

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with James Lowell Gibbs, Jr.

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Gibbs, James Lowell
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with James Lowell Gibbs, Jr.,
Dates:	April 5, 2006
Bulk Dates:	2006
Physical Description:	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:55:40).
Abstract:	Cultural anthropology professor James Lowell Gibbs, Jr. (1931 -) was the Martin Luther King, Jr., Centennial Professor of Anthropology, Emeritus at Stanford University. Gibbs was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 5, 2006, in Stanford, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2006_061
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Cultural anthropologist James Lowell Gibbs, Jr., was born on June 13, 1931, in Syracuse, New York to Huldah Hortense Dabney, a school teacher, and James Lowell Gibbs, Sr., executive director of a community center. Gibbs was born prematurely when his mother's appendix burst during the seventh month of her pregnancy. Gibbs can trace his family ancestry back to 1834 to a paternal great-great grandfather who was born in Florence, South Carolina. Gibbs grew up in Ithaca, New York, where he attended Henry St. John's School. He skipped the second grade and later attended Boynton Junior High School and Ithaca High School. Gibbs initially wanted to be a commercial artist but changed his mind

when he read a book by Paul Robeson's wife, Eslanda Goode Robeson, called *African Journey* that showcased Robeson's field work as a cultural anthropologist in Uganda. Gibbs realized that he wanted to be a social scientist.

Gibbs graduated from Cornell University in 1952 and served as senior class president. Gibbs went on to graduate school at Harvard University and earned his M.A. degree and Ph.D. degree in cultural anthropology. While pursuing his degree at Harvard, Gibbs served as a teaching fellow and resident tutor, the first African American resident tutor in the history of Harvard University. In 1959, Gibbs went on to teach at the University of Minnesota. He remained at the University of Minnesota until 1966. In 1965, Gibbs edited and contributed to the book, *Peoples of Africa*. In 1966, Gibbs joined the staff at Stanford University as associate professor of anthropology. For three different periods, Gibbs went to Africa and conducted field research on the Kpelle of Liberia. In 1970, Gibbs co-directed and co-produced the documentary film, *The Cows of Dolo Ken Paye*, which displays the Kpelle people's methods of conflict resolution. That same year, Gibbs became Stanford University's first dean of undergraduate studies. He remained in this position until 1976 but continued to serve as a professor of anthropology. In 1983, Gibbs co-authored *Law in Radically Different Cultures*, a study of law in Botswana, Egypt, the Peoples Republic of China, and the United States. In 1984, he became a senior fellow at the W.E.B. DuBois Institute for Afro-American Research at Harvard University. Gibbs returned to Stanford and served as the codirector of the Stanford/Berkeley Joint Center for African Studies between 1985 and 1987. Between 1987 and 1990, Gibbs served as Stanford University's chairman of the Department of Anthropology.

Gibbs was the Martin Luther King, Jr., Centennial Professor of Anthropology, Emeritus at Stanford University. He is married to Jewelle Taylor Gibbs.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with James Lowell Gibbs, Jr. was conducted by Loretta Henry on April 5, 2006, in Stanford, California, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Cultural anthropology professor James Lowell Gibbs, Jr. (1931 -) was the Martin Luther King, Jr., Centennial Professor of Anthropology, Emeritus at Stanford University.

Restrictions

Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

Persons:

Gibbs, James Lowell

Henry, Loretta (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Gibbs, James Lowell--Interviews

Stanford University--Faculty--Interviews

African American anthropologists--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Stanford University

Occupations:

Cultural Anthropology Professor

HistoryMakers® Category:

EducationMakers

Administrative Information

Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with James Lowell Gibbs, Jr., April 5, 2006. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 2/5/2020 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

Detailed Description of the Collection

Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with James Lowell Gibbs, Jr., Section A2006_061_001_001, TRT: 0:28:50 2006/04/05

James Lowell Gibbs, Jr. was born on June 13, 1931 in Syracuse, New York to Huldah Hortense Dabney Gibbs and James Lowell Gibbs, Sr. According to his family's oral history, his maternal ancestor was the brother of abolitionist Elizabeth Van Lew. Gibbs' mother was born in 1907 in Richmond, Virginia, where she attended Armstrong Normal School, and became a schoolteacher. Gibbs' father was born in 1904 in Florence, South Carolina. He married Gibbs' mother in 1930, and together they became Episcopalian to have a shared denomination. They moved to Syracuse, where Gibbs' father worked at the Paul Laurence Community Center before becoming the first executive director of the Southside Community Center in Ithaca, New York. There, he established a training program for black high school students. Later, as a postal clerk, he commanded Mohawk Airlines to hire Ruth Carol Taylor, who became the nation's first black stewardess. As a young child, Gibbs was close to his mother, who taught him to read.

Stanford University--Faculty--Interviews.

African American anthropologists--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with James Lowell Gibbs, Jr., Section
A2006_061_001_002, TRT: 0:27:50 2006/04/05

James Lowell Gibbs, Jr.'s parents met at Armstrong High School in Richmond, Virginia. After they moved to Syracuse, New York, Gibbs' father studied social work at Syracuse University. Gibbs was raised in a working class area of Ithaca, New York. His father served as the executive director of Ithaca's Southside Community Center, and was active in the Rotary Club of Ithaca and the Tompkins County Human Rights Commission. As a child, Gibbs aspired to a career as a social scientist. He delivered the Pittsburgh Courier and The Afro-American newspapers, and talked often about the news with his family. While his parents attended St. James A.M.E. Zion Church, St. John's Episcopal Church and Calvary Baptist Church in Ithaca, Gibbs attended Sunday school at Ithaca's First Presbyterian Church. Gibbs had one sister, Huldah Gibbs Jones, who worked as an orthoptic technician before she became a freelance writer. At this point in the interview, Gibbs talks about his paternal family ancestry.

Video Oral History Interview with James Lowell Gibbs, Jr., Section
A2006_061_001_003, TRT: 0:31:10 2006/04/05

James Lowell Gibbs, Jr. began his education at Washington Irving School in Syracuse, New York before his family's move to Ithaca, New York. There, he attended Henry St. John School, where he was allowed to skip the second grade. He then attended Boynton Junior High School and Ithaca High School, where he joined the school band, the debate team and the student newspaper. He also participated in social activities at Ithaca's First Presbyterian Church. Aspiring to a career in anthropology, he drew inspiration from Eslanda Goode Robeson's travel narrative, 'African Journey.' His English teacher, Marian E. Elliott, introduced him to Milton L. Barnett, an Cornell University instructor who spoke to him about anthropological fieldwork. In 1949, Gibbs became a student at Cornell University. There, he honed his skills in social science research under the mentorship of Dr. Robert Johnson. In the summer, Gibbs worked as an interviewer and participant observer for a project on intergroup

relations in Elmira, New York.

Video Oral History Interview with James Lowell Gibbs, Jr., Section
A2006_061_001_004, TRT: 0:28:00 2006/04/05

James Lowell Gibbs, Jr. completed his bachelor's degree in anthropology at Cornell University, where he was mentored by Robin M. Williams, Jr. He also belonged to the Watermargin cooperative, which was created by World War II veterans as an alternative to the Greek life on campus. Gibbs met Eleanor Roosevelt through the organization. While attending a NAACP conference in Boston, Massachusetts, Gibbs was given a tour of Harvard University by Ambassador Walter C. Carrington. He then decided to pursue his Ph.D. degree in anthropology there under the tutelage of Clyde Kluckhohn and Cora Du Bois. In his second year, Gibbs received a Rotary Foundation Fellowship to study at the University of Cambridge in England. During this time, he also traveled to other parts of Europe. Upon his return, Gibbs was appointed as Harvard University's first African American resident tutor. He also recalls meeting his wife, Jewelle Taylor Gibbs, who was an undergraduate student at Radcliffe College, and anthropologist St. Clair Drake.

Video Oral History Interview with James Lowell Gibbs, Jr., Section
A2006_061_001_005, TRT: 0:31:00 2006/04/05

James Lowell Gibbs, Jr. wrote his Ph.D. dissertation on the traditional law of the Kpelle indigenous group. With Marvin Silverman, he created two ethnographic films based on his fieldwork in Foquelleh, Liberia: 'The Cows of Dolo Ken Paye' and 'Dolo Ken Paye's People Go to the Movies.' From 1959 to 1965, Gibbs taught at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, where he served on the State Commission Against Discrimination and the Fair Employment Practices Commission. Gibbs was also a visiting professor at Cornell University for the 1962 summer semester. At the request of Johnetta B. Cole, he traveled to San Francisco, California to help train her Peace Corps group. Gibbs was then hired at Stanford University, because of his work as an Africanist. In addition to his professorship, he served as the first dean of undergraduate studies, chaired the anthropology department and co-directed the Stanford/Berkeley Joint

Center for African Studies. He also volunteered in East Palo Alto's YES Reading program.

Video Oral History Interview with James Lowell Gibbs, Jr., Section A2006_061_001_006, TRT: 0:28:50 2006/04/05

James Lowell Gibbs, Jr. served as dean of undergraduate studies at Stanford University in Stanford, California at the time of the Vietnam War, when social activism was prevalent on campus. In this position, he approved accreditation for student-initiated programs, which included courses taught by experts outside of the faculty. Gibbs describes the importance of community building, particularly for African Americans, as well as his future plans of continuing his genealogical research. He reflects upon changing university demographics and his life experiences. Gibbs also describes values he considers to be important, and how he would like to be remembered by his colleagues and future grandchildren. Gibbs concludes the interview by narrating his photographs.