Mende people. In attempting to continue traditional practices in a different landscape but that featured ecological similarities to their historic homelands in Sierra Leone, the Gullah Geechee encountered other indigenous people and their practices. It was through this encounter between Africans of the Diaspora and Native Americans, and the nonhuman inhabitants of this particular landscape, that traditional fishing practices co-mingled to articulate new traditional practices still in use on the Sea Islands. I conducted ethnographic fieldwork over the course of three years primarily during the summer in South Carolina's Sea Islands. The Sea Islands served as an ideal site for investigating the emergence of a distinct indigenous identity due to its remarkable retention of traditional fishing practices—practices that I argue evidence distinct Gullah Geechee linkages to place. My preliminary data found that fish for the Gullah Geechee was more than a staple; the culture of fishing was fundamental to who they are as a people. Land was also fundamental to their identity. For absent ties to the land, they became a people stripped of their distinctive identity and sovereignty.