

Sometimes we just need to stop and listen



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HIGHLAND VIEWS

“Every frog praise e own pond” (Every frog praises its own pond). This proverb from the Sea Island people — the Gullah or Geechee, descendants of African slaves — draws attention to the places and faces we most value.

We were visiting Gullah communities off the coast of South Carolina recently and were privileged to hear a good-natured Geechee man describe his culture, history and language. He drove us through the “ponds” of modest homes in these island communities squeezed and surrounded by larger homes of mainlanders. Resort development is rapidly eating up the valuable coastal land.

As we listened and learned, we heard our guide, David Campbell, explain the difference between the “Binya” and the “Comya.” A Binya is an island native (“we’ve been here”) and a Comya is one who comes from another place, the mainland.

David was light and humorous about it, but the historical tension is wrenching. As in so many indigenous cultures, the Comya changed the land and the culture of these proud people who now number about a half million. Thankfully, the Gullah, like David and his family, are not going to let their story be forgotten or ignored, no matter how much the pond is drained or muddied.

“E mout na know no Sunday” (His/Her mouth doesn’t know Sunday — a day of rest). We hear lots of talk about cultural diversity and racial equality and it’s essential that we hear it. But sometimes it may be good to give our mouth a rest and listen — listen to the stories even if (and especially when)



Chris Highland titled this photo “Deep Island Roots — Hilton Head.”

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those stories show us a shadow side to our own story.

Gullah people have a deep spiritual tradition rooted in Africa. They pay attention to dreams and meditations and their “root doctors” use plants and roots as medicine. The comya church came in after slavery to convert the islanders, dressing up the Geechee as good Christian Americans.

David’s brother Emory Campbell explains: “Just as we made efforts at home to change our hair and skin texture to become more ‘acceptable’ to other Americans [our school] was exhorting its students to ‘get cultured.’ The school was teaching them to look and act like European-Americans so that they would be accepted as mainstream Americans” (“Gullah Cultural Legacies,” 2008).

I heard an echo of this from Timo-

thy, an Ethiopian friend who exchanges emails with me. He’s a young college graduate finding it very hard to live or find work in his homeland. The other day Timothy wrote to tell me he spends his days with artists while “going through contemplation with the Rural.” He recommends the famous Ethiopian singer “Teddy Afro,” who “preaches our tears of justice and frustration.” Timothy closed his email with, “I keep my ears with him.”

“I keep my ears with him.” When your mouth knows Sunday and you can stop hopping around in praise of your own pond, maybe you hear what you need to hear. Like wisdom from Africa.

Closer to home, my wife was deeply impressed by our local “Hood Huggers” tour, with its rolling classroom driving through African-American neighborhoods rich in stories.

“New broom sweeps clean but old broom gets the corners” (a new person may seem to have all the answers, but the Binya knows better what needs to be done).

How many times have we heard of missionaries who try to come in and sweep an entire culture away to impose their own ways on people? They may use nice words and may even have good intentions, yet their brooms (beliefs, bibles, clothing, religious education) can be weapons. If we “keep our ears” with the original inhabitants we still hear their voices of survival, resilience and cultural pride.

Campbell explains: “Being constantly mistaken as one from the continent of Africa, confirms the fact that there is a true connection between Gullah people and Africans, who had never left the continent. We are descendants of enslaved people brought from Africa some 400 years ago, who have retained Africanisms in our speech, food ways and daily ways of living.”

And celebrated in proverbs.

It’s amazing to me that we can, even now, visit the Eastern islands and hear a Gullah woman, man or child greet us with a smile and a “How oonah da do?” (How you all doing?).

If we’re honest about our history we will learn from other histories. I want to ask, “How are YOU doing, after what you’ve endured, after they came to make you look and sound and believe like them? Tell us your story.” Because their story of tragedy and triumph is somehow my story, our story.

“E head da run ainty?” (Is he/she thinking clearly?). Are we?

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