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Black Resiliency in the Caribbean: Cat Island, Bahamas

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August 2024

Abstract

This research project explores the cultural heritage of the Afro-Caribbean communities on Cat Island in the Bahamas. It aims to understand how these cultural practices reflect both historical and contemporary experiences of Black populations and community resilience in postcolonial societies. Proposed by Professor Anita Gonzalez, who teaches in the Black Studies and Performing Arts departments at Georgetown University and co-founded the Racial Justice Institute, this project aligns with her emphasis on the power of cultural expression in social movements.

My fellow researchers and I conducted fieldwork over a 10-day period, primarily on Cat Island. The island is 150 square miles, and we traversed its 45-mile, island-spanning road to visit and interview residents, including farmers, herbalists, historians, and artisans. We conducted all interviews in person, respecting the residents' preferences, and recorded them to ensure accuracy. Our goal was to gather their direct perspective on their experiences and ancestral knowledge to challenge the colonial and Eurocentric frameworks that have overwhelmingly characterized ethnographic and historical research.

Acknowledgments

I am deeply grateful to the Laidlaw Foundation, Dr. Anita Gonzalez, and the Georgetown University Laidlaw Scholars Programme for giving me the opportunity and resources to culturally immerse myself and conduct this research. Additionally, I would like to extend a special appreciation to Yvonne, Margaret, and Carl at the Rollezz Resort on Cat Island, who gave us a beautiful place to stay, guided our excursions, and facilitated connections with the locals on Cat Island. I am also highly grateful to the residents of Cat Island who generously shared their stories for my use in this research: Christopher Stubbs, Daisy Mae Hunter, Bloneva Hunter,

Garth King, Rita King, Ian Cleare, Ivan Cleare, Jamaal Moncur, Julian Russell, Horace Forbes, Harrison King, and Pamela Poitier.

An Introduction to Cat Island

Landing on Cat Island, I was immediately entranced by its environment: the rolling hills, crystal blue water, incomparably peaceful beaches, and the thick, tall brush only interrupted by the dirt roads we drove down. Before arriving there, I knew that the Cat Island lifestyle relied on its land to fulfill its agricultural, wellness, and cultural needs, and its appearance only confirmed that. The houses and infrastructure blended into and incorporated the fauna, contrasting the common American practice of clearing and completely altering the land for commercial or residential use. This environmental intentionality is a tenant of the Cat Island identity: resilience. The people of Cat Island are descendants of those who survived and flourished despite colonization and enslavement. They have preserved an illustrious cultural heritage that reflects their ingenuity and connection to the land. This includes the vibrant tradition of "Rake-and-Scrape" music (where musicians use objects like screwdrivers and saws as instruments) and the sustainable farming, fishing, and cooking practices transmitted through generations. As commercial "modernization" and global influences- like tourism and industry- encroach upon the island, its residents' persistent lifestyles and traditions further embody their legacy of strength and cultural pride. Cat Islanders are not just survivors of history but creators, cultivators, and storytellers.

The traditions of Cat Island and similar communities have been passed down mainly through oral means. However, the destructive legacies of colonialism have too often erased or devalued their perspectives, withholding from these regions the chance to cement their written

records in academia and historical discourse. Traditional academic and legal frameworks commonly dismiss oral narratives, resulting in an incomplete and biased understanding of the historical and ongoing struggles of Cat Island and the Bahamas. Because of this, these oral histories are some of the only sources that capture these regions' authentic backgrounds and practices without Western alterations. Researchers must legitimize and prioritize oral histories within their documentation to truly appreciate the realities of communities like those on Cat Island.

For around eight centuries, the Lucayans, a Taino-related indigenous people, inhabited Cat Island and the rest of the Bahamas.[1] The Lucayans thrived within multifamily groups, surviving from fishing, agriculture, and trade. The arrival of Christopher Columbus in 1492 disrupted their society, and the Lucayan population is believed to have been entirely decimated within 25 years because of European-introduced diseases and the harshness of enslavement by the colonizers.[2] The Bahamas became a crown colony of Great Britain in the 18th century, and Loyalists from Virginia formed the first white settlement on Cat Island in 1783 as they were fleeing from the American Revolution. During this Loyalist Plantation Period (1783-1838), the colonists planned to lead cotton plantations like those in the American South, but saw that the Bahamian soil was unfit, so they shifted to planting other crops using forced labor.[3] Through the Loyalists' participation in the Atlantic Slave Trade, Cat Island's population grew dramatically, with over 90% of people being of African descent by 1788.[4]

Before the 20th century, Cat Island was called "San Salvador". However, in 1926, the Bahamian House of Assembly- still run by the colonizers- passed an act that officially

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[1] Meyers, "Engraved Ship Iconography in The Bahamas: Approaches and Insights from Cat Island."
[2] Morsink, "Spanish-Lucayan Interaction: Continuity of Native Economies in Early Historic Times."
[3] Meyers
[4] Craton, Michael, and Gail Saunders, *Islanders in the Stream: A History of the Bahamian People: Volume One: From Aboriginal Times to the End of Slavery*.

transferred the name "San Salvador" from Cat Island to Watling's Island.[5] Even though the current San Salvador (previously Watling's Island) is widely considered the site of Columbus' first landfall in the Americas, many of Cat Island's residents believe that Columbus landed on their island. The local lore purports that this was an act of colonial erasure driven by political and economic motives, including land grabs and promoting tourism linked to Columbus. The belief is so ingrained in the island's history that its southern part is named "Columbus Point." Most Cat Islanders we interviewed were adamant that Cat Island is, indeed, the site of Columbus' landing. They cited various pre-1926 familial records with the name "San Salvador" printed on them.

Contemporarily, Cat Island is one of the Bahamas' smaller and less industrial islands. Its population has dwindled from 5,244 around the year 1900 to only 1,522 recorded by the 2010 census.[6]

Oral Histories

Oral histories are the key to the past in communities like Cat Island, where written historical and ancestral records are scarce or manipulated. They offer an alternative to the Eurocentric narrative in written histories. Oral transmission is necessary for preserving Cat Islands' traditions because its colonial education system has focused primarily on the colonizer's history, leaving Bahamian children disconnected from their heritage. Cat Islanders being excluded from their history was a deliberate outcome of colonialism, as the British sought to maintain control by keeping the local population unaware of their people's accomplishments. Great Britain prohibited the Black majority from holding power; Black Bahamians did not gain

[5] Meyers, "Engraved Ship Iconography in The Bahamas: Approaches and Insights from Cat Island."
[6] Meyers

significant control over government and economics until the late 1960s and did not gain independence from Great Britain until 1973.[7]

Christopher Stubbs is a Cat Island native who has taught, farmed, and served as an island commissioner. On the topic of educational omission, he reflected, "We didn't study Bahamian history. We had to do English and American history".[8] Mr. Stubbs elaborated on how he knows extensively about figures like "Henry VIII" and "Catherine of Aragon" but learned nothing about Bahamian Figures like James Weldon Johnson, who, alongside his brother J. Rosamond, wrote the song "Lift Every Voice and Sing," which is integral to the African American struggle and championed across the Black diaspora.[9] Garth King is another Cat Islander who has taught, farmed, and wrote poetry. He reinforced how colonizers designed his education system in order to keep Bahamians ignorant of their history. He explained that he never learned about Bahamian heroes like Stephen Dillet, the first Black member of Parliament in the Bahamas, or poets like Derek Walcott, who later won the Nobel Prize for literature.[10] Mr. Garth King shared a poignant poem on this topic that illustrates his deep connection to the African diaspora. His poem, which remains unpublished, captures his emotional ties to the Harlem Renaissance, even though he grew up in the Bahamas. He proclaimed that he "was there" for these moments of Black resilience.[11]

Referring back to the contested landing site of Columbus, this manipulation of history also exemplifies how Cat Island's significance has been subdued. When asked about Columbus and the name-changing debacle, Christopher Stubbs responded, "Yes. You're quite correct. A name has been stolen, and it was stolen by the government. Cat Island is where Columbus

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[7] "Current Economic Position and Prospects of the Bahamas."
[8] Christopher Stubbs, interview by Delaney Sebora et al., Cat Island, Bahamas, May 21, 2024.
[9] Lindsay -Habermann, "Till Victory Is Won: The Staying Power Of 'Lift Every Voice And Sing.'"
[10] Garth King, interview by Delaney Sebora et al., Cat Island, Bahamas, May 24, 2024.
[11] Garth King

actually landed. He actually came to Cat Island. We have Columbus Bay and, in Cat Island, all the characteristics of his visit are found in Cat Island. Cat Island hills, still have the highest hills in the Bahamas. [...] So, if Columbus was coming from Spain, Portugal, it means that the first place they would see is the island with the highest hill".[12]

Furthermore, Garth King added in his interview, “On my grandmother's will, when she deeded this four acres to my granddaddy, it says Sarah Atlanta Culma of Knowles, San Salvador. Okay. The name change came about in 1926. That was done in the House of Assembly. And that was underhand work. There was a land grab in San Salvador. They had that all cut and dry with a Catholic priest named Father Chrysostom. He was involved in that, too, and they just did a bunch of crap, change the name and ended up with some land and they made their livings. And we live happy ever after with the results".[13] Harrison King, a farmer and business owner on Cat Island, stated, "My daddy was born Port Howe in 1919, Port Howe, San Salvador, and I was born 1959 Port Howe, Cat Island. [...] The British did not […] They never told us that in school. So they lied to us that this is Cat Island and this island was named after a pirate by the name of Arthur Catt. And so they drop one of the 't,' and make 'Catt' Island into the animal 'Cat' Island".[14] These Cat Islanders’ collective opinion on the historical narrative supports the idea that colonizers provided misinformation to Bahamian students to obscure Great Britain’s colonial transgressions, like the arbitrary grabbing and renaming of Bahamian islands.

In addition to their ancestry, they rely on the words of older generations to maintain their environmental practices. Daisy Mae Hunter is a farmer, crafter, and specialist in bush medicine. In her interview, she touched upon how she learned methods of foraging, healing, and farming by observing and speaking to her elders: "I learned part of my family history from my mother, my

[12] Christopher Stubbs, interview by Delaney Sebora et al., Cat Island, Bahamas, May 21, 2024.
[13] Garth King, interview by Delaney Sebora et al., Cat Island, Bahamas, May 24, 2024.
[14] Harrison King, interview by Delaney Sebora et al., Cat Island, Bahamas, May 23, 2024.

father, or my aunt or my uncle, some of my older persons. That's how I learned it, from them. And so whatever they instill in me, I has it that I can pass on to my children, or some of my other siblings or family, I can pass down to them".[15] Hunter also shared a story from her ancestors that points to a shared family memory. She recalled, "One of the things that really stands out with me, with my family history, is the rebellions of a part of my family history. Like the Golden Grove plantation, where there was a revolt we held where the slave master didn't want to give up. He just wanted to keep everybody there bound. And so for me, that kind of stuck with me for a long while".[16] Hunter is referring to the Golden Grove Uprising of 1831, which was sparked when Joseph Hunter, a plantation owner, refused to grant his enslaved workers a break on Christmas Day.[17] Daisy Mae Hunter is a direct descendant of the people enslaved under Joseph Hunter, and she gave us a tour of this land, which is now in her family's hands. She referred to the uprising with a collective "we," which illustrates the generational continuity of resilience during the rebellion. The stories from her ancestors are rare primary sources from the perspective of those enslaved during this period.

Pamela Poitier, the daughter of actor Sidney Poitier (who was raised on the island), grew up in the United States but described her spiritual connection to Cat Island. Despite her father's fame and her exposure to urbanity, Pamela returned to Cat Island because of her appreciation for the values of her ancestors. She shared her preference for old lifestyles over new ones, particularly when it comes to traditional wellness techniques. For example, "There are certain bushes that if you, you know, rub against them, they give you an itch. Moringa trees. You take the leaves, and you do, so I'm kind of- I take it all because I think all the old ways are way better than the new ways. I don't like the new ways. So, I take from my roots. I take from my cultures,

[15] Daisy Mae Hunter, interview by Delaney Sebora et al., Cat Island, Bahamas, May 24, 2024.
[16] Daisy Mae Hunter
[17] Meyers, "Striking for Freedom: The 1831 Uprising at Golden Grove Plantation, Cat Island."

and I make it modern for me".[18] Her identity and philosophy rely on the oral wisdom of Cat Islands' ancestors and their knowledge of the land. When asked about the evolution of her lifestyle on Cat Island, she responded, "Well I read. I talk to the elders. I sit at their feet. And I ask questions."[19] Pamela's story of returning to Cat Island centers on discovering her roots, as well as her responsibility to carry forth her ancestors' words.

By articulating their stories, these Cat Islanders combat historical erasure and allow future generations to continue their legacy of resilience and cultural pride.

Living Reciprocally With the Land

The traditional farming practices on Cat Island demonstrate their profound, reciprocal relationship with the environment. Their agriculture prioritizes sustainability and respect for natural resources. Multiple interviewees explained the example of "pothole farming," a technique where farmers clear small pockets of fertile soil amidst Cat Island's rocky terrain. This creates micro-gardens where diverse crops can grow, contrasting with the modern American method of clearing the land and planting homogenous plots. Pothole farming maximizes the use of Cat Island's limited arable land and minimizes environmental disruption.

Garth King grows crops on his land and emphasizes the importance of using the land wisely. He enriches his soil with natural fertilizers like bat guano and chicken manure instead of relying on chemicals. He advised, "If you don't teach yourself ways to enrich the soil instead of just exhausting it year after year [...] then you gotta, that gotta come through education."[20] Harrison King reinforced this sustainable approach to farming in the number of crops he produces: "I grow enough to eat, to sell, and to give away [...] the more I give, the more they

[18] Pamela Poitier, interview by Delaney Sebora et al., Cat Island, Bahamas, May 26, 2024.
[19] Pamela Poitier
[20] Garth King, interview by Delaney Sebora et al., Cat Island, Bahamas, May 24, 2024.

bear. When nobody else is growing, my field blossoms."[21] Harrison also rotates his crops, which keeps his soil fertile and productive. This allows his farm to yield crops like tomatoes, sweet peppers, and watermelons year-round. Their holistic approach to farming reflects the community's ecological respect and foresight to maintain the land for future generations.

In addition to agriculture, Cat Islanders' use of bush medicine signifies their interdependence with the land. Daisy Mae Hunter conveys her ancestors' legacy of traditional healing methods through her bush medicine expertise. She explained, "I come about doing medicine through my old family ancestors and also the older ones in the community. I usually like go around to older people and talk with them and see them using different bushes for different things. [...] I still have a legacy to go on."[22] Hunter treats her community with native plants like aloes, bay geranium, and fever grass; she forages all of these amidst the bush, which may appear to be filled with useless weeds to foreigners who do not have the same environmental knowledge.

Modernization- in the technological sense- risks losing these traditional farming and wellness techniques and Cat Islanders' generational respect for the land. Shortly after the research trip ended, the Bahamian government held an "official handing over ceremony" where they unveiled the first John Deere tractor and other farming tools to Cat Island. This equipment will surely increase efficiency, but it threatens to alter the traditional practices that have sustained Cat Island for centuries.

Cat Island faces the challenge of navigating industrialization while maintaining its cultural heritage. Another local farmer, Ivan Cleare, spoke about how modernization has created a dependence on exported goods, yet he prioritizes self-sufficiency: "We're trying to grow sweet

[21] Harrison King, interview by Delaney Sebora et al., Cat Island, Bahamas, May 23, 2024.
[22] Daisy Mae Hunter, interview by Delaney Sebora et al., Cat Island, Bahamas, May 24, 2024.

potato, yam, cassava, whatever. We could make cassava bread, you know, like, we just want to be at that stage that if something's gonna happen, you have war break out, you can't get it, America might not get it. If American don't get it then we wouldn't get it right- because no. Because we import- almost everything from America".[23] However, as Ian Cleare (Ivan's son) referred to the trend of youth leaving Cat Island for the "allure of the fast city," he pointed out, "When the tradition doesn't [...] keep up with the technology and the times [...] this is what you get."[24] This conversation illustrates the delicate balance between adapting to the global climate and preserving valuable traditions and oral information.

Reflection

Preserving Cat Island's unique cultural practices is not just an act of safeguarding history but a necessary step in promoting a more inclusive and accurate understanding of our global identity. These communities must be supported in their efforts to transmit their culture and history amidst the pressures of assimilating to a "globalized ideal." Through this project, I aim to advocate for research practices that include both academic inquiry and community engagement and also promote the voices of groups that have been historically marginalized. Cat Island's history and its people deserve to be recognized. Their knowledge has been passed down through generations of storytelling, observation, and struggle, and the value in this surpasses what can be learned about them in written records or history books.

[23] Ivan and Ian Cleare, interview by Delaney Sebora et al., Cat Island, Bahamas, May 25, 2024.
[24] Ivan and Ian Cleare.

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