Community Commons: An analysis of the Gullah communities of South Carolina

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Abstract:

Descended from slaves brought to the southeast United States between the early 17th and mid 19th centuries, the Gullah-Geechee of South Carolina and Georgia in the United States, have developed distinctive, culturally-expressive creole communities. Juxtaposed against their ancestor's plantation slave villages, present-day settlements reveal deliberate creations of community and strong connections to place. The Gullah concept of place and community also includes an understanding of the land as commons that is at odds with the dominant culture in the United States.

Under slavery the Gullah lived in rigidly geometric settlements. Although this was the only settlement pattern the slaves had experienced, within the space of two generations after emancipation (post-1865) community forms transitioned to organic, roughly circular settlements based on family relationships. These settlements were held as common land, and over the course of several generations, the communities were owned in common by descendants at times numbering in the hundreds. Given the realities of US property law, this left the Gullah communities vulnerable to takeover by outsiders who capitalized on the weaknesses of the Gullah system of heirs property.

This paper looks at the concept of the common in Gullah tradition, and the effect that the legal system has on this cultural practice. While clearing title was one approach widely adopted for community protection, the form and pattern of the Gullah communities remained at odds with zoning and subdivision regulations. Adherence to a zoning and subdivision scheme are both required for the deeds and mortgages necessary for building new homes in the communities, therefore 15 years ago Gullah-specific zoning and subdivision regulations were adopted. The paper will explore the results of these regulations, and their effect on the growth and perpetuation of the Gullah communities and their system of commons.

Keywords: Gullah; community commons; zoning; legal;