SACRED LANGUAGE(S) OF THE PAST
ANCESTRAL LINGUISTIC GENOCIDE, THE ART OF LOSS, NECRO-TRAGEDY, AND THE PROCESS OF KNOWING

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Language can truly be considered spiritual and, in some respects, a scientific phenomenon. Empirically quantifiable phenomena occur as a result of cognitive intentions and processes that emanate from our volition, or spirit (e.Soul, 2024). Language is the connector of all things, configuring universal understanding and meaning. Beyond the surface, the languages that were born across cultures, time periods, and geographical locations are a window into the world view of that particular group navigating time and space. Further, the very languages we speak are directly synthesized with our spiritual beings, which possess the stories, traumas, victories, and knowledge of the past—or become the bearer of ontological and epistemological terror (Warren, 2018). But what of those whose languages were erased and subjected to an early and brutal death? Are their stories and histories forgotten? Are their legacies worth remembering?

Using an historical analysis of *ancestral linguistic genocide*, I aim to answer these critical questions; this has forced me to better conceptualize the *art of loss* of language through racial violence and terror, which produces physical and metaphorical death. Further, this historical analysis is a quintessential example of what Harris (2018) classified as *necro-being*, entrapped in *necro-tragedy*—a condition and institution of racism that kills and prevents persons from being born and surfaces as absolute, irredeemable suffering in a non-moral universe. As I reflect on my story, I deem the linguistic genocide of my people as a form of necro-tragedy. Through this lens, I acknowledge the African lineages who died at sea during the Middle Passage who never got to pass down their ancestral languages and those African ancestors who survived only to face death, brutality, and dehumanization in the processes of being forced to bury their own languages while adopting the English language.

Furthermore, my understanding of the art of loss, ancestral linguistic genocide, and the irredeemable suffering it has caused has better informed me of my destiny, scholarship, and life's work; all of which are carried out by my current commitment to the acquisition of my ancestral language(s). To that end, my ability to conceptualize these realities has produced a level of ingenuity within myself that allows me to imagine what future exists in this non-moral universe for children who share my story and deserve to reclaim the language(s) of their ancestors through culturally responsive language education and curriculum. I begin this story by exploring my ancestral discovery and its connection to the religion of Islam and the Qur'anic Arabic language.

THE ART OF LOSS, QUR'ANIC ARABIC, AND THE ROOT OF RELIGIOUS LINGUISTIC REDEMPTION

The nature of my experiences in and beyond the classroom are engulfed in the process of loss and losing. As my passion in linguistics has become one of the greatest parts of my identity

and research, I can't help but reflect upon and grieve the ways in which my ancestral languages were lost. In the African American context, I define *ancestral linguistic genocide* during the trans-Atlantic slave trade as the systematic eradication of African languages and linguistic identities through forced displacement, prohibition of mother tongue use, and cultural assimilation policies enacted by colonial powers. This process severed African peoples from their ancestral languages as a means to control, erase, and reconstruct identity within the chattel-slavery system. With this understanding, I must admit, my journey has been pretty difficult considering the deep trauma embedded in knowing my ancestors were victims of this tragedy. In Poetter's (2024) *Curriculum Fragments*, he articulated a powerful statement, "We all repress things that are uncomfortable, bury them, keep them hidden, just to be well and to survive" (p. 50). Thinking about my ancestral story brings me terror, grief, and discomfort, and although it's a fragment of a more distant past, it had been a part of my identity that remained repressed for years and became unsettling from within. This realization led to the inspiration to create my own independent educational experience that brought me to the question, "Who am I?"

WHO AM I?

After years researching my lineage, I discovered that I descended from the Hausa tribe from northern Cameroon in Central Africa. This discovery indicated that my ancestors were Muslim and typically had advanced Arabic literacy skills. Similar to Poetter's (2024) fascination with the American Civil War, I became fascinated with my ancestral languages and the idea of truly knowing who I am beyond the cage of America's doings. I mean, wow, how did this young African American boy who grew up in Cincinnati, Ohio, in America discover such a distant, underrepresented, complex, yet rich historical past? Between 10 and 30% of enslaved Africans were Muslims and came from communities that were native Arabic speakers; this percentage could be significantly higher due to the undocumented forced conversion of enslaved Africans to Christianity as a part of the trans-Atlantic slave trade (Diouf, 2013). This was a part of who I am, this was my legacy. Learning this blew my mind and made me further reflect on why I was naturally drawn to Islam in the pursuit of Arabic language acquisition through studying the Qur'an. I guess it was all starting to make sense. In true Asad fashion, it was time to learn a new language—not any language, but a language that has a significant religious and cultural connection to me by way of my ancestral heritage. This brought me to the next question, "What is my process of knowing?"

THE PROCESS OF KNOWING

Transitioning to the concept of knowing, I must be clear; numerous weeks passed without me actually knowing anything. I was geared up and ready to start Arabic classes with my teacher from Giza, Egypt. This was one of the most challenging educational experiences of my life and brought nerves and determination. I had the opportunity to relearn a part of cultural and linguistic heritage my ancestors lost centuries ago and pass these language skills down to my children one day. Although at the time I had a significant amount of Swahili language proficiency, the Arabic language was far beyond what a native English speaker could ever imagine. For context, Arabic is not a simple language, but a language that has over 12 million words compared to the approximate

170,000 English words (Eriksen Translations, 2022). To add more stress, it is a cursive language that reads from right to left. Simply put, one must completely rewire their brain in order to learn!

As I began classes, I began to hit milestones that I had never thought of. First, I learned and memorized the Arabic alphabet with vowel concepts and correct pronunciation. Second, I began to start putting together small words and phrases using the pronunciation rules. Third, I began to learn how to develop more complex sentences and even how to write my name—(Asad Ikemba) أسدإيكيمبا. Once I got to this level, it was like I hit a roadblock. I became discouraged and did not feel like I would ever reach my language goals. I began to develop deficit thoughts that sounded like:

> "Maybe I'll always be limited to the English language."
> "I'm not truly capable of this because I started learning a language as an adult."
> "Maybe my instructor laughs at me when we get offline."

I would say that reflecting too much on the past can create problems in the present and a future that never existed. These negative thoughts helped me realize that my deficit thinking was a sub-conscious emotion that haunted me as a result of necro-tragedy—which produced ancestral linguistic genocide. I was able to dig myself out of that dark space and continue my classes. I went on to complete all the foundational rules in the Arabic language, learning how to read, write, and recite the Qur'an, which gave me the ability to draw closer to *who I truly am* and *what I deserve to know*. In all, this educational experience has had a significant impact on my life in ways I couldn't have imagined. This regressive fragment showed me the power of self-determination and that true life education can be impactful in and beyond the walls of American institutions. I appreciate the vulnerability of Poetter's (2024) fragments, as they have helped me dig deeper and become more comfortable with facing the often-uncomfortable past. My ancestral story was a reality I had to face to achieve a life goal and further reclaim my ancestral linguistic heritage. This historical analysis of my ancestral history and its association with the Arabic language has inspired the revelation of my destiny, current scholarship, and life's work.

INSPIRATION, AFRICAN LANGUAGES, AND THE REVELATION OF DESTINY – A MARATHON TO FLUENCY

Beyond the acquisition of Qur'anic Arabic, another part of my ancestral heritage is connected to sub-Saharan African languages. This revelation of my destiny was born through the inspiration to become a professor, linguist, and researcher, which I attribute to one of my African American heroes, Dr. Lorenzo Dow Turner. Dr. Turner was an African American linguist and academic who was most popularly known for his seminal research finding the linguistic connections between the Gullah Geechee Language in the communities in lower county Georgia (and the sea islands) and West African languages of ethnic groups from which African Americans descend. This research was presented in his magnum opus, *Africanism in the Gullah Dialect* (Turner, 1949). The first work of its kind, Turner's research played a huge role in the revitalization of African linguistic heritage in the African American community. Although traces of African language and phonetic patterns had been documented in African American speech, Dr. Turner helped solidify the Gullah dialect as an official creole language recognized on a global scale.

This pivotal moment in history helped disrupt the ideology that the Gullah language was "just another corrupted English" spoken by illiterate enslaved Africans. Because of the devastating aftermath of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, many descendants of enslaved Africans were disconnected from the reality that they descend from ethnic groups of diverse cultures and languages. With that reality in mind, Turner traveled to Africa and Brazil to continue his research on African languages and their influence on the diaspora during the early to mid-20th century before it became common for African Americans to travel and study abroad. Dr. Turner's research and legacy plays a huge role in my inspiration to further explore the African American connection to African languages beyond the Gullah Geechee communities. I see much of myself in him and aspire to grab the baton and continue the marathon of African American linguistic liberation.

I am also inspired by contemporary scholar Dr. April Baker-Bell and her award-winning book, *Linguistic Justice* (2020), which takes a sociolinguistic approach to advocating for education that acknowledges AAVE (African American Vernacular English), AAL (African American Language), and BL (Black Language) as legitimate, rule-governed languages spoken by African Americans. Further, this text critically draws on the liberatory outcomes of Black Language as a form of resistance to white linguistic hegemony that is present in both educational institutions and the society at large. However, outside of Dr. Turner, I haven't seen much literature on the theorization or praxis of African American track-to-fluency language education learning the languages of their African ancestors that typically derive from West African ethnic groups (e.g., Bambara, Fulfulde, Wolof, Mandinka) or of the broader African continent (e.g., Swahili, Xhosa, Zulu, Lingala). With that said, I am a strong believer that all African languages are equally important yet under researched in connection to the African American linguistic imagination.

Current Scholarship and the Challenges Faced as a Survivor of Linguistic Genocide

I consider where I am now as an emerging scholar a gray area. Anyone who's ever decided to learn a new language (while pursuing a PhD) as an adult can attest to the challenges that arise in the acquisition process. I conceptualize this gray area as a crossroad between developing myself as a linguistic scholar and as a multilingual global citizen. I mean, isn't the PhD stressful enough! However, I strongly believe that my language acquisition journey is teaching me so much about what it means to be an African American African language learner. These lessons, while tough, are critical in developing my skills to effectively create language programs that will produce more multilingual African American children. Some of the lessons I've learned throughout this process are:

1. You cannot rely on anti-black institutions to undo linguistic genocide of enslaved Africans.
2. There is no easy route (or secret) to becoming fluent in a 2nd language. The language acquisition process is indeed a marathon, and if you are not committed to learning, chances are you won't reach fluency.
3. If you don't use it, you lose it! There is nothing more important than staying consistent speaking with native speakers. Sometimes having access to native speakers can be a barrier.
4. Language education is most critical in early childhood education due to the developmental years (0-5) being crucial in establishing a strong foundation in speaking, reading, and writing any language.

5. Language is one of the most incredible ways one can expand their horizons and understanding of the world as doing so introduces new concepts, ideas, and epistemologies that cannot be properly translated into the English language.

Beyond these lessons, I've come to the realization that, in order for me to be successful in my language acquisition journey, I cannot continue to have a deficit/victim mindset. I would often struggle because, amid me learning my African language of choice (Swahili), I am constantly reminded of the horrific ways in which my people lost their ancestral languages. This remembrance can cause one to become discouraged and paralyzed with trauma and doubt. Transitioning from a deficit mindset and reminding myself how blessed I am to even be given the inspiration to become multilingual is essential to my development. In addition, I must remember how far I've come in this marathon—from a young curious undergraduate student frustrated at the beginning stages, to a doctoral student who can hold conversations and navigate in East Africa through language while developing life-long friendships and connection with Swahili-speaking people.

These experiences are all necessary in order for me to reach my long-term goal, finish the marathon, then run it again and again with African American youth in years to come. I am certain that I will encounter more valuable lessons that will inform my research and life's work. Also, I am certain that those who paved the way for me to run this marathon, like Dr. Turner, would be proud that young emerging scholars like me are willing to grab the baton and expound on such important work like providing African language access to African American children. Last but certainly not least, I have begun to develop a progressive plan while exploring the disparities in U.S. foreign language education. I am a strong believer in the ideology that, where there is theory, there must be practice; where there is thought, there must be imagination; and where there is systemic racism, there must be counter-initiatives. Here's how I plan to implement that.

IMAGINATION, COUNTER-INITIATIVE, AND THE MAKING OF THE AFRICAN LANGUAGE LAB

Have you ever wondered why so many American students graduate high school and college without actually learning a foreign language? How about why foreign languages are typically only an educational requirement starting in high school? Sometimes I wonder, why there is access to languages of white/European groups (French, German, Italian) while the languages of African/Indigenous groups are invisible. I also wonder why, if the American education system truly wanted to prepare American children to become global citizens through linguistics, foreign language requirements wouldn't be included in early childhood education (pre-k/Kindergarten) and beyond (high school to college). Or better yet, I wonder why American education does not offer the African languages of African Americans, who lost their language because of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Would it be too expensive to do such a thing? Would it mean we as a society have to acknowledge that this historical phenomenon occurred and classify it as a reality worth examining?

> According to research on U.S. foreign language education, a total of 11 states has foreign language graduation requirements; 16 states do not have foreign language graduation requirements; and 24 states have graduation requirements that may be fulfilled by several subjects—one of which is foreign languages. (American Councils, 2017, p. 6)

These statistics indicate that, from a policy perspective, the mastery of foreign languages is not prioritized or enforced as a critical part of the American educational experience. I would further add that, of those states that do have foreign language graduation requirements, the programs offered are consistently ineffective in their ability to develop multilingual students. This can largely be attributed to the reality that the tenants of white linguistic hegemony are embedded in the fabric of American education and curriculum.

Beyond the failure of America's foreign language education, I also argue that the access to and prioritization of African languages are even more rare. The American Councils for International Education's (2017) *National K-12 Foreign Language Enrollment Survey* shows that African language learning classes are nearly invisible and among the lowest percentages of all offered foreign language classes among participants in their national survey. I recognize this as a clear indicator of the level at which African language, culture, and history are valued in American schools.

These are the realities that are the foundation of my research through a progressive lens. As an African American man who lived through America's lackadaisical and inefficient foreign language track, I felt severely disconnected from foreign language education as I saw that the language options that were available had no historical or cultural connection to my community. In addition, I felt as though the foreign language education did nothing but remind me of colonialism and imperialism that led to the linguistic genocide of African American people. In fact, I noticed that schools in my home district CPS (Cincinnati Public Schools) even offered dead languages such as *Latin* at a higher rate than African languages.

Let's take a moment to conceptualize the gravity of surviving a linguistic genocide and the importance of acknowledging the gravity of why culturally relevant language education is necessary. To understand linguistic genocide, one must see the language of the oppressor as a weapon used to inflict physical, mental, and spiritual violence towards African people. This reconnects to the aforementioned philosophical concept of necro-being/tragedy that results in death and perpetual suffering. A group travelled to Africa, committed one of the worst and long-lasting human trafficking campaigns in human history, facilitated cultural and linguistic genocide forcing millions of enslaved Africans to abandon their indigenous languages, and has done nothing to create avenues for the descendants of the enslaved to reclaim what was lost during the trans-Atlantic slave trade through education. These questions, ideas, and thoughts led to the educational experience I imagine happening in the future that would require me to use educational leadership to fight against injustice in the American education system.

Systemic Restoration of African Language and Multilingualism in the African American Context

My long-term goal after I finish my PhD is to start the *African Language Lab*, which will be a hub for African American early childhood learners (k-3) to receive access to track-to-fluency African language education. The African Language Lab, as a counter-initiative to white linguistic hegemony, will focus on African languages that derive from ethnic groups who share a common ancestral history with African Americans such as the Wolof, Fulfulde, Hausa, Soninke, and Bambara. As we develop, I hope to provide African language education in linguistic families that will allow African Americans to connect to other parts of the continent, such as Swahili, Zulu, and Xhosa.

Through this initiative, I also plan to create a pipeline for African language teachers to participate in a residency-style teaching fellowship in America or virtually at the Language Lab. Furthermore, I will start in k-3 due to the amount of research that suggests that language and literacy education in early childhood education has a positive effect on their developmental and cognitive abilities, in addition to providing a strong foundation in second language learning. I would also like to become a professor of educational leadership, linguistics, history, and/or early childhood education. I want to continue using my scholarship and teaching to inspire students of all backgrounds to understand the power of African language education.

As I imagine this future educational experience, I think of how Love (2023) articulated the importance of CRT (Critical Race Theory), which is also connected to research areas such as critical Black language studies. CRT in curriculum lies at the complex epicenter of education activism and education policy/reform. For example, following the cultural aftermath of Nikole Hannah-Jones' (2019) *The 1619 Project*, practitioners and community leaders continue to advocate for education that centers the Black experience and our contributions to American society through the lens of U.S. chattel slavery (Love, 2023). Much like the reactions to CRT, this project was met with friction by educational leaders and politicians who are complicit in the perpetuation of white hegemonic history education that ignores African Americans, much like the realities of American language education. I strongly believe that, if the history of a people is forgotten, then their linguistic heritage will be invisible.

I imagine that the Africa Language Lab will be an educational institution and counter-initiative that will resist the white linguistic hegemony and anti-black linguistic racism often demonstrated in American society, education, and curriculum (Baker-Bell, 2020). In this moment, I could become the educational leader I always needed as a child—an educational leader who isn't afraid to go against the grain or actively contribute to the decolonization of African American children, a leader who would acknowledge the intellectual curiosity of Black children who may desire to learn languages that are culturally relevant to their ancestral heritage. I imagine that this initiative may be viewed as radical; however, it could become a transformative possibility for children who otherwise would be invisible. The African Language Lab will be unique, because we will use African languages as a language of instruction. This means students will get an opportunity to be fully immersed in their target language through their teachers, curriculum, and classroom environments.

Although I aspire to make change regarding better access to African language education in American schools, I realize that sometimes educational resistance must occur outside of public institutions. This realization reminds me that those individuals or governing bodies mentioned in Love's (2023) work regarding the conflict of CRT in history education are the ones who also get to decide what languages are important and what languages aren't. To that end, they are complicit in devaluing and erasing the African linguistic heritage of Black children. I hope as an educational leader I can contribute to diversifying the American foreign language education experience for Black children whose linguistic heritage has been invisible in schools. Love's (2023) work addresses a holistic view of the injustices that Black children experience in education. I have been able to make connections between these areas of injustices and the matter of American foreign language education and my personal lived experiences. In all, this is how I seek to re-imagine the American foreign language education experience that dismantles a particular form of injustice regarding the linguistic heritage of African American children.

CONCLUSION

The overall tenets of *currere* (regressive, analytical, progressive, synthetic) have gifted me with the skills to reflect on multiple possibilities regarding my life's educational experiences. As I conclude this piece, I'd like to revisit the original questions I aimed to address through synthesizing my linguistic history, current journey, and potential future. The questions were: (1) What of those whose languages were erased and subjected to an early and brutal death? (2) Are their stories and histories forgotten? (3) Are their legacies worth remembering? My linguistic journey has served as an example of self-decolonization, resisting the institutions of racism that have prevented the survival of my ancestors' language(s). As a counter to this necro-tragedy, I imagine that this linguistic journey promotes *life* over death, *joy* over terror, and a perpetual state of *bliss* over irredeemable suffering. My commitment to my Qur'anic Arabic and African language acquisition journey is in honor of those bloodlines lost at sea, the languages that never had an opportunity to be passed down, the millions of children who would have inherited those languages who were prevented from being born.

To acquire a language to fluency and provide opportunities for others to do the same is one of the strongest ways to preserve the legacy of a particular group of people. As for African Americans, learning the languages of their ancestors would restore a sense of remembrance that could revitalize a sense of self that has been missing for centuries. Unfortunately, racialized groups cannot depend on their oppressors to learn from the horrors of their complex historical past but rather must construct decisive ways to put the destiny of their descendants in their own hands. If you want to know someone's story, listen to the language they speak. It is usually either a story of domination or subjugation, and as for those whose ancestral languages have been violently eliminated, the most important part of their story has been missing in the book of humanity.

To address the last question, the idea of worth is subjective to the interpreter; however, the idea of legacy tends to be universally understood. In all, language can be a connector of both. I dream to find a way to restore both regarding African American ancestral language(s) through the forming of an education institution (African Language Lab) using my life experiences and history to develop a curriculum that will address the ancestral linguistic genocide, art of loss, and necro-tragedy faced by African Americans. This, I believe, is the ultimate indication of self-worth, that is, if language is truly universally recognized as a scientific and spiritual phenomenon.

All three reflections (regressive, analytical, progressive) in this piece have made me who I am. It has all been woven into the fabric of my psyche, spirit, and heart, which has supported my dedication to linguistics as a liberatory skill for African American children. I dream one day of walking in the African Language lab seeing Black children speaking the African languages of their ancestors. I dream of their spirits smiling above, acknowledging that their descendants were finally given an opportunity to remember who they are. I dream that through education and curriculum generations of multilingual African American children will grow up having an informed, spiritual sense of their ancestral story beyond the horrors of slavery. I too dream to see hundreds of thousands of multilingual African American children grow up to become contributing members of the global society connecting with others through languages they once had no access to. This is the nature of my destiny and a reflection of the sacred language(s) of the past.

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