"Relational Roots and Ecological Futures: Bridging Whitehead, Cobb, and Gullah Wisdom Toward a Decolonized Ecological Civilization"

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Introduction

The ecological polycrisis facing humanity (and non-humanity) calls for innovative frameworks that bridge scientific, philosophical, and spiritual approaches to understanding our relationship with the Creation. We as a species have caused a great deal of the ontological and physical damage to our planet and ecosystems that we are just now beginning to comprehend in a short-sighted pursuit of objectivist knowledge, conceits of power over land and the non-human and human, and especially profit based on conceptions of capitalistic tendencies. This paper examines the convergence of Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy and Gullah spiritual ecologies, arguing that both traditions offer transformative insights for addressing environmental challenges, especially when enjoined and seen as a way forward that moves humanity as a direct agent towards a conception of what comes next after "civilization." At their core, both process thought and Gullah eco-spiritualities reject mechanistic, dualistic conceptions of reality, instead affirming an interconnected and relational understanding of existence. Whitehead's process-relational metaphysics emphasizes that all entities, human and non-human alike, participate in a dynamic flow of experience and creativity, contributing to the ongoing "creative advance" of the universe (Whitehead 1978, 21). Similarly, Gullah spiritual ecologies, deeply rooted in African cosmological traditions adapted to the Lowcountry regions of South Carolina[1], embodies a

[1] For this paper, I am focusing on Gullah Geechee communities in the Lowcountry of South Carolina (primarily St. Helena Island in Beaufort County) due to the ethnographic research I am beginning this Spring directly with community members and leadership of these communities. Although I do not want to erase or mute the Gullah communities in Georgia and those that exist in other locations along what we now call the East Coast of the United States, this affords me the opportunity to not speak for communities I have not and will not be in intentional communication with in my wider project (although that is always an option I would love to pursue in the future).

worldview that celebrates the interdependence of humans, nature, and the spiritual realm (Pollitzer, *The Gullah People and Their African Heritage*, 1999, 42).

Whitehead's philosophy provides a foundation for understanding the relational nature of consciousness as an aspect of existence, challenging both materialist reductionism and idealist abstraction. Central to his thought is "prehension," which posits that all actual entities feel and influence one another, forming a relational continuity that transcends the boundaries of seemingly inert matter and isolated subjectivity (Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 1978, 19). In parallel, Gullah spiritual practices, such as ring shouts, communal storytelling, and ancestral reverence, reflect an embodied awareness of interconnection, much like the embodiness of phenomenological thinkers such as Merleau-Ponty in addition to Whitehead's prehension. These practices are not merely cultural artifacts but lived expressions of what Whitehead describes as "heightened consciousness" in ontological epistemologies, achieved through rhythmic and relational engagement with the environment and community (Crawford, *Gullah Spirituals*, 2021, 53). Gullah environmental stewardship, such as sustainable farming on "heirs' property" and the maintenance of sacred natural sites, offers concrete examples of this relational consciousness in action. For instance, Gullah families have historically practiced communal farming methods that preserve soil health, reduce ecological degradation, and sustain intergenerational ties to ancestral land (Campbell 2020, 98).

Building on the work of John Cobb, this paper situates these insights within the broader vision of ecological civilization. Cobb's advocacy for a cultural shift from consumerism driven by the Western conception of capitalistic civilization building toward what could be labeled sustainability (for lack of a better term) aligns with Gullah practices that prioritize community

well-being, sustainable land use, and spiritual reverence for nature (Cobb, *Is It Too Late?* 1995, 14). Where Cobb's process philosophy offers a theoretical and possible blueprint for ecological civilization, Gullah spirituality serves as a living, practical manifestation of these ideals in many facets and points to the possibilities for colonialist Western thought patterns to choose a different path in a non-extractive and decolonial approach. The Gullah people's enduring relationship with the land through practices such as rotational agriculture, environmental storytelling, and spiritual ceremonies that honor the natural world illustrates how ecological consciousness can resist these exploitative tendencies of modern "development." However, contemporary pressures on Gullah communities, including land dispossession, socio-economic injustice, real estate development, and climate change in South Carolina's Lowcountry, underscore the urgency of recognizing and preserving these ecological traditions through activism (Burton 2014, 75).

This paper addresses what is arguably a significant gap in this bridging of scholarship: while Whitehead's process thought has been widely applied to ecological philosophy, its comparative potential with Indigenous and African diasporic ecological wisdoms and what those paths of knowledge generation can teach surrounding communities in rural and urban South Carolina about community, development, and concepts of "civilization" remains underexplored. Focusing on Gullah spiritual ecology, this paper highlights the mutual enrichment possible between process philosophy and Indigenous ecological perspectives. It reveals how Gullah practices provide grounded, place-based examples of Whitehead's relational metaphysics and Cobb's vision for ecological civilization.

The analysis proceeds along three key trajectories: First, it explores how Whitehead's process philosophy establishes a metaphysical framework for understanding reality as inherently

relational and dynamic. This section delves into concepts such as “actual occasions” and “prehension,” illuminating all existence's interdependent nature. Second, it examines the spiritual ecology of the Gullah people, focusing on their cosmology, practices, and sustainable land management traditions. Here, the relational consciousness articulated in process philosophy is grounded in lived experience. Third, the paper considers how these two frameworks in the form of process philosophy and Gullah eco-spirituality together offer a compelling model for ecological consciousness and environmental ethics that are actively able to resist the pressures of colonialist Western civilization looking for resource extraction. By integrating Whitehead’s theoretical insights with the practical wisdom of Gullah spirituality, this paper proposes that ecological civilization must be rooted in both relational metaphysics and embodied cultural practices.

In addressing contemporary environmental challenges, this synthesis provides a way forward that transcends the limitations of mechanical materialism, dualistic thought, and socio-economic models based on resource ideologies. It demonstrates that spiritual ecology, as exemplified by the Gullah people, and process-relational philosophy articulated by Whitehead and Cobb are mutually enriching approaches to fostering ecological consciousness and intentionality. Together, they challenge dominant paradigms of exploitation and invite us into a more holistic, participatory relationship with the natural world (Berry 1988, 15; Abram 1997, 45).

Process Philosophy: Relational Ontology and Ecological Thought

Alfred North Whitehead’s *Process and Reality* presents a metaphysical system that fundamentally rethinks the nature of existence by replacing static, substance-based conceptions

of reality with a relational ontology. Whitehead identifies actual entities as the building blocks of reality, but rather than isolated objects, they are processes of becoming, shaped by their relationships with all other entities (Whitehead 1978, 18). These entities experience reality through prehension, an active process of "feeling" or integrating past influences into new, creative expressions of existence (Whitehead 1978, 19).

This understanding of relationality distinguishes Whitehead's panexperientialism from both physicalism, which reduces consciousness to brain activity, and panpsychism, which posits experience as a universal property of matter. Whitehead bridges this divide by suggesting that experience is not an emergent property of certain complex entities but an inherent quality of all actual occasions, from the simplest to the most complicated. This relational experience culminates in what he calls concrescence, where diverse prehensions unify into novel forms of existence. Reality, therefore, is not a static assemblage of objects but a "creative advance into novelty" (Whitehead 1978, 21).

The ecological implications of Whitehead's metaphysics are profound if we are able to extend that understanding, which I am confident is the case. By recognizing relationality and experience as fundamental to all entities, Whitehead provides a foundation for an ecological worldview that sees humanity as embedded within, not separate from, the natural world. This insight challenges Western anthropocentric paradigms that regard "nature"[2] as an inert resource and has parallels with Indigenous traditions, including Gullah spiritual ecology, that honor the

[2] The term "nature" is problematic for me, but I use it here to denote the wider Creation as I do throughout this paper.

interconnectedness of all life and insist on not viewing land, water, and non-humans as potential wealth-generators or something apart from one's self.

John Cobb extends Whitehead's insights into the practical realm of ecological thought, arguing that the ecological crisis stems from the modern world's anthropocentric and consumerist values. In *Is It Too Late? A Theology of Ecology*, Cobb proposes the concept of an "ecological civilization," a cultural transformation where sustainability, relationality, and harmony with nature replace the destructive values of growth and exploitation (Cobb 1995, 23). Cobb writes, "We must learn to see ourselves as participants, not masters, in the life of the Earth," a statement that echoes Whitehead's rejection of dualistic thinking that separates humans from the rest of nature (Cobb 1995, 28).

The transition from Whitehead's more abstract metaphysical principles to Cobb's more practical ecological vision illustrates the power of process thought to address concrete ecological challenges in the twenty-first century. This bridge becomes particularly vivid when applied to Gullah spiritual ecology, where cultural practices already embody many of Cobb's ideals. For example, Gullah traditions emphasize communal land use, sustainable farming, and spiritual reverence for natural spaces. These practices reflect a deep understanding of relationality and interdependence. Burial sites, for instance, are seen as sacred places where the living and the ancestral coexist and are able to seemingly communicate, mirroring Whitehead's idea of the "creative advance," where the past influences and co-constitutes the present (Campbell, Gullah Days, 2020, 75).

The work of thinkers like Isabelle Stengers and David Abram reinforces the ecological implications of Whitehead's metaphysics. Stengers argues in *Thinking with Whitehead* that his

relational ontology demands ethical engagement with the more-than-human world, urging a shift from domination to co-creation (Stengers 2011, 12). Similarly, Abram connects Whitehead's process philosophy to embodied experience, showing how direct sensory interaction with nature fosters ecological awareness. Abram writes, "Our bodies know themselves as part of the breathing Earth," highlighting how relational experience grounds ecological consciousness (Abram 1997, 33).

This synthesis of process philosophy and ecological wisdom / activism finds practical expression in the Gullah worldview. Charles Hartshorne's exploration of panpsychism further strengthens this connection, positing that all entities, from rocks to rivers, possess some degree of experience and agency (Hartshorne 1950, 214). In Gullah communities, this idea is not abstract but lived: the land itself is honored as a spiritual agent, and ecological stewardship is practiced not as a duty but as a reciprocal relationship with the Earth. This enacted idea actively resists pressures from development of new golf courses, resorts, beach destinations, and foodways on St. Helena Island in Beaufort County even in the present as we are seeing dozens of new attempts to counter the Gullah community's resistant response from those who want to encroach on their ancestral land and have brought numerous petitions to Beaufort County.

However, the convergence of Whitehead's metaphysics, Cobb's ecological civilization, and Gullah spiritual ecology demonstrates the power of process thought to bridge more abstract philosophy with concrete ecological wisdom and activism. Whitehead's ideas provide a metaphysical foundation, Cobb extends these principles into actionable frameworks, and the Gullah people embody these ideals through practices that honor relationality, interconnectedness, and sustainability. By grounding ecological consciousness in relational experience, process

philosophy offers both a theoretical and practical path for addressing the ecological crisis, emphasizing harmony and co-creation over exploitation and domination.

Gullah Spiritual Ecology: A Relational Praxis

Gullah spiritual ecology offers a living, relational praxis that aligns profoundly with Whitehead's relational metaphysics, particularly his concepts of prehension, concrescence, and panexperientialism. Emerging from the historical and cultural experiences of the Gullah people who are descendants of enslaved West Africans who were forcibly settled in the Lowcountry of South Carolina to perform rice planting, growing, and harvesting on extractive plantations. This worldview integrates spirituality, cultural memory, and ecological stewardship into a holistic understanding of the natural world. Far from abstract theorizing, Gullah spiritual ecology is a lived philosophy that exemplifies an interdependent relational ontology.

The Gullah lifeways, shaped by African traditions and adapted to the ecological realities of the southeastern United States, reflect an embodied awareness of the interconnection between humans, ancestors, and the land. As Emory Shaw Campbell notes in *Gullah Days*, the Gullah worldview rejects dualisms that separate spiritual and material, human and non-human. Instead, it embraces a continuum of existence where all entities, whether living, ancestral, or non-human, participate in an ongoing relational process (Campbell 2020, 42). This perspective finds a strong parallel in Whitehead's concept of *prehension*, where every entity "feels" its environment and integrates this experience into its becoming (Whitehead 1978, 19). For the Gullah, ancestral presence is not metaphorical but an ongoing relationship expressed through rituals, burial practices, and oral traditions that prehend the past as an active, living influence on the present.

Gullah rituals and spiritual practices serve as creative acts of concrescence, or the integration of past, present, and future into novel expressions of community and ecological stewardship. In ring shouts, for example, rhythmic movements and chants preserve ancestral connections while creating communal solidarity and ecological awareness. Eric Crawford's *Gullah Spirituals* describes how these musical practices link spiritual and environmental consciousness, expressing an "embodied relationality" that mirrors Whitehead's understanding of experience as dynamic and participatory (Crawford 2021, 88). The ring shout exemplifies how Gullah traditions integrate the past (ancestral memory), the present (communal gathering), and the future (cultural resilience) into a unified creative process that honors both spiritual and ecological interdependence.

Gullah oral traditions further demonstrate how relational praxis embodies process philosophy's rejection of static being in favor of becoming. As William Pollitzer emphasizes in *The Gullah People and Their African Heritage*, storytelling and oral histories function as cultural preservation and as dynamic acts of co-creation that transmit ecological knowledge across generations (Pollitzer 1999, 104). Whitehead's *creative advance* finds direct application here: Gullah stories adapt and evolve to address contemporary challenges while maintaining continuity with ancestral wisdom. For instance, oral traditions emphasize the sacredness of land, water, and community as interconnected and interdependent entities, aligning with Whitehead's panexperientialism, which views all entities as possessing some degree of experience (Whitehead 1978, 22).

The practical implications of Gullah spiritual ecology can be seen in their approaches to land use and environmental stewardship. The *National Park Service Gullah Culture Special*

Resource Study highlights the Gullah commitment to preserving sacred spaces, such as burial grounds and communal lands, against the pressures of modern development (NPS 2005, 32). For the Gullah, land is not merely a resource but a living entity that embodies ancestral relationships and demands reciprocal care. This praxis resonates with John Cobb's vision of ecological civilization, where sustainability and relationality replace consumerist exploitation (Cobb 1995, 27). Gullah practices, such as sustainable fishing, farming, and communal land ownership, provide tangible examples of ecological consciousness that Whiteheadian process thought advocates theoretically.

Moreover, contemporary challenges Gullah communities face in the present, particularly regarding land development and displacement, underscore the urgency of integrating relational ontologies into environmental ethics. Emory Shaw Campbell's analysis of Hilton Head's transformation into a tourist destination reveals the consequences of disregarding relational ways of being. As developers encroached on Hilton Head, sacred spaces were lost, and ecological relationships were completely disrupted or erased, leading to cultural dislocation (Campbell 2020, 79). This stark contrast between extractive modern practices and Gullah ecological wisdom highlights the relevance of Whitehead's critique of materialist reductionism, which fails to account for the intrinsic value of relational experience.

The convergence of Gullah spiritual ecology and Whitehead's process philosophy demonstrates how relational ontologies can serve as practical frameworks for addressing contemporary ecological crises. By emphasizing prehension, concrescence, and panexperientialism, Whitehead offers a metaphysical basis for understanding Gullah practices as more than cultural artifacts or something to be exploited by those with plans for extractive

capitalism. They are expressions of ecological wisdom rooted in lived experience. This synthesis deepens our understanding of relational consciousness and provides actionable insights for fostering sustainable, interconnected human-environment relationships.

Comparative Analysis: Bridging Process Thought and Gullah Wisdom

Alfred North Whitehead's process thought and Gullah spiritual ecology represent two deeply interwoven perspectives on relational consciousness and ecological interdependence. This comparative analysis identifies points of philosophical resonance, practical alignment, and potential tensions while arguing that Gullah spiritual practices offer a powerful embodiment of Whiteheadian metaphysics. At the same time, their specific, place-based nature challenges process thought to remain grounded in lived, embodied experience, offering practical solutions to contemporary ecological crises.

Relational Consciousness and Interdependence

Whitehead's metaphysics is centered on relational processes where all entities participate in a web of interconnections. His concept of prehension, the way entities inherit, integrate, and creatively advance prior realities, provides a framework for understanding consciousness as emergent and relational (Whitehead 1978, 19). This view aligns with Gullah spiritual traditions, emphasizing the interconnectedness of humans, ancestors, land, and non-human life.

Whitehead's concrescence describes the integration of diverse experiences into a unified occasion of experience, an exact parallel to how the ring shout integrates individual and collective energies into a creative expression of community and spirit (Crawford 2021, 88). The

rhythms and movements of the ring shout demonstrate the relational creativity inherent in Gullah spirituality, where consciousness arises through shared action and embodied experience.

Similarly, the Gullah maintaining sacred burial grounds reflects Whitehead's idea that prehension connects the living with the dead. Burial grounds are not merely sites of memory but active, relational spaces where ancestors remain spiritually present. These spaces embody Whitehead's principle that the past continues to shape the present through inherited experiences, ensuring that ancestral wisdom remains a living force guiding ecological and ethical behavior (Pollitzer 1999, 118).

Ethical Implications: Ecological Vision and Land Stewardship

John Cobb's vision of ecological civilization expands Whitehead's process thought into an ethical call for sustainability and relational responsibility. Cobb emphasizes the need for cultural transformation, prioritizing interdependence over consumerism and sustainability over exploitation (Cobb 1995, 56). Gullah land stewardship practices offer a practical manifestation of this vision, providing tangible examples of how relational ethics can inform environmental sustainability.

In the Gullah tradition, land is not a resource to be dominated but a sacred entity demanding care and reciprocity. Emory Shaw Campbell documents how Gullah communities on Hilton Head Island and St. Helena Island resist development pressures, advocating for sustainable land use that prioritizes communal well-being over short-term economic gain (Campbell 2020, 102). Practices such as communal farming, sustainable fishing, and maintaining buffer zones between residential areas and marshlands illustrate a lived ethic of stewardship.

These practices align with Cobb's ecological civilization, demonstrating how relational consciousness can guide sustainable relationships with the land.

Contemporary ecological challenges further underscore the relevance of Gullah wisdom. The Lowcountry faces rising sea levels, coastal erosion, and development pressures that threaten both the environment and Gullah communities. The National Park Service's Low Country Gullah Culture Study highlights Gullah efforts to protect communal lands and preserve sacred sites amidst these challenges (NPS 2005, 33). By integrating ancestral respect with ecological knowledge, Gullah stewardship practices exemplify how process thought's ethical principles can be applied to address modern environmental crises.

Tensions: Abstract Philosophy and Place-Based Spirituality

While Whitehead's process thought and Gullah wisdom share significant resonances, tensions arise from the abstract nature of process philosophy compared to Gullah spirituality's embodied, place-based nature. Whitehead's concepts of prehension, concrescence, and panexperientialism are universal in scope, providing a metaphysical framework applicable to all entities. However, this abstraction risks overlooking the importance of specific cultural and ecological contexts, which are central to Gullah spiritual practices.

Gullah traditions demonstrate that relational consciousness is not merely a metaphysical concept, but can also be a possibly lived, embodied reality tied to particular places and practices. The Lowcountry's sacred marshlands, burial grounds, and communal gathering spaces are integral to Gullah identity and ecological wisdom. As Isabelle Stengers argues, process philosophy must remain open to "situated knowledge" that emerges from specific cultural and

ecological contexts (Stengers 2011, 148). Rather than viewing this as a limitation, Gullah practices enrich process thought by grounding its metaphysical principles in concrete, place-based relationships.

For example, Whitehead's abstraction of prehension can be deepened by observing how Gullah practices maintain continuity with the past through tangible relationships with land and community. Thomas Berry's call for a "communion of subjects" aligns with this idea, as he argues that ecological renewal requires practices that honor relationality and interdependence in specific contexts (Berry, 46). Gullah wisdom demonstrates how such communion can be achieved through lived practices that integrate ancestral memory, environmental care, and communal responsibility.

Practical Solutions: Bridging Theory and Praxis

The synthesis of Whiteheadian process thought and Gullah spiritual ecology offers practical solutions for addressing contemporary ecological challenges. Gullah practices provide a model of ecological consciousness that moves beyond theoretical abstraction, demonstrating how relational ethics can inform sustainable living. By grounding process philosophy in the lived experiences of Gullah communities, this synthesis highlights pathways for fostering ecological resilience, cultural continuity, and environmental stewardship.

For instance, Gullah traditions of communal land ownership and sustainable resource management offer valuable lessons for environmental policy and conservation efforts. These practices reflect what Cobb envisions as ecological civilization: a way of life that prioritizes relationships, reciprocity, and long-term sustainability over exploitation and consumption (Cobb

1995, 73). By learning from Gullah wisdom, contemporary societies such as those in rural South Carolina can develop practical strategies for addressing the polycrisis of environmental degradation, cultural loss, and climate change even when facing pressures from developers and those looking to extract resources from land that has long been considered sacred or at least important.

Moreover, this synthesis underscores the importance of honoring Indigenous and African diasporic ecological knowledge as vital contributions to global environmental discourse. As Berry suggests, integrating Indigenous wisdom with process philosophy can help re-enchant humanity's relationship with the natural world, fostering a deeper awareness of interdependence and relationality (Berry 1988, 52).

In bridging Whiteheadian process thought and Gullah spiritual ecology, this comparative analysis reveals how relational consciousness, and ecological wisdom can offer transformative insights for addressing contemporary environmental challenges. Gullah practices provide a grounded, embodied model of ecological consciousness that enriches process philosophy, demonstrating the power of lived traditions to inspire sustainable relationships with the Earth. By honoring the specific, place-based spirituality of Gullah communities, process thought gains depth and relevance, offering a framework for ecological renewal that is both practical and profoundly relational.

Implications: Toward an Ecological Civilization

The synthesis of Alfred North Whitehead's process thought with Gullah spiritual ecology offers a transformative lens for addressing contemporary ecological crises. By integrating a relational metaphysics with lived, place-based ecological wisdom, this synthesis provides a

robust foundation for rethinking human-nature relationships, developing community-based sustainability practices, and redefining cultural progress. In an era of climate change, biodiversity loss, rising sea levels, and environmental degradation, Gullah ecological wisdom demonstrates how relational consciousness can guide sustainable solutions grounded in care, reciprocity, and resilience. This is especially true in South Carolina given the increasing population and need for more equitable housing, development, and resource usage in the face of rapidly growing area.

Rethinking Human-Nature Relationships

Whitehead's process philosophy positions all entities, human and non-human, as participants in a dynamic, interconnected web of experience. Rejecting mechanistic materialism, he describes reality as relational and creative, where each actual occasion emerges through prehension, integrating the influence of its past into novel possibilities (*Process and Reality*, 1978, 33). This view aligns profoundly with Gullah spiritual ecology, which recognizes the land, water, ancestors, and community as relational partners.

For instance, the Gullah reverence for wetlands and marshlands reflects a recognition of their vital ecological and spiritual roles. Practices such as sustainable fishing, rotational harvesting, and land stewardship exemplify Berry's "a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects" (Berry 1988, 16). This relational ontology challenges exploitative systems that reduce nature to inert resources, offering an alternative framework that prioritizes reciprocity and interdependence.

Practical Models for Sustainability and Ecological Ethics

Gullah ecological practices embody Whiteheadian relationality in tangible ways. Emory Shaw Campbell's account of land preservation efforts on St. Helena Island highlights the Gullah community's resistance to development pressures that threaten both their cultural heritage and environmental stability (Campbell 2020, 94). As rising sea levels and increased salinity jeopardize traditional agricultural practices in the South Carolina Lowcountry, the Gullah commitment to sustainable land use provides a living model of ecological resilience.

For example, traditional *sweetgrass basket weaving*, reliant on coastal marsh plants, depends on the preservation of salt marsh ecosystems. The National Park Service's *Low Country Gullah Culture Special Resource Study* underscores the importance of protecting these habitats to maintain cultural practices and biodiversity (NPS 2005, 41). Such practices demonstrate what John Cobb envisions in *Is It Too Late?*, where ecological civilization hinges on fostering reciprocal relationships between humans and the natural world (Cobb 1995, 48).

Additionally, communal farming and collective land ownership that is rooted in spiritual responsibility to ancestors also aligns with Whitehead's notion of "concrescence," where past, present, and future converge in a creative synthesis. Gullah practices remind us that sustainability is not merely a technical challenge but a cultural and spiritual imperative grounded in relational ethics that resist the alienation of modern industrial systems.

Addressing Contemporary Ecological Challenges

The ecological crises facing the Gullah community, such as rising sea levels, saltwater intrusion, and development pressures, underscore the urgency of this synthesis. For example, sea-level rise exacerbates salinity in Lowcountry soils, threatening traditional rice farming and other agricultural practices central to Gullah lifeways (Campbell 2020, 106). Whitehead's

emphasis on creativity and adaptation offers theoretical support for understanding the Gullah's ongoing resilience in the face of such challenges.

Furthermore, as coastal development accelerates, the Gullah community's resistance highlights the importance of policy frameworks that center on local ecological knowledge. Integrating Gullah spiritual ecology with process thought enriches ecological philosophy and offers practical guidance for policymakers seeking community-driven, sustainable solutions. Thomas Berry's call for a cultural transformation rooted in reverence for the Earth resonates here: Gullah practices show how such transformation can occur when spiritual consciousness informs ecological action (Berry 1988, 43).

Bridging Gaps and Offering Solutions

Matthew Segall critiques the concept of "civilization" as historically tied to colonialism and exploitation, raising the question of whether ecological civilization can avoid these pitfalls (*The Varieties of Physicalist Ontology* 2020, 29). By incorporating Gullah ecological wisdom, this vision becomes more grounded and inclusive, offering a path toward cultural renewal that prioritizes well-being overgrowth. Success, in this framework, is measured by ecological health, cultural resilience, and spiritual fulfillment and not economic exploitation.

Specific policy recommendations emerge from this synthesis:

1. **Preservation of Sacred Landscapes**: Policies should prioritize protecting culturally significant lands and ecosystems, such as marshes and burial sites, from development and environmental degradation.
2. **Community-Led Conservation**: Government agencies and NGOs should collaborate with Gullah leaders to develop conservation strategies rooted in traditional ecological knowledge.
3. **Climate Adaptation Programs**: Investments in sustainable infrastructure and agricultural practices that align with Gullah environmental values can mitigate the impacts of rising sea levels and salinity.

4. **Cultural Education Initiatives**: Programs that educate broader populations about Gullah ecological wisdom can foster cross-cultural understanding and support for relational, sustainable practices.

Future Implications and Conclusion

By synthesizing Whiteheadian process thought with Gullah spiritual ecology, this study bridges abstract philosophical frameworks with concrete cultural practices, offering new pathways for ecological sustainability. Gullah traditions, rooted in ancestral reverence and relational ethics, exemplify the creative potential at the heart of Whitehead's metaphysics. This synthesis not only deepens our understanding of relational consciousness but also provides practical models for addressing ecological crises.

In envisioning an ecological civilization, we must look to communities like the Gullah, whose practices demonstrate that sustainability requires both spiritual and cultural transformation. By integrating process thought with Indigenous wisdom, we can cultivate a future where humans embrace their role as participants in a living, relational cosmos—a vision that is both ancient and urgently necessary for addressing the polycrisis of the present moment.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the synthesis of Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy and Gullah spiritual ecology as a transformative framework for addressing contemporary environmental challenges. By demonstrating their shared emphasis on relational consciousness, interdependence, and ethical responsibility to both human and non-human communities, this study reveals how theoretical and cultural traditions can inform one another to build more sustainable and just ways of inhabiting the Earth. Whitehead's metaphysical insights—particularly prehension, concrescence, and panexperientialism—align with the embodied, place-

based spirituality of Gullah practices, offering a bridge between abstract process thought and lived ecological wisdom.

At its core, Whitehead's philosophy challenges mechanistic materialism and subject-object dualism, advocating instead for a relational ontology where all entities participate in the creative unfolding of reality (Whitehead 1978, 33). However, as Matthew Segall argues, process philosophy's contributions to envisioning an "ecological civilization" must also contend with the colonial baggage of the term "civilization" itself (Segall 2020, 29). Historically, the notion of civilization has been complicit in erasing Indigenous knowledge systems, enforcing exploitative hierarchies, and reducing nature to a resource for human domination. Any attempt to redefine ecological civilization must, therefore, begin with a critical deconstruction of its assumptions and a serious engagement with the wisdom of historically marginalized communities, such as the Gullah.

Gullah spiritual ecology offers precisely what Segall calls for: a living, relational praxis that decolonizes the concept of civilization by re-centering it on ecological and communal well-being rather than material growth or cultural hegemony. Through practices like communal land stewardship, reverence for sacred places, and the integration of ancestral wisdom with ecological care, the Gullah demonstrate an alternative vision of success—one rooted in reciprocity, cultural resilience, and ecological health (Campbell, Gullah Days, 2020, 94; NPS, Low Country Gullah Culture, 2005, 41). This approach challenges dominant capitalist and anthropocentric frameworks, offering a model for reimagining "civilization" as a network of relational practices that prioritize care, creativity, and sustainability.

John Cobb's work on ecological civilization further underscores this need for cultural transformation. Cobb argues that relational consciousness, as articulated in Whitehead's process thought, must inform a shift away from consumerism and toward sustainable living (Cobb 1995, 48). Yet Cobb's vision risks remaining abstract unless grounded in lived practices like those of the Gullah, whose traditions provide tangible examples of what an ecological civilization might look like in practice. The Gullah remind us that sustainability requires more than theoretical shifts; it demands a reorientation of values, systems, and relationships rooted in embodied experience and place-based wisdom.

Reflecting on the broader implications, this synthesis can potentially reshape academic philosophy, environmental ethics, and ecological policy. By integrating Whitehead's process metaphysics with Gullah ecological praxis, we can move toward a relational, decolonized framework that acknowledges the agency of all beings and the significance of cultural diversity in addressing the ecological crisis. Academic philosophy, long criticized for its abstraction, finds renewed relevance in this interdisciplinary synthesis, while environmental ethics gains practical grounding through lived traditions of ecological care.

In conclusion, the convergence of Whiteheadian process thought and Gullah spiritual ecology offers a path forward and challenges exploitative systems, deconstructs colonial, capitalistic, and extractive assumptions embedded in concepts like civilization, and calls us to embrace a relational vision of existence. By learning from traditions that embody ecological consciousness, such as the Gullah, we can begin to cultivate the ethical, cultural, and spiritual transformations necessary for fostering an ecological civilization. This synthesis does not merely

theorize about sustainability but it invites us into a lived praxis of activism, care, creativity, and interconnectedness that offers hope amid the polycrisis of our time.

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