



Dismantling Racism in the Food System

Special multi-authored series on racism and liberation in the food system

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The Roots of Black Agrarianism

By Owusu Bandele and Gail Myers

*“Ah wakuh muh monuh kambay
yah lee luh lay kambay yah lee luh lay tambay.”*

“Everyone come together let us work hard;
The grave is not yet finished; let his heart be perfectly at peace”

This song is performed by Mende women at ceremonial burials in southern Sierra Leone. One woman, who was among the cargo of African women transplanted into America in the 18th Century, ended up in Georgia and retained her memory of the song. Mary Moran’s grandmother, Amelia, taught her the song growing up in the Gullah Geechee community of Georgia’s Sea Islands. “Amelia’s Song,” spoken in the Mende native language, was preserved for more than ten generations. The documentary film *The Language You Cry In* tells this remarkable story. In the film, the Moran family makes a historic trip back to Sierra Leone to connect with the women there who still perform the song for burial ceremonies. When asked why Amelia’s great grandmother would preserve the song and pass it on for generations, a Mende elder replied:

That song would be the most valuable thing she could take. It could connect her to all of her ancestors and to their continued blessing. You know who a person really is by the language they cry in.¹



Sandra Simone (white hat) works with fellow Southeast African American Farmers’ Organic Network (SAAFON) members in the Virgin Islands. Photo courtesy of Terry Hayes of SAAFON.



Joseph Field, SAAFON member, leads a tour through his farm in South Carolina. Joseph's land has been in his family for over a century. Photo courtesy of Terry Hayes of SAAFON.

Much like the Mende song, African agrarian roots have survived through the memory and practice of a deep enduring connectedness to the land. Today, there are Africans in America who have been rooted on family land for over 150 years. Many Black landowners are struggling to retain their land, agrarian roots, and memory of communal beliefs about land ownership and caring for nature. There are African farmers and landowners in America still surviving, like “Amelia’s Song,” but they are threatened by a hostile food and agricultural system, discriminatory government policies, and a swiftly moving tide of urban and rural development.

African agrarian wisdom is an acknowledgment of the link between the natural and the spiritual. In African societies, one finds a strict adherence to preserving, conserving and regenerating soil, water, and the local eco-culture of life.^{2,3} African societies have created cultural narratives by preserving natural elements so that humans and other life can exist symbiotically. This ecological belief system endured in the Americas, even under the most exploitative conditions of chattel slavery. Asking a village elder in Suriname why his people paid such reverence to a tree and why they bring offerings to the wild cotton tree, an ethno-botanist got this reply:

Having no churches, no places built for public worship as you have on the coast of Guinea, and this tree being the largest and most beautiful growing here, our people assembling under its branches when they are to be instructed and defended by it from the heavy rains scorching sun. Under this tree our gadoman, or priest, delivers his lectures and for this reason our common people will not cut it down upon any account whatever...and account it sacrilege to injure it with an axe; so that even the fear of punishment will not induce them to cut it down.⁴

African mythology, origin myths, and spiritual practices all revere the centrality of nature. Stories of trees, animals, birds, flora, and natural elements all had their origins in preserving and conserving the consequential relationship between humans and their environment. Moreover, African ecological thought utilizes land as part of the ritual of how to honor spirit. These ritualistic expressions of an eco-spiritual worldview were imprinted on the daily lives of enslaved Africans and impacted beliefs about food, farming, family, and forest.⁵

Wisdom, Smuggled Seeds, and Enduring Technologies

Africans' agrarian knowledge, crops, and technology have had a profound effect on food and agriculture throughout the world. Important fruits, vegetables and herbs transported by both enslaved Africans and their captors include: ackee, African rice, African yam, Bambara groundnut, bitter melon, black eye pea, cowpea, coffee (arabica), cola nut, Melegueta pepper, muskmelon, okra, pigeon pea, roselle (hibiscus), sesame, sorghum, Guinea corn, tamarind, vegetable amaranth and watermelon.⁶ Rice has a very unique history. Europeans erroneously took credit for introducing both the crop and the technology for growing it in Africa. It was not until the 20th century that this misinterpretation was corrected.

According to oral history, enslaved African women brought okra and rice seeds to the Americas by hiding them in their braided hair. These crops were essential crops to people of African descent. In fact, cowpeas, okra, and, especially, rice all have had profound culinary and cultural effects in the Americas. Not only were the plants essential to the development of the United States seen today in places like the Sea Islands of South Carolina, African agrarians, fisher folk, and engineers changed the landscape of the waterways. Today, these changes contribute to more environmentally sustainable waterways, enhancing the ecological landscape and the state tourist economy. International artist Jonathan Green from the Gullah Geechee region paints this picture:

Imagine being brought here in chains. They could not imagine where they were. Entire state was covered in plantation at one time. Moccasins, rattlesnakes, alligators. Forest was thick. Could not see sunlight. Now you see the beauty of South Carolina. Rice culture built the economy. The money from rice...Africans transformed and created an eco-culture for bird watchers. The bird hunting and watching people come from everywhere to watch birds here. This was not able to be traversed at one point because the Islands were a very thick forest, with cypress trees. They preserved the fields and formed the hunting and bird watching habitats. Blacks were not given credit for creating those ecosystems.⁷

That Black labor built wealth in the Americas has

been widely documented. However, Africa's contributions to agricultural technology has too often been minimized. Africans were the original plant and animal scientists. Plant domestication is believed to have first started in the highlands of Ethiopia. Expertise in irrigation and the first use of hydraulic engineering was the basis for Egyptian civilization along the Nile River.⁸ Ancient Egyptians are also credited with inventing the axe, hoe, and plow, and for having extensive knowledge of the medicinal properties of plants. Agricultural technology was by no means limited to Ancient Egypt or northern Africa. Tropical African farmers also contributed a myriad of agricultural techniques.⁹

African crops and agrarian wisdom were the basis for wealth not only in the United States, but in Brazil. Even though the introduction of rice into the Western Hemisphere is most often associated with its arrival in South Carolina in 1670, rice was actually grown in Brazil approximately one century earlier.¹⁰ Three quarters of enslaved Africans brought to Brazil between 1548 and 1560 came from the rice-growing region of Senegambia in West Africa. Rice was grown both as a plantation and subsistence crop and was an important source of food for the maroons who escaped slavery.

Jonathan Green conveys the ingenuity of rice-growing Africans later coming into South Carolina: "All the earth was moved by people only using sweet grass baskets. They moved earth larger than the Great Wall of China, larger in volume than the pyramids."^{11 12}

The Persistence of Black Agrarianism

Indeed, it was these agrarian roots that made Africans so valuable to the development of white supremacist capitalism in the Americas. Today, those same agrarian roots remain the essence of the survival for African land-based communities. Green and other Gullah Geechee farmers we interviewed, speak of the disappearance of culture, yet they agree that solutions rest in maintaining an agrarian rootedness, especially within a communally-owned, land-based system. Today, Black landowners are struggling desperately to hold onto their land, and the Gullah Geechee communities represent the hopes of our connection between reclaiming our African agrarian roots and preserving African-based culture and food ways.



Sandra Simone of Huckleberry Hills Farm in Alabama. Photo courtesy of Natasha Bowens.

The African agrarian roots in the South, however, are not confined to the Gullah Geechee corridor. Sandra Simone for instance, owns and operates Huckleberry Hills Farm, located in Talladega, Alabama, which her family has owned for 140 years. Simone's great grandfather on her mother's side, John Easley, who she affectionately called "The African" acquired the land during the 1860s (Simone 2016).¹³ Easley was originally from Mozambique, but was never enslaved. He worked on passage ships and eventually found his way to Alabama. According to Simone's great uncle, Sippe Easley, John Easley's son, his father acquired over 2,000 acres, some of which was prime land located along a lake.

Simone is the only family member still farming the land. She had moved away from Alabama, and did not plan to return. However, when attending a family function there, her now late husband, Harold Burke, encouraged her to do otherwise. "I know it was never a plan of mine to return and live in Alabama, and certainly not in the country, but my husband started talking to me, almost preaching to me about the value of the land, the value of my great grandfather's accomplishments, and what it meant for Black folks to hold on to the land, to stop selling the land...that woke me up..." Simone is now an organic grower and founding member of the Southeastern African American Farmers Organic Network (SAAFON). "Now I know I love it, and I am so grateful to be here. I thank the Creator and I thank my ancestors and I hope they are guiding me to what I'm supposed to do."¹⁴

Many Africans in the Americas are a people still rooted in land, even after generations of exploitation and tor-

ture on the plantations. Amazingly, they were able to acquire substantial acreage, but so much of that land has been lost. After enslavement, Africans acquired land on former plantations and claimed it as their homes (Joyner 1992). According to a 1971 report on the state of Black land tenure on the South Carolina Sea Islands, 10 to 15 years prior to the publication of the report "almost all of the Sea Islands largely in Beaufort and Charleston Counties, with a few in Jasper and Colleton, were owned by blacks."¹⁵ By 1960, most of the large Black landholdings of 100 acres or more were lost. The historical significance of these counties is that they comprised part of the freedpeople territory authorized by General Sherman's Field Order 15, which transferred nearly 400,000 acres of land along coastal South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, and the Sea Islands in 40-acre parcels to African families. Although the possessory titles were never confirmed by Congress, small parcels were purchased by Africans when abandoned plantations were sold by federal tax commissioners during the latter part of the Civil War and during Reconstruction.

Some of the acreage included in General Sherman's Field Order remains central to land struggles today. After Congress failed to confirm the order, plantation owner Margaret Harris willed her land, located within the area, to formerly enslaved Africans. The area became known as "Harris Neck," and the 75 families living there became the legal landholders.¹⁶

Years later, during World War II, these families were uprooted from their land when the federal government used eminent domain to seize the Harris Neck land for construction of a federal airstrip. Seventy-five families were displaced from over 2,600 acres of land. Later, the land was given to the Department of Interior who converted it to a National Wildlife Refuge.

Residents have been waging an ongoing battle to regain their land since. In 2006, they formed the Harris Neck Land Trust to reclaim the land. Like so many other Black landowning communities throughout the country, the Harris Neck families continue to fight courageously for their land and wholeness.

Rooted in the seeds of African agrarian principles of water and soil conservation and preservation, by ancestry, African American farmers like the Harris Neck families have an uninterrupted cord of environmental and land-based knowledge guiding them in their land stewardship practices. Root medicines survived, iron casting, fishing techniques, unique to West Africa, are

still practiced in the Gullah Geechee communities.¹⁷ The isolation of the Sea Islands and the skills needed to negotiate the terrain, the similarities in the languages of those Africans coming together to inhabit those Islands after enslavement — these uninterrupted agrarian roots and linguistic patterns facilitated the survival of “Amelia’s song.”

Carver and Whatley: The Seeds of Their Wisdom Are Still Taking Root

As African-Americans work to maintain land and knowledge, they draw inspiration from two leaders who have developed new roots for African-American agrarian traditions: Drs. George Washington Carver and Booker T. Whatley. Their ideas and research represent the legacy of an African/African American agricultural knowledge base that continues to contribute to the world’s agricultural system.

These two scientists had much in common: both started from humble beginnings, had to overcome tremendous obstacles in a racist, oppressive country, and valued education. Dr. Carver was born to an enslaved mother around 1864. He earned a master’s degree from Iowa State College in 1896 (and received several honorary doctorate degrees). Dr. Whatley was born in 1915, and raised on a farm in Anniston, Alabama during the Jim Crow era. He earned his Bachelor of Science from Alabama A&M University (a historically black 1890 land-grant university), and a doctorate degree from Rutgers University.

Both professors achieved greatness by dedicating their lives to underserved African American farmers who were discriminated against by a racist American agricultural system.

Carver’s recommendations helped lay the foundation for today’s sustainable and organic agricultural movements. Initially, due to his mainstream agricultural training at Iowa State College, Carver advocated for the use of commercial fertilizers but the price of the products precluded poor African American farmers from utilizing them. Many of the practices that he advocated are today the cornerstones of organic production.¹⁸ These include the use of crop rotation, cover crops, animal manure as fertilizer, composting, and soil and water testing.

Dr. Whatley was often referred to as the “small farm guru” and is remembered for his small-scale farm plans, often referred to as his “Tuskegee Plan.” Like Carver, Whatley advocated for diversified cropping systems to make them more ecologically sound. His ideas were summed up in his book *How to Make \$100,000 Farming 25 Acres*.¹⁹ Dr. Whatley’s recommendations included diverse planting systems, establishing apiaries, and use of the U-Pick system to reduce labor costs during harvest. Farmers throughout the country incorporated parts of Dr. Whatley’s plan into their farming operations.

Together, the two professors developed a network of disciples that continue to spread their vision of a sustainable agricultural system that is inclusive and equitable.

Conclusion

African American farmers throughout the South continue to maintain and enrich a deep-rooted agricultural heritage based in values that are in harmony with nature and sustainable lifestyles. Gullah Geechee landowners and farmers, who might be the last surviving roots of their intact African agrarianism, are particularly emblematic of this struggle. These deeply rooted communities have preserved Africanisms such as the Mende song, net fishing, basketry, and love of nature, just to name a few. Gullah Geechee and other African American farmers continue to draw inspiration from both their African ancestors, and African American predecessors – such as Carver and Whatley – who continue to inspire. Black farmers from coast to coast embody the branches our agrarian roots, full of hope for a new generation. These roots flow directly to Africa. Those are, indeed, very deep roots.



Cynthia Hayes, late co-founder of SAAFON, whose legacy of sustainable agriculture and black agrarianism is reflected on landscapes across the US. Photo courtesy of Terry Hayes of SAAFON.

Endnotes:

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- 7 Green, Jonathan. 2016. Personal Interview by Gail Myers, February 24.
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- 9 These include planting on raised mounds to avoid excess moisture in wet areas; planting on terraces to reduce erosion; flattening and planting on top of termite mounds which were fertile sites; using compost, manures and ashes to enhance soil fertility; using live trees as supports for vining crops; pruning trees to allow adequate light for shade tolerant crops planted under them; adjusting plant spacing to reduce competition among intercropped plants; preserving useful trees when land was cleared for agricultural uses; identifying which crops could tolerate excessive moisture as well as those that could tolerate drought; obtaining proper canopy to reduce soil erosion; using legumes to increase nitrogen in soils; and using rotational cropping systems to maximize land and nutrient use.
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Dr. Owusu Bandele is professor emeritus at the Southern University Agricultural Center and co-founder of the Southeastern African American Farmers Organic Network (SAAFON).

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About this special series:

This Backgrounder is the fourth in a multi-authored series on “Dismantling Racism in the Food System.” In this series we seek to uncover the structural foundations of racism in the food system and highlight the ways people, communities, organizations and social movements are dismantling the attitudes, institutions and structures that hold racism in place. Food First is convinced that to end hunger and malnutrition we must end injustices in the food system. Dismantling the injustices of racism in the food system, in the food movement, in our organizations and among ourselves is fundamental to transforming the food system and our society.

Food First invites contributions on this topic from authors engaged in research and community action to dismantle racism in the food system. Different aspects of the topic can include land, labor, finance, food access, nutrition, food justice and food sovereignty organizations.

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