

BY QUEEN QUET
As told to Onleilove Alston

'WE ARE NOT AN ISLAND'

The Gullah/Geechee Nation, extending from North Carolina to Florida, battles against corporate encroachment, environmental racism, and climate change.

MARQUETTA L. GOODWINE, a computer scientist, mathematician, and community organizer, grew up on the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina. On July 2, 2000, Goodwine was “enstooled,” in a traditional African ceremony, as “Queen Quet,” political and spiritual leader of the Gullah/Geechee Nation that extends from coastal North Carolina to Jacksonville, Fla.

“A lot of people don’t know that we exist,” she told *Sojourners*. “People are unaware that there is a subgroup of the African-American community that’s an ethnic group unto itself, with nationhood status for itself.”

Queen Quet, and the Gullah/Geechee Sea Island Coalition she founded, are actively engaged in battling environmental racism and climate change. As a cultural leader of an Indigenous community, she works to preserve her people’s heritage in the land and stop corporate encroachment. As a spiritual leader of a people who practice a unique form of faith that adheres to Christian doctrine while being distinctly African, she nurtures her people’s tradition of communal prayer, song, and dance, as well as their connection to Praise Houses, the small places of worship built on plantations during slavery.

Sojourners contributing writer Onleilove Alston, a faith-based organizing associate at the Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies in New York City, sat down with Queen Quet on St. Helena Island in Beaufort County, South Carolina, to learn more about the Gullah/Geechee people, their spirit, and their struggle for justice.

—The Editors

Without our spirituality
I don’t think our ancestors
would have survived.
—Queen Quet

Photos courtesy of Gullah/Geechee Nation

THE GULLAH/GEECHEE PEOPLE are the descendants of African people that were enslaved on the Sea Islands. We are descendants of Igbo, Yoruba, Mende, Mandinka, Malinke, Gola, Ife, and other ethnic groups from the Windward Coast of Africa, as well as Angola and Madagascar.

We also have Indigenous American ancestry from the Cusabo, Yamasee, Cree, and Edistow, the original inhabitants of the land now held in the Gullah/Geechee Nation. A socio-anthropologist segregated us at one point, saying that Gullahs are on the South Carolina Sea Islands and Geechees are on the Georgia Sea Islands, but there is no difference between us. We are one people.

In 1999, I became the first Gullah/Geechee in history to speak before the United Nations. Now I am a member of the International Human Rights Association of American Minorities, an NGO with U.N. consultative status, and the International Human Rights Council (a coalition of human rights scholars and activists that works on key human rights issues).

I also work with other Indigenous peoples around the world to help all of us survive. Especially, I'm working with the Small Island States. We're not just faced with cultural genocide caused by corporations attempting to displace us so they can come on our land, we're also faced with climate change, because we live directly in the Atlantic Ocean. I always tell the children, "We're from islands, but we are not an island." Every individual will need somebody else at some point.

THERE HAVEN'T BEEN any other Gullah/Geechee kings or queens enstooled in North America. I am the first one. Of course, in our ancestral background and collective consciousness, this practice has existed. One of the reasons our elders returned to an enstoolment ceremony is because it was part of our tradition in the motherland to have chiefs, queen mothers, and so on as respected members of the community.

The elders in the community, who had watched me and told my mother that I was here for a special reason, approached me. "There's too much going on and they are trying to completely put us off the whole coast. If we come together in a united way, will you be the leader? We don't have a title yet—but

if the whole community comes together, will you lead?"

I said, "Well, I don't need a special title. But whatever you need me to do, I'll do it."

In 1999 and 2000, a vote took place by petition and online. They got advice from the International Human Rights Association of American Minorities. They took this petition everywhere—under the oak tree, to dinners

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and festivals. On July 2, 2000, an enstoolment ceremony took place on Sullivan's Island in Charleston—the place where more than 40 percent of Africans enslaved in America came through.

We wanted a ceremony there because it is U.S. federal property. We wanted the federal government to acknowledge that this vote had taken place. We had U.N. observers there to certify that the vote was official. When they called for an agreement on that vote, everyone said yes. There was not one person who contested. I can only say it was divine order.

I was not only elected, but enstooled as a spiritual leader, as a queen mother. That is why I am Queen Quet, chieftess and head of state of the Gullah/Geechee Nation. I'm now in my second seven-year term. Every three years the Council of Elders, which is like the U.S. president's cabinet, and the Assembly of Representatives, like the U.S. Congress, can review what I've done and they can impeach me. We have a constitution and our own flag,

Gullah Good News

De Sperit ob de Lawd pon me.
E done pick me fa tell de
Good Nyews ta de po people.
E done sen me fa tell dem
wa ain free,
say, "Oona gwine be free."
E sen me fa tell de bline people,
say, "Oona gwine see gin."
E sen me fa free dem wa da suffa.

—Luke 4:18,

from the New Testament in Gullah

and we are a nationally and internationally recognized nation.

THREE CRITICAL FACTORS will help our people: knowing their rights and protecting our land; having their own institutionalized way to pass on the knowledge; and strengthening our fight against climate change by educating more of our people about how to

live in balance with the land by keeping up our fishing and hunting traditions.

Our greatest battle is making sure we maintain land ownership. I founded the Gullah/Geechee Sea Island Coalition in 1996 to fight for human and land rights. It is easier to get funding for the natural environment or animals than it is for human rights. This becomes a justice issue in itself. It's a balancing act between social justice issues and funding. You have a constant tug-of-war between communities faced with a lot of injustice and the reality that people want to support charity, but don't see charity as equality.

Many Gullah/Geechee families have deeds that date back to 1862 during the Civil War. Coming out of a time where we were listed next to pieces of property, we then became property owners. I've had to fight a great deal against the cultural genocide caused by the displacement of our people as a result of corporate development. We have an onslaught of people wanting to make the area resorts and gated communities.

There is real ignorance among other people of African-American descent who are descendants of the Gullah/Geechee Nation. They have no knowledge about who they are. They don't see the land as an asset; they see it as a liability because they have to pay taxes on it. They force the family to sell the land, saying "Somebody wants to buy it from us, just sell it, then, at least, I can get this money now." But once you spend that money, it's over with. You've put your whole family and all of its history for sale on an auction block. You have been a participant in cultural genocide.

One of the major things that we have

Queen Quet, with bowl, at a celebration on the beach. Below, Queen Quet shares a story with school children.



to accomplish is the establishment of the Gullah/Geechee Land and Legacy Fund. The fund would be an endowment so that we can purchase land when, for example, an elder doesn't have heirs to the property—to prevent the county from auctioning it for pennies to someone who is not Gullah/Geechee. Keeping the land is critical to our existence.

I'VE ALSO SPENT the last 20 years collecting anything and everything that reflected Gullah/Geechee culture, whether it was photographs, thesis papers, books. All these things we have now in a massive archive. We're digitizing all of it so that the children can understand who we are as Gullah. A lot of our people didn't realize they were different until they went off to college. All this forms the Gullah/Geechee Alkebulan Archive. We have to leave a legacy of home-grown education and grassroots scholarship.

The Gullah/Geechee Sea Island Coalition worked arm-in-arm with Rep. James E. Clyburn to get the Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Act passed and create the Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor. It's the first law the U.S. Congress ever passed to create a national heritage area dedicated to people of African descent. The bill acknowledges that ours is a unique culture and a consistent part of the fabric of America. I like to say it's the foundation of America. Had Africans not been enslaved to build this country, you would not have the America you have today.

Additionally, St. Helena Island played an important role in the civil rights movement. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Ralph Abernathy, Rev. Jesse Jackson, and Stokely Carmichael (who became Kwame Ture) used to meet here at our Penn Center's Frissell Community House during the 1950s and '60s. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference as well as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee used to meet here, in particular in the Frissell Community House. These grounds were used for trainings. St. Helena Island has never been ridden on by the KKK and, to this day, St. Helena's is still more than 90 percent Gullah/Geechee-owned. Dr. King could be safe here when he came. He came often, writing many of his major speeches here on the island. He even

started planning the Poor People's Campaign here.

Finally, we need to put more pressure on Western society to change its ways and behaviors on the land, so we can decrease the carbon emissions and stave off some of the climate change issues. Some of the Penn Center's buildings have been destroyed because we are in a hurricane zone. That's one of the critical social issues we contend with: the services that do—or do not—come when you are a largely black community and a storm is coming.

PEOPLE ALWAYS HEAR me say, "Hunnuh mus tek cyare de root fa heal de tree," a Gullah proverb meaning "You must take care of the root to heal the tree." If you want the fruit to be healed to have another generation of rich fruit, then make sure to get to the root of the problem first. Heal it—and everything else will be fine. God will take care of the tree from there.

Spirituality is critical to all Gullah/Geechee people. It is a thread that ties us together. It's foundational to our existence. The "seeking" tradition is an element that came from our African ancestry that we keep here in the Sea Islands. It's like what some would call a "vision quest" or a process of spiritual discernment. It's an initiation process that was brought into the Praise Houses and then into certain churches.

Seeking means going out into the wilderness. It's like Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness, though seeking only lasts three days. The seeker goes out when it's still dark. You might have to deal with snakes and other things



that might be out there, but you know that your faith in God protects you. To be in the Praise House and to be a part of a traditional faith community is important to us. Seeking is a very, very sacred thing—and a very private thing for those who've done it. Without our spirituality I don't think our ancestors would have survived.

My cousin, Matilda Middleton, recently passed away at age 105. I spent a lot of time with her. She remembered stuff back to her childhood and could tell me how things were then. She kept our traditions and culture. Everyone called her Ma, not just because her name was Matilda, but because she was the mother figure of the whole island. "Keep your hand in God's unchanging hand," she would say.

Many of my ancestors and elders lived to be over 100. They fought so hard for the land because they went through so much—right out of enslavement and into the Jim Crow era. Yet they were able to teach us how to love each other and always do things "in decency and in order." ■