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The Gullah Language and Sea Island Culture Part I: The Gullah Language



[Sweetgrass Basket](#)
Photo by Dennis Adams



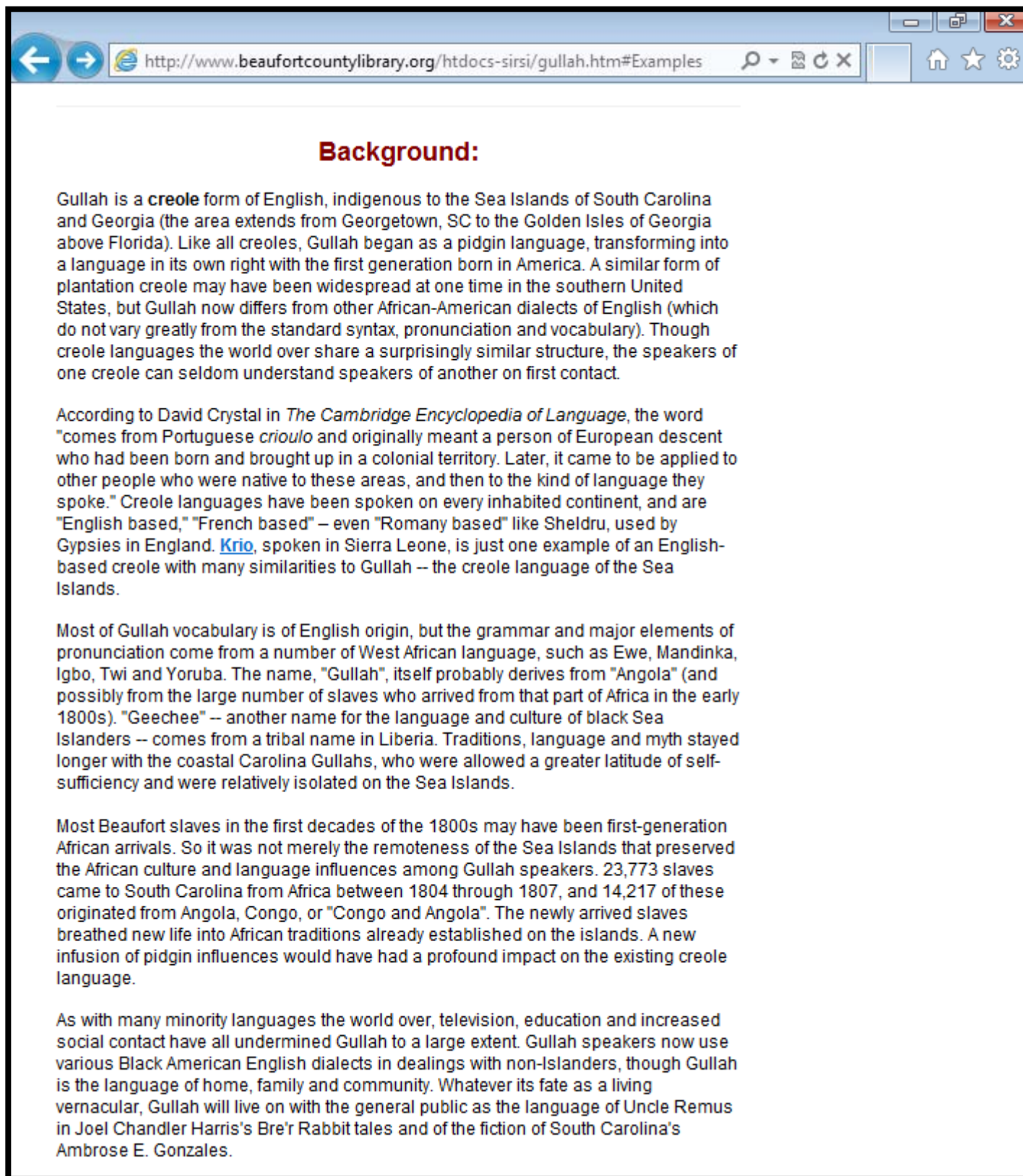
Robert Smalls, sculpture by Marion Ethredge at Tabernacle Baptist Church, Beaufort

by
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- For basic **geographical** facts about Beaufort County's Sea Islands, see: [Sea Islands: Erosion Remnant Islands and Barrier Islands](#)

Background Information



The image is a screenshot of a web browser window. The address bar shows the URL: <http://www.beaufortcountylibrary.org/htdocs-sirsi/gullah.htm#Examples>. The page content is titled "Background:" in red text. It contains four paragraphs of text discussing the history and characteristics of the Gullah language, including its origin as a creole form of English, its relationship to other creoles and dialects, and its historical context in the Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia.

Background:

Gullah is a **creole** form of English, indigenous to the Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia (the area extends from Georgetown, SC to the Golden Isles of Georgia above Florida). Like all creoles, Gullah began as a pidgin language, transforming into a language in its own right with the first generation born in America. A similar form of plantation creole may have been widespread at one time in the southern United States, but Gullah now differs from other African-American dialects of English (which do not vary greatly from the standard syntax, pronunciation and vocabulary). Though creole languages the world over share a surprisingly similar structure, the speakers of one creole can seldom understand speakers of another on first contact.

According to David Crystal in *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*, the word "comes from Portuguese *crioulo* and originally meant a person of European descent who had been born and brought up in a colonial territory. Later, it came to be applied to other people who were native to these areas, and then to the kind of language they spoke." Creole languages have been spoken on every inhabited continent, and are "English based," "French based" – even "Romany based" like Sheldru, used by Gypsies in England. [Krio](#), spoken in Sierra Leone, is just one example of an English-based creole with many similarities to Gullah – the creole language of the Sea Islands.

Most of Gullah vocabulary is of English origin, but the grammar and major elements of pronunciation come from a number of West African language, such as Ewe, Mandinka, Igbo, Twi and Yoruba. The name, "Gullah", itself probably derives from "Angola" (and possibly from the large number of slaves who arrived from that part of Africa in the early 1800s). "Geechee" – another name for the language and culture of black Sea Islanders – comes from a tribal name in Liberia. Traditions, language and myth stayed longer with the coastal Carolina Gullahs, who were allowed a greater latitude of self-sufficiency and were relatively isolated on the Sea Islands.

Most Beaufort slaves in the first decades of the 1800s may have been first-generation African arrivals. So it was not merely the remoteness of the Sea Islands that preserved the African culture and language influences among Gullah speakers. 23,773 slaves came to South Carolina from Africa between 1804 through 1807, and 14,217 of these originated from Angola, Congo, or "Congo and Angola". The newly arrived slaves breathed new life into African traditions already established on the islands. A new infusion of pidgin influences would have had a profound impact on the existing creole language.

As with many minority languages the world over, television, education and increased social contact have all undermined Gullah to a large extent. Gullah speakers now use various Black American English dialects in dealings with non-Islanders, though Gullah is the language of home, family and community. Whatever its fate as a living vernacular, Gullah will live on with the general public as the language of Uncle Remus in Joel Chandler Harris's Bre'r Rabbit tales and of the fiction of South Carolina's Ambrose E. Gonzales.

Samples

An Example of Gullah:

The words, **goober** (peanut), **gumbo** and **yam** all have West-African/Gullah roots. The following example is a Gullah translation of a familiar Bible text (Matthew 5, verses 3-9):

3. Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.	3. Dey bless fa true, dem people wa ain hab no hope een deysef, cause God da rule oba dem.
4. Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.	4. Dey bless fa true, dem wa saaful now, cause God gwine courage um.
5. Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.	5. Dey bless fa true, dem wa ain tink dey mo den wa dey da, cause all de whole wol gwine blongst ta um.
6. Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.	6. Dey bless fa true, dem wa hongry an tosty fa wa right, cause dey gwine git sattify.
7. Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.	7. Dey bless fa true, dem wa hab mussy pon oda people, cause God gwine hab mussy pon dem.
8. Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.	8. Dey bless fa true, dem dat only wahn fa jes saab de Lawd, cause dey gwine see God.
9. Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.	9. Dey bless fa true, dem wa da wok haad fa hep people lib peaceable wid one noda, cause God gwine call um e chullun.