

7-2013

Daise, Ronald

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Recommended Citation

Daise, Ronald; Slutzky, David; and Morgan, Portia, "Daise, Ronald" (2013). *Video Collection*. Paper 179.
https://digital.kenyon.edu/gullah_video/179

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Ronald Daise
David Slutzky and Portia Morgan
July 2013

DS: Okay, I'm David Slutzky, here with Portia Morgan, and today we have the honor and privilege of interviewing Ronald Daise. We know Ronald Daise as an author, creator of Gullah Gullah Island. Currently, you are chairman of the Gullah/Geechee... Quarter? What's the full name of it?

RD: The Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission.

DS: Okay. That's a lot for me to remember, so I'm glad that you said it there.

RD: I was impressed (both laugh)...

DS: How long have you been chairman?

RD: I have been chairman for one full year, and one month now.

DS: Okay. I think the best way to do this is just to go back to the beginning, and, you know, when did you first hear the term "Gullah," and what was your childhood like, and how did that grow into your work as an author and TV show creator and where you are today? So let's start back in childhood.

RD: Well, sure. I am a native of St. Helena Island, which means that I am a binyah. And that's a Gullah expression, someone who's a native of a Gullah community who has been here, or binyah. I'm a binyah. My parents are graduates of Penn School, the class of 1933. My mother, in fact, stayed in the Benezette dorm. And currently, my mother is the oldest living Penn School graduate, and on September 1st, she will turn 100 years old.

DS: Wow, that's terrific (RD laughs).

RD: I grew up, as I said, a product of St. Helena Island, a product of the Penn School and its heritage. I remember coming to community sings at Penn Center, in the Frissell House—it was there—and also being a member of Brick Baptist Church, just across the highway from Penn Center, learning to sing spirituals and just basking in the heritage. As I was growing up, the

words “Gullah” and “Geechee” were negative words. They were invectives. In fact, they were called fighting words. You didn’t want to be identified by either one of them. We were more... acceptable of “Sea Islanders,” that’s where we were from. In fact, my first book in 1986 was titled *Reminiscences of Sea Island Heritage*. My wife and I, in fact, were not the creators of Gullah Gullah Island. We were the stars of it, and we were cultural consultants for it. But the media constantly replays whatever we try to correct that we didn’t create it. In fact, the show was created... Well, after novelist Gloria Naylor had written *Mama Day*, which is about a fictional Gullah community, she bought a home on St. Helena Island, and she, my wife, and I became friends. Her book was being optioned for a Disney movie. The producers of the movie, the woman who was to be the executive producer and Laurence Fishburne, who was to direct and star in it, came to Beaufort County, St. Helena Island to scout for sights, for the movie. And on the last night of their visit, my wife and I were invited to dinner. As a part of the dinner conversation, we were asked about our ideas about children’s television by the woman who was to be the executive producer, because she and her business partner were working on pitching a program idea to Nick Junior. Following the publication of my first book, my wife and I had scripted it into a cultural performance. We dramatized the oral histories about these traditions. We sang the songs that were listed. We showed slides of the historical photographs, which were a part of the Penn Center collection, in this performance piece. We had a three-year-old and were expecting our second-born. What we wanted of children’s TV was to have a program in which our three-year-old daughter didn’t afterward wish to have blonde hair and blue eyes. That was all (DS laughs) that we wanted. She then said, well, she was working on a program idea. It perhaps could be about some magical, enchanted... It was to be about some magical, enchanted island. Maybe it could be about some magical Sea Island, ‘cuz that was her first time visiting the community. “Would you be interested?” And we said, “Sure!” We didn’t think much of it, but in fact, that’s what happened. The creative team eventually came down. They spent three days with my wife and me and our family, and they basically based the characters on our real life experience. That’s why it was called, I’m on the show as “Mr. Ron,” and she was “Miss Natalie,” our real names. Children from the Gullah Gullah Island community visited us. We taught them songs and engaged them in activities. It was just to be a show in which Gullah culture was a backdrop, but it was... it had cross-generational appeal, and it impacted the perception of Gullah heritage for a number of people. Particularly those were in the target audience, who are now in their late twenties and early thirties, grew up with a positive understanding of Gullah from hearing the tune “Let’s All Go To Gullah Gullah Island.” There was no negative (laughs). And even if they wanted to find out more, their eyes were open to finding out more about it.

DS: No, it was a terrific, terrific TV show, and I’m glad that it had and continues to have the run. You mentioned early on you thought Gullah was a negative stereotyped to you. When did you first turn that to a positive connotation?

RD: Well, it... around the same time I had begun, or that I had written my first book, *Reminiscences of Sea Island Heritage*, the Gullah Bible Project was begun. And it was called the Sea Island Translation and Literacy Project, which had begun translating the bible into Gullah, or Sea Island Creole. One of the important things that the linguists who came to the community taught me and

others was that Gullah was a language, as bona fide a language as other languages, with its own grammatical rules. They explained some of them. And I think that was the beginning of an understanding of the significance of the language therein of the culture. One of the things that the linguists, one of the things that they informed us in the way that Gullah was written, their identification that it was a language—it wasn't substandard, broken English or bastard English—was that there was no need to use apostrophes. Many of the narrations of Gullah were written before then always you had these apostrophes which would give the connotation of something's missing. It's a broken, substandard English. And I like that understanding, there was no need to use apostrophes. That spoke to me. That also was around the time that the Gullah Festival originated. Penn Center had been having its Heritage Days Festival, and it is a true Gullah festival, but that wasn't a term that was readily accepted at the time that it began. And the Gullah Festival with its name had begun, and the movie *Daughters of the Dust* had droves of people coming to the Gullah Festival and to Penn Center Heritage Days Festival and the Georgia Sea Island Festival, with the expectation of seeing dark-skinned women walking along the beaches in white clothing (DS and PM laugh), as had been depicted in the movie.

DS: Right (both laugh).

RD: And at these festivals more or less the truth of the culture was shared and people left with a better understanding and appreciation of the crafts and the believes and the traditions of Gullah heritage. When the Gullah Commission began doing its—we had community engagement meetings for when we were in the planning stages of our management plan, the document in which we prescribe how this forested corridor is to be managed—there were numerous community members who asked that very same question. “What is Gullah?” they would say. Some of them, they didn't begin hearing that word until the 1980s. They were familiar with the word “Geechee.” “There Geechees over there.” And that's the way it has been throughout my childhood. No one would identify him or herself as Geechee. They would say, “Well, I know someone (DS and PM laugh). Over there (points). Someplace else. Who is Geechee. Who speaks that Geechee.” And in the writing of the management plan, the 25 commissioners who were involved, with the understanding of the comments given in various communities, as a way of self-identification, we coined the term “Gullah/Geechee,” because we are the same people, the culture. We speak the same language. As opposed to thinking that Gullahs are those descendants from West Africans who were placed on plantations in South Carolina and North Carolina, and Geechees were the same demographic placed on plantations in Georgia and Florida. In the four-state area, we're Gullah/Geechees, and the Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor is the only one of 49 national heritage areas that promotes the *living* culture of an African American population.

DS: That's fascinating. I know that Congressman Kleinman, from—

RD: Clyburn. James Clyburn.

DS: Clyburn, rather, from South Carolina spearheaded this.

RD: Yes.

DS: How did it all come to be, with his involvement, and you, and...

RD: Well, his involvement came initially... that was around the time, from my understanding, that the production of Gullah Gullah Island was going on. And in 19... I forgot the exact year. 2004, I think, it was determined by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, they identified the Gullah Coast as one of the eleven endangered, on the list of eleven endangered historic places more or less. And Clyburn had made with a number of leaders of the Gullah/Geechee communities to find out if in fact what could be done to promote this culture and this heritage. The National Parks Service were among the groups who met at the initial meeting, and the National Parks Service was given the directive to do this special resource study to gather information supporting that it was a significant culture, which they did. They had a very exhaustive document. And after the publication of that document, that's when Clyburn proceeded with the bill for the creation of a corridor. And then, the law came about following that in 2006.

DS: Yeah, it's incredible. I wonder, did the congressman make for himself to be Gullah, even prior to protecting that bill?

RD: He generally comments that his wife is of Gullah heritage, and that was his introduction to Gullah heritage. And also because he's a graduate of South Carolina State University—it was college at that time—there were people that spoke in certain ways, and he became very interested in it. The community in which Clyburn was born, I think, I'm not sure, I think he's from Sumter. But of course, the culture extends. Although as a part of the management plan, it says the culture extends about 30 miles inland from the coast, it extends further than that. There are vestiges of it in different communities, such as Sumter, and Orangeburg, and numerous others. And Gullah/Geechee people, when there were movements west, we took our culture with us and it expanded. Even in New York City. During my childhood, I always thought that half of New York City emptied during the summertime, because everybody returned to south to be with their grandparents (all laugh).

DS: No, we've heard a lot, that it even expands to Texas, about the Texas Gullah, from other people as well, so there's definitely a spread. But just that so many cultural things spread all over, whether it's music, or craft, or food. A lot of it just spreads in places you wouldn't think of, and it has to start somewhere. We look at this area here as being so pivotal to making that

happen. Y'know, I think, getting back to the Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission?

RD: Yes! Go ahead (both laugh).

DS: So, Congressman Clyburn is one congressman in one state, yet this covers a four-state area. So how tough was it to get the cooperation of four states to preserve that stretch of land?

RD: Well, there are commissioners from each of the four states. The commission itself is [Note: unclear] by 25 commissioners. There are 15 primary and expert commissioners, and the others, they're 10 alternates, each from the four states. As we... The designation, once that was defined by the law, it is now... The commission is hopeful because we are accepting applications for implementation of the ideas that are named in the management plan, for governmental organizations, as well as city groups, individuals, community-based organizations as well to submit partnership grants for telling the Gullah/Geechee story. There are three tiers of implementation that are identified in the management plan: education, documentation and preservation, and economic development.

DS: Okay. And I guess the three kinda go hand-in-hand. I can't ask you a favorite idea you have, because they all intertwine.

RD: Mm-hmm. And those were based on the comments that we received from community members, as we engaged in 21 public meetings throughout the four states.

DS: Wow. Grassroots ground swell. That sounds good. So tell us the traditions that you grew up with that you still pass on today to your family and future generations.

RD: Some traditions... Well, there's the basket name traditions. The name given to a newborn at birth that has something to do with their physical features or something that occurred at the time of birth. My father, for instance, his basket name was Chanceon, which is an unusual name. All of the older siblings had died at childbirth or soon after birth. When he was born, the midwife looked at him and thought he looked healthy and said, "Well, I guess we're gonna chance on." Take a chance on his survival.

DS: Oh, okay.

RD: And Chanceon was his name until he became an adult, then he took on the name of his father, Henry Daise. I was not given a basket name, but I am aware of that tradition. I always tell people who ask the question: "I guess if I had been given a basket name, it would be Whodat." And the reason is, I'm the last of nine children. When the sibling just ahead of me was born, I'm told the story that all the older siblings were quite upset. "How we gonna eat now? Why they havin' another child?" Etc. Etc. And my mother meant to have to tube tied, I'm told, following my older brother's birth. But before that scheduled appointment (DS laughs), I was on the way. So because of the outcry that had developed within our family, she never told them. Only she and my father knew about it, until I was brought home from the hospital. And I think the first expression was, "Who dat?" (Both laugh).

DS: I kinda saw where that was going, given the stuff with your line.

RD: But image... from my visits to two West African countries, Sierra Leone and Ghana, West Africa. And in fact, that's what I tell about in my book *Gullah Branches, West African Roots*. I was surprised to learn that in one of the Ghanaian languages, a male child born... the name for a male child born on Monday is Bobo. And a year later when I had gone to Sierra Leone, and picked up a small dictionary, "bobo" was the name for boy, male child. And that's what I had begun calling my son. And it wasn't as though I had always said, "Oh man, when I have a child, I'm gonna call him Bobo." I don't think I had even used the name before. But I had DNA testing done after my trips to those two countries, and my paternal lineage is from the Ewe and Akan peoples of Ghana, West Africa, and my maternal lineage is from the Temne people of Sierra Leone.

DS: Incredible.

RD: That's what I thought. So I said, "Y'know, like a basket name, I think that's just what I imparted (laughs)."

DS: That's terrific. You know, the first connection that we learned about, just as educators, was reading about the Gullah from Joseph Opala. And I know that you and he were just inducted into Penn Center for a prestigious award. Can you tell us about that?

RD: Yes. We were both inducted for the Penn Center 1862 Award. It was, 1862 was the year that Penn Center [Note: referring to Penn School] was started. And Penn Center evolved from Penn School, which is one of the first schools in the south for emancipated enslaved Africans. I also participated with Joe Opala on his third Gullah homecoming trip, which was Priscilla's Homecoming, to Sierra Leone. Priscilla was a ten-year-old Sierra Leone young girl who was captured in 1756, brought to a rice plantation near Charleston, South Carolina. And due to a rare paper trail, it was documented that Priscilla, who lived to about age 65 and married and had ten

children, 250 years later still had relatives living near that rice plantation in Charleston. And her 31-year-old granddaughter, Mrs. Thomalind Martin Polite, was given an all-expense trip to the country of her family's ancestral legacy. I was among the 20 others who joined her on that trip. It was a Gullah homecoming for her, and it was a Gullah homecoming for me as well. She was called throughout that weeklong journey "the Priscilla woman," because this was the first time many Sierra Leoneans had seen a descendant of someone who had left their shores. And in fact, when the participants of that trip had visited the nearby, an island near... Bunce Island, the Bunce Island slave prison, we journeyed on a ferry, a very large ferry. And on the way back, all of the participants were wearing our "Priscilla's Homecoming, a Gullah Homecoming," I think the subtitle was. And someone on this ferry, halfway around the world, saw one of these t-shirts, and he spoke to Mr. Opala. He said, "'Gullah Celebration?' Like in Gullah Gullah Island?" (DS and PM laugh) and Mr. Opala said, "Why yes. And there's the star of the show (points) right over there." And he came smiling. He was a Nigerian-born man who lived in Germany, who watched the show daily with his four-year-old son who came, wanted to take a picture with me to take back to his son, and he said he *loved* the show. He felt so fondly of the show because the bright colors and the people and the language reminded him so much of his home.

DS: Aw. You know, we viewed a movie last year, *A Family Across the Sea*. The same kind of stories just keep repeating, and that the Sea Islanders as well as Sierra Leoneans get reunited, and it's like a family reunion because they pretty much do the same thing, and the Sierra Leoneans looking at the Sea Islanders saying, "How'd they know that?" Y'know?

RD: Mm-hmm (nods). That's the way it was, both in Ghana as well as in Sierra Leone. The Sierra Leoneans spoke Krio—K-R-I-O—the trade language that sounds remarkably like Gullah/Geechee. They would say words and the Gullah members would understand, and we would say things and they would understand. In Ghana, because they had been a British colony, when you heard them speak English words, they sounded just like people from Gullah/Geechee communities. One thing that was striking to me, on the five-week trip to Ghana with educators from South Carolina and North Carolina, I was the only African American male. There were three African American females. Whenever the natives, the Ghanaians, they would wait around. I would see them waiting around, and whenever the white members of the group moved away, they would find me. They would come to me and they'd begin talking. Of course they were speaking in Fante, and I don't speak Fante (DS laughs), I don't know what you're saying. But I learned that because of my physical characteristics, they thought that I was either Ghanaian or African. They did not think I was African American. And that those physical characteristics and features of Gullah/Geechee members is closely linked to that of West Africans. The language itself is another carryover, as in the word "cootuh" for turtle, which comes from an African word, and "tote," to carry, or hold something. Usually it means people are (holds hands above head) toting objects on their heads. That's also an African word. There's stories of... I don't know if you've heard the story of the hag before. Someone... A hag is usually an elderly person, generally a woman, who has the ability to become invisible, shed her skin, torments people at night, sitting on their chests, straddling them and pulling the air out of their nostrils, or even pulling blood out their bodies. And if you wake up at night, and you feel a weight or pressure your chest, it's because you've been ridden by a hag. And during that time, you try to scream,

call out, but you realize that your voice is inaudible to anyone, even to yourself, and those who awaken the next morning will say things like, “I’m so tired, cuz a hag been riding me.” And those who don’t believe (laughs) would it comes from excessive worrying, eating too rich foods too late at night. But others say, “No, you’re ridden by a hag,” and it’s a story that’s shared by people in various African communities and well as countries of the African diaspora. We share that story with people from, like, the Virgin Islands or Jamaica and other similar kinds. The only way to rid oneself of a hag, you throw salt over your shoulder. A hag can’t get back in its skin if it has salt on it, and it has to get back in its skin before morning. If it doesn’t, then it will die. Or to put a broom. If you see brooms by doorways or windows, it’s because hags are supposedly fearful. They will not bypass a broom. And you’ll see that, brooms by opening to doors. Or the dark blue. It’s kind of a midnight blue color on the window trees of houses. That’s to rid evil spirits.

DS: I’m taking notes. “My favorite color is blue (RD laughs). I’ve got a broom...” (both laugh) you know “... near my closet to protect myself.” And you think of, like, folk tales and folk lore about just throwing salt over your shoulder and where it comes from. So many rich stories come from West Africa, and that have been adapted in, you know, kids’ fairytales and folk tales. Any others you’d like to share beside the hag? That’s a great story.

RD: Mmm, that’s all I can think of right now.

DS: Okay, that’s fine. But you’ve been a wealth of information. I know you’re a very busy man, and we appreciate the time that you’ve put aside for us today.

RD: Sure. Sure.

DS: When I go home sometimes I speak a little Gullah. After being here for a while, my wife will catch me saying, y’know, “[Notes: speaks Gullah, possibly “I don’ wantuh ‘top,” or “I don’t want to stop”].”

RD: And she looks at you...

DS: She’s used to by now, I think (RD laughs).

RD: Okay (both laugh).

PM [Note: off camera]: Well, I’m glad that Gullah Gullah Island is still in syndication.

RD: Thank you.

PM: I wake up sometimes at 2:00 in the morning to catch you and Natalie and the kids and Binyah Binyah havin' a good time. I really do appreciate all that you've done for the children through the stories and the messages that they've got something from that show.

RD: Thank you.

PM: I guess I have one last question, about children. So, I know you joined this commission; what is the outreach to young people so that they get a better understanding of this culture and appreciation for it?

RD: Well, it has also been stated that we want to make sure that our youth are included. They are the next generation. There's an understanding that there are art forms, performance art forms for instance, visual arts—that we want to embrace the thoughts of the younger generation in whatever way they wish to provide it. The arts do not have to be of a set period as a lot of the visual artists seem, are comfortable in depicting the culture. There's also... it has been stated on numerous occasions that the language is dying and what. But those who perpetuate this aren't in, they're not on college campuses where there are a number of Gullah speakers or not in social settings like barber shops or at card games or at churches, where people are comfortable in speaking the way they normally do. They're no outsiders. And if they hear that, they realize it is a living culture. And anyways, our youth and younger members of the population want to promote this, who are open to receiving in whatever ways they are... spoken word...

PM: And weren't you thrilled when Candice [Note: likely referring to Candice Glover, winner of American Idol in 2013] openly discussed her heritage?

RD: Oh, you don't know. You should hear my family talk about that experience (DS laughs), 'cuz I stood up in my living room (laughs).

PM: When she talked about it and the Gullah culture, I thought: *how brave of her!* Because with how many young kind of not so happy with their Gullah culture, and she just embraces it and talks about it and explained it to everyone.

RD: Well, if you were watching the show throughout it, the week before, 'cuz that was when I think it

was coming to five or I don't know if it was five finalists, I said now—'cuz she always said she was from St. Helena Island. I said, "If I had the money, and if I could go and just sit in that audience, and if the camera would pan my and they would make the connection. They'd say, 'Gullah Gullah Island... Candice Glover.'" But then it was on that very next episode, 'cuz she was asked something others don't know about her, and she said, "Well, I speak another language." And, as you said, she said, "They call it Geechee." And she wasn't a bit timid about it. And I stood up, I clapped my hands, and I said, "Yes! Yes (waving hands above head, PM laughs)! Yes, that's what she needed to do!" Because there are so many throughout the voting, people who understood and appreciated her courage in doing that.

PM: Well, I know she was there two years ago when she tried out. I called everybody in this group and said, "There's somebody from St. Helena, Glover, who's trying out!" But she didn't make it. So then the next time, Allen who was with us also, started calling and sayin', "Look, we've got to start watching." And so yeah. She got a lot of phone calls. I was really proud of her for standing up and talking about her culture. And then of course the trip home. She really highlighted some of the beauty and good parts of being part of this island.

RD: Yes, right. And in fact, the Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor... Commission (laughs) had its quarterly meeting the day after she was announced the winner, and I, y'know, I made reference to it at the meeting, and I just read an article in which she had stated—because this was her third attempt—and, I'm trying to remember exactly what she had said. It was something like, she knew, it was when you know who you are. Because for the first two seasons, she said she was influenced by some of the judges, what they said, what she thought other people wanted, but this year she was determined she was going to have fun, and she sang the songs that she wanted the way that she wanted to. And that's what I said, you know, was in like mindedness what the commission hoped that those of the culture would realize would benefit from when they all know who they are and appreciate it.

PM: And that's part of our thing. You have to go there to know it.

RD: Yeah.

DS: Yes? I notice you some books on your lap that we'd like you to show to our viewers as well. If we could have your—

RD: Well (holds up book), I work in Brookgreen Gardens, in Murrells Inlet, South Carolina. Brookgreen Gardens was established on four abandoned rice plantations and therefor Gullah heritage is inherent on the grounds. One of the events we have had for the past nine years is called Gullah Gullah Days, where the third-graders of Georgetown and Horry Counties come to learn about Gullah heritage, a free field trip. And as part of their post-field trip experience, I have

some writing prompts that they're given, and they can also do drawings about anything they observed at Brookgreen Gardens during the field trip experience. And their submissions are called, in a booklet called "'Wuh E'Mean Ta Be Gullah,' or, 'What It Means To Be Gullah,' as Seen Through the Eyes of Georgetown and Horry County Third-Graders." And this is available, it's for sale at our gift shop. But on the front is a drawing of a cootuh. 'Cootuh' is the Gullah word for turtle. And the Brookgreen Gardens' website address is www.brookgreen.org, and copies are available, they can be mailed to you. And this (holds up second book) is the book that I spoke about during the images, *Gullah Branches, West African Roots*. And my wife did this drawing. It's beautiful, isn't it?

PM: Mmm, yes, I see she is quite the artist.

DS: Does she have a website for this?

RD: Uh, the website that you can see this on is... oh, what is it? It's... probably natalie.com [Note: it's actually nataliedaise.com].

DS: Okay.

RD: But, that one's for you (hands the "What It Means To Be Gullah" booklet to DS).

DS: Why thank you. I just thought we'd show this off so our viewers know where to go for more of this as well. And thank you for your time as well.

RD: Sure.

DS: So. All right, well, best of luck to the future of the Gullah/Geechee... Cultural Heritage Corridor... Commission.

RD: And we shorten it to Gullah/Geechee Commission or Gullah/Geechee Corridor (all laugh), once it's given out the first time. Because you know it's a mouthful (laughs).