

**African American Resiliency in the British Caribbean: Self-Sufficiency in the Foodways of
Cat Island**

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Abstract

On Cat Island in The Bahamas, the local population of subsistence farmers has relied on the foodway traditions of pothole farming and crop preservation for generations. However, modernization and the subsequent rise of the tourism industry alter the daily life of local residents throughout The Bahamas. Previous research has examined the impact of tourism on Bahamian populations located in urban areas, but has largely ignored modernization's effects on the residents who remain on rural islands. Through conducting oral interviews and other ethnographic field research methods, the project considers how modernization influences the planting and preservation practices of the local population on Cat Island. Under the framework of resilience theory, Cat Island's local population exhibits adaptation to the disturbance of modernization. Traditional practices of pothole farming and crop preservation are exchanged for modern agricultural practices to maintain the island's overall emphasis on self-sufficiency through foodways.

Introduction

"Ain't nobody want pick up no cutlass or nothing like that. Everybody want to go to Nassau, make a million dollars and go to the mall on the weekends" (GK).

A former administrator, teacher, and farmer described the current generation of youth on Cat Island in The Bahamas. Most of the island's residents rely on subsistence farming, planting the land and preserving crops by hand following traditional practices. However, younger generations on Cat Island, influenced by modern ways of life, often resist engaging in farming. Furthermore, in May of 2024, the Ministry of Agriculture and Marine Resources in The Bahamas donated a package with various types of agricultural machinery to the Cat Island community. Cat Island locals looked forward to using the new implements, considering the possibility of

generating larger crop yields and expanding commercial production on their land. With the transition from traditional foodway practices to modern machinery, and the refusal of younger generations to engage in farming, Cat Island's traditional foodway practices may be at risk of disappearing.

In surveying the culture of local populations on Cat Island, the focus will be on the island's foodways, or the local population's practices of producing, gathering, processing, cooking, distributing, and consuming food.¹ Foodways can reflect the island's geographic location and climate, while also highlighting a sense of identity held by the local population.² How the disturbance of modernization affects the foodway traditions, specifically the practices of crop planting and food preservation, practiced by the local population of Cat Island will be examined.

Background

The Commonwealth of The Bahamas contains thirty inhabited islands geographically situated off the coast of the U.S. state of Florida.³ The Bahamas contains urban areas like New Providence Island and Grand Bahama Island, as well as less developed islands known as the Out Islands, or Family Islands.⁴ Over ninety percent of residents in The Bahamas are of African descent.⁵

¹Charles Camp, "Foodways in Everyday Life," *American Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (1982): 279, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2712779>.

²Sarah Colby, "Understanding Foodways and a New Way to Conference," *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* 55, no. 10 (2023): 697, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jneb.2023.08.007>.

³Douglas Reber Dunkel, "Tourism as a Form of Demographic Imperialism: A Comparison of The Bahamas and Virgin Islands" (PhD diss., Michigan State University, 1985), 10.

⁴Melissa Klurman, "The Wild Out Islands of The Bahamas," Oceanic Society, July 13, 2021, <https://www.oceanicsociety.org/travel-ideas/the-wild-out-islands-of-the-bahamas/>.

⁵The World Factbook, "Bahamas, The," Central Intelligence Agency, last modified July 30, 2024, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/bahamas-the/>.

A forty-six mile strip of land located southeast of New Providence Island and the capital of Nassau, Cat Island was considered the first landing site of Christopher Columbus in the New World.⁶ As the origin of exchange across the Atlantic Ocean, Cat Island serves as an appropriate location to analyze the resilience of Black populations that have survived forced migration to the Western Hemisphere. On Cat Island, subsistence farming is a way of life with common crops including tomatoes, corn, pigeon peas, and tropical fruits.⁷ Much of the island is covered with bush, or wild vegetation that residents harvest for natural remedies to health concerns.⁸ With the population hovering around 1,500 residents, the local community is tight-knit and friendly.⁹

A society facing modernization may experience improvements in public infrastructure, advancements in technology, and the process of urbanization.¹⁰ However, developments in modern amenities were not seen in Cat Island until recent decades, hence its status as an Out

⁶“Cat Island,” The Government of The Bahamas, 2011, https://www.bahamas.gov.bs/wps/portal/public/About%20The%20Bahamas/The%20Islands/CAT%20ISLAND!ut/p/b1/vZLJkpswFEW_JR9AI8liWmLAMtjMo9m4wAbMaOMBMF-f7lQWnVSIO4t09FaqOu9d6Uh0TEd03CVDWST38twlzds-ZvcLQHRRxLxOGMAC1be2osWtkQmZV2D3AYDBZ_0hHXk7IMhYHVdKtJeKewUoTb6E1ipRKp4QdznFLqUJjqoGW2EfxIfOxMzDy5jBTOAh4sA6EcqDNw_XoSsusc6laXiy7slGAQFrgVtS146JBV_fToKwmoYjGzDWsKgnK_VkdVv3Z0p7-pvDXYZZIRbN5dajdA6qeuXXSnlSNOlaxE2xqT2ld3TdXXlaMmoXSRKE5pjbcm1mp8dPD-APS_wLD_GHyAZ9Aryp_gF8cIbdK8C9m-AFAKqQiI4LbcAbkPboCOC9Wz0v6lzPTgWe0JMj8rbK-DbCq4fQ8BRk3Am8y_YIFajpqQoM2UfeHCLDkK1j4PhLUco6swx_DzSRJ7wGSpDd-AxwAf7qQMKY_KsjzrNEBgFivw8duPivSollgi-4S-fBtv_g01Oi7T9mU8tC_ghRdYyHA8FngWYmXzdFDtMCdjTVRUby_dUHBr8IT14wr3lo17e5KYkam7oUmLiBcYzq6N024-zA_NoMRieyv5diDEoYiaCX0956Yu4yR1rcq6liHv7DQ2Aw3GaNYkuDTi1rHIJfV4jBkTTd2g3JKrMj8urYuOC7iJh_MtDwi3QIE-FbuAnKd574gQVcnqj01J-oxmWR_GnAoXzdGpPeutigCqcudgGW5iRhLpZefbthFiPViflSUG5bE8GCavBwp3e3OV9pYn9uMvrT-sGWd9Ry9q0z89h2tl-B8/dl4/d5/L2dBISEvZ0FBIS9nQSEh/.

⁷Susan Love Brown, “This is the Real Bahamas: Solidarity and Identity in Cat Island” (PhD diss., University of California, San Diego, 1992), 75.

⁸Brown, “This is the Real Bahamas,” 73.

⁹“Cat Island Population By Settlement and Total Number of Occupied Dwellings: 2010 Census,” The Government of The Bahamas, https://www.bahamas.gov.bs/wps/wcm/connect/a39dabd3-9444-4ace-a3ee-d47abe723752/CAT+ISLAND+POPULATION+BY+SETTLEMENT_+2010+CENSUS.pdf?MOD=AJPERES.

¹⁰Andrew Eungi Kim and Daniel Connolly, “Institutions and Countercultures: Christianity’s Impact on South Korean Modernization,” *Religions* 15, no. 416 (2024): 3, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15040416>.

Island.¹¹ The island did not receive electrical service until 1990 whereas, for comparison, the capital of Nassau obtained electrical service in 1909.¹² In the present day, many residents live reciprocally with the land, though greater access to modern technologies is now available.

In the mid-20th century, a series of legislative decisions prioritizing development in Nassau stimulated the growth of the Bahamian tourism industry.¹³ Currently, tourism and related services comprise over 70% of the nation's annual gross domestic product and employ over half of the workforce.¹⁴ For a nation otherwise limited in natural resources, tourism can create revenue and opportunities for employment from one abundant resource: the tropical environment.¹⁵ The presence of tourism influences the everyday lives of local populations, shaping infrastructure projects and the jobs available.¹⁶ However, tourism is primarily concentrated in New Providence Island and Grand Bahama Island, with little foray into the Out Islands.¹⁷ Work by sociologists like Dunkel have analyzed how tourism influences Bahamians who move to urban areas for employment. However, little prior research has examined the impact of modernization and tourism on Bahamians still living in the Out Islands.

¹¹Laurel Richey-Abbey, "Bush Medicine in the Family Islands: The Medical Ethnobotany of Cat Island and Long Island, Bahamas" (PhD diss., Miami University, 2012), 16.

¹²Brown, "This is the Real Bahamas," 90.

¹³Dunkel, "Tourism as a Form of Demographic Imperialism," 178-179.

¹⁴"2023 Climate Investment Statements: The Bahamas," U.S. Department of State, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-investment-climate-statements/the-bahamas/>.

¹⁵Dunkel, "Tourism as a Form of Demographic Imperialism," 32.

¹⁶Dunkel, "Tourism as a Form of Demographic Imperialism," 92.

¹⁷Richey-Abbey, "Bush Medicine," 16.

Previous research on social systems has categorized the responses to disturbance, or change, into resilience, adaptation, or transformation.¹⁸ Although various definitions of resilience exist, social systems can demonstrate resilience when they face change but still maintain their distinctive features and overall identity.¹⁹ The social system exhibits adaptation when efforts arise to reduce the influence of the disturbance on the system's identity. With transformation, the disturbance changes the identity of the social system altogether.²⁰

Methods

A research team of Georgetown University faculty, students, and external partners traveled to Nassau, on New Providence Island, and Cat Island in The Bahamas for a period of ten days during May of 2024. The investigation's focus built upon prior research, *Cooking Up History: Honoring African American Resilience in the Chesapeake Bay*, conducted by the Woodshed Center at the Georgetown University Racial Justice Institute.

Data gathering was conducted through ethnographic field research methods, primarily the collection of oral interviews with residents of Cat Island. A trusted source on the island selected potential interviewees. The majority of residents interviewed, although not all, had been born and raised on the island. A total of twelve residents were interviewed, with interview durations ranging from under fifteen minutes to two hours. The interviewees consisted of eight men and four women, the majority of whom were over the age of fifty. To improve upon data collection, a more equitable distribution of youth and women could have been interviewed.

¹⁸Debra J. Davidson, "The Applicability of the Concept of Resilience to Social Systems: Some Sources of Optimism and Nagging Doubts," *Society & Natural Resources* 23, no. 12 (2010): 1145.

¹⁹Stephanie J. Rotarangi and Janet Stephenson, "Resilience Pivots: Stability and Identity in a Social-Ecological-Cultural System," *Ecology and Society* 19, no. 1 (2014): 2, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5751/ES-06262-190128>.

²⁰Davidson, "The Applicability of the Concept of Resilience," 1145.

Interviews covered the broad themes of cultural tradition and transmission. Questions specifically focused on foodway practices, the process of retaining Cat Island's traditions, colonialist histories, and the relationship of younger generations to the island's foodway practices.

Interviews were recorded with a portable audio recorder and uploaded into a transcription software. Photographs and videos were taken of each interviewee and used in the analysis of data. Each interviewee voluntarily signed a release form, allowing materials with their image to be used in publications and educational resources. To protect the privacy of individual interviewees, only the initials of interviewees are used after their quotes in this paper.²¹

Self-Sufficiency Through Foodways

Like the other islands in the Bahamian archipelago, Cat Island is composed of limestone with a thin layer of soil at the surface.²² The rocky land and lack of rich soil proves especially difficult for agriculture. Indeed, after the Revolutionary War in 1783, colonists who were loyal to Great Britain fled the Thirteen Colonies and settled in The Bahamas, then a British colony. After attempts at traditional plantation systems failed due to thin soil, many Loyalists soon left the islands.²³ In the present day, Cat Island residents still face issues with farming in the unforgiving terrain.

The local population on Cat Island has adapted to farming on the rocky land with a practice called pothole farming, also known as banana hole farming. After a storm, rainwater flows into naturally formed holes, some more like chasms, found in the limestone. The rainwater

²¹All collected research, including transcriptions and photographs, can be found at: https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1ZsOzux3-Afkacd0mgj9epQnU_C0maFno?usp=sharing.

²²Brown, "This is the Real Bahamas," 73.

²³Richey-Abbey, "Bush Medicine," 19.

carries nutrients into the hole, making the hole an ideal location to plant and grow crops. Cat Island residents use the tradition of pothole farming with a variety of crops, but most often with larger trees like bananas and mangoes, planting wherever the limestone holes occur rather than in orderly rows in a field (Figure 1).

After harvesting their crops, Cat Island residents use an array of preservation methods to extend the crop's shelf life. Staple foods like peas, corn, and beans are shelled by hand and stored in steel barrels or plastic drums. Crops like tomatoes and tamarind are turned into pastes and hot sauces, then bottled in empty glass beer bottles, capped, and boiled following family traditions (Figure 2). Other tropical fruits like sapodilla, mangoes, and guava can become jams. Coconuts are grated and boiled to leave coconut oil or diced and blended into coconut milk. One farmer showed the device he made to grate coconuts, a curved metal sheet poked with holes and nailed into a wooden block. The farmer noted, “when the abundance came, you make use of it” (GK). If a plentiful harvest arises, farmers find methods to preserve their crops, securing sustenance for themselves in later seasons. The practice of crop preservation ensures Cat Island residents have food year-round.

The local population on Cat Island learned the foodway traditions they practice from older generations. Parent-child socialization often holds a crucial role in imbuing certain cultural values in younger generations.²⁴ One farmer remembers as a child, “I always grew up with her, with my grandfather, with [my father], always planting... So we always had this, this, tradition to plant” (IC2). Cat Island residents learn to assess the most appropriate season to plant based on temperature and precipitation patterns through firsthand experience. Another resident declared, “Basically, it was just you learned by watching... No one sit me down

²⁴Liat Hasenfratz and Ariel Knafo-Noam, “Intergenerational Cultural Transmission: Looking Beyond the Processes of Parent-to-Child Socialization—A Comment on Tam,” *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 46, no. 10 (2015): 1347, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022115613028>.



Figure 1. Banana trees planted with the practice of pothole farming. Photo by John R. Diehl.



Figure 2. Cleaned glass beer bottles to be used in bottling tomatoes. Photo by John R. Diehl.

and say, ‘that's how you do it.’ As a little child you, you just watch your elders” (GK). Through exposure, Cat Island residents acquired foodway techniques from planting to cooking crops. Growing up practicing specific planting and preservation techniques, Cat Island residents learn how to live off of the land and sustain themselves.

Facing unpredictable disruptions, pothole farming and crop preservation practices allow the local population on Cat Island to remain self-sufficient. Two major challenges mentioned by residents were the island’s dependency on the mailboat and the damage sustained from hurricanes. Cat Island receives mail and imports, including food supplies, from Nassau once a week by boat. The prices of goods at retail food stores on Cat Island are high due to the extended supply chain. As one farmer noted, “we growing stuff here, to feed us and our family that if the mailboat don't come, so it didn't come” (IC1). Cat Island residents hope to ensure that they can always independently sustain themselves. Indeed, nearly every individual interviewed spoke of farming as crucial to their daily lives. Furthermore, as a low-lying tropical island, Cat Island is susceptible to the effects of natural weather disasters. Most residents possessed experience preparing for and surviving hurricanes. One farmer recounts, “We would shell the corn and put the corn in drums...so after hurricane, you still had your corn, and you still had your peas, you still had the bean, and whatnot” (CS). Through the practice of pothole farming to grow food in the rocky terrain and the preservation of crops to ensure sustenance year-round, Cat Island residents prioritize self-reliance. Self-sufficiency through foodways forms the identity of the local population on Cat Island.

Recently, modernization on Cat Island has affected how the local population plans to plant and preserve their crops. In May of 2024, the Ministry of Agriculture and Marine Resources of The Bahamas donated a package worth \$821,068 to the Cat Island community.

Included were a John Deere 6175M tractor with attachments, a community food processing center, and shade houses for the two Cat Island high schools. As Prime Minister of The Bahamas Philip Davis, a Cat Island native, explained, the tractor attachments would enable farmers to break through rock and till the soil on their land. Through a tractor rotation program, every Cat Island resident will have access to more efficient methods of planting. The limestone terrain no longer poses an obstacle and farmers do not need to rely on pothole farming. The donated processing plant contains semi-automated equipment, like vacuum packaging machines and volumetric fillers, removing the need for traditional manual methods to process and preserve crops. Indeed, before the introduction of the processing plant, farmers were already looking for ways to increase efficiency in food preservation. The same farmer who grated coconuts with his handheld device transitioned to using an electric blender when the appliance became available for purchase and shipment to Cat Island. One farmer noted that the use of machinery would allow him to partake in plantation agriculture, increasing his crop yield and enabling him to scale his farm for commercial production. Within the same generation of Cat Island residents, traditional foodway practices have given way to modern practices of planting and preservation.

The Disturbance of Modernization

In contrast to prior generations, the current youth on Cat Island generally resist taking on Cat Island's traditional foodway practices. Younger generations appeared to prefer a modernized way of life. One farmer described, "when I say, 'look, come, go with me in the field,' " the youth would answer, " 'I ain't going to no field. I ain't going. I'm not 'gonna dirty my nails. I'm not going to farm' " (CS). Cat Island youth oppose engaging in the seemingly outdated, manually strenuous foodway practices of their elders. Other youth migrate to urban areas in search of employment and see little reason to return to Cat Island. Employment opportunities in the

tourism industry are open at hotels, restaurants, marinas, preserved colonial ruins, and in related services like gift shops, golf courses, tennis courts, and nightclubs.²⁵ Now, on days when cruise ships dock at the Nassau Cruise Port, shops in Nassau's commercial district are bustling, catering to tourists exploring the city. Yet the next day, when the cruise ships and tourists leave, the commercial district is barren. Certain establishments are only open on days when cruise ships dock, illustrating the influence of tourism on daily life in The Bahamas. The tourism industry may influence the youth on Out Islands to move to urban tourist centers with more abundant employment opportunities. Then, compared to the developed cities, Cat Island seems to afford few opportunities for economic growth or social mobility. An interviewee who spent ten years in Shanghai, China before returning to Cat Island described, "when the tradition doesn't...keep up with the technology and the times and the allure of the fast city, this is what you get. And it didn't just happen in Cat Island, it happened in most of the Family Islands in The Bahamas" (IC2). The internal migration to urban areas reduces the population on Cat Island that can continue the cultural practices of older generations. Presently, when one generation on Cat Island plants and harvests the land for food, the next generation generally does not. Perhaps the most substantial threat to the continuation of Cat Island's self-sufficiency is the resistance of youth to taking on the foodway practices of their elders.

Cat Island's Response

On Cat Island, efforts are being made to counter the lack of youth interest in agriculture. The shade houses provided by the Ministry of Agriculture and Marine Resources will expand the foundational agriculture education at both high schools on Cat Island. Already, the current academic curriculum in schools focuses on the importance of agriculture and emphasizes the

²⁵Dunkel, "Tourism as a Form of Demographic Imperialism," 137.

diversity of related career fields, including hydroponics, aquaponics, and forestry. Some high school students have expressed initial interest in agriculture as a career, but as the agricultural science teacher declared, “we need to make it more sexy” (HF). The shade houses, which allow residents to extend the growing season and control for pests, may help increase crop yields. Through the implementation of technology which enables greater farming productivity, agriculture can support residents financially, making the occupation more appealing to youth. Younger generations may have less reason to migrate to urban areas for employment when farming on Cat Island can prove lucrative. Additionally, the agricultural science teacher highlighted that changes should be made to how the curriculum introduces students to agricultural practices. Instead of teaching students to prepare the land by hand, as is traditionally done with a machete or grub hoe, the teacher plans to expose students to operating the John Deere tractor donated by the Ministry. Similarly, training will be provided to students at the new community food processing plant. Rather than teaching traditional crop preservation methods, students will learn how to use semi-automatic equipment for food processing. To present agriculture in a more attractive manner, Cat Island educators will teach the next generation of youth to use modern machinery as a more efficient agricultural practice.

In response to the disturbance of modernization, Cat Island demonstrates the response of adaptation. Cat Island may experience a loss of traditional foodway practices in order to maintain the emphasis on self-sufficiency through foodways. As Cat Island elders narrated, traditional foodway practices like pothole farming and food preservation had been passed down through generations as modes of resilience in face of the natural environment. Yet, with the influence of modernization, through the introduction of agricultural machinery and the allure of urban areas, traditional foodway practices are likely to be lost. Older generations hope to transition away

from traditional ways of farming in pursuit of greater crop yields with machinery, while younger generations largely forgo the practice of farming altogether. Even attempts at engaging youth in agriculture emphasize education on modern agricultural practices rather than traditional practices. However, for Cat Island residents, the end objective is still to possess self-sufficiency through foodways. With excitement around the idea of commercial agricultural production, Cat Island farmers can use machinery to generate a profit and financially support themselves. The Prime Minister noted that if faced with global health emergencies or geopolitical conflicts, the focus on farming would always serve Cat Island with a steady food source. Similarly, Cat Island educators are willing to sacrifice tradition in order to encourage the overall practice of agriculture amongst younger generations. If more youth took up farming, the island's import bill would decrease, and the current money spent on importing food could be diverted to improving other resources for residents. Cat Island residents do not look to maintain traditional foodway practices, which would exhibit resilience, but also do not accept the loss in agriculture for self-sufficiency, which would be transformation. Instead through adaptation, by prioritizing modern agricultural practices to generate larger crop yields and increase the appeal of agriculture to youth, Cat Island's local population may retain their identity of self-sufficiency through foodways.

Further research must be completed in the future to accurately assess the impact of modernization after the prospective machinery and education curriculum have been implemented.

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