

Sankofa in Ptahhotep and Nelson Mandela for the *Gullah Bible*: The Head and The Heart of *African Wisdom 365 Days a Year*

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Abstract

Advice from our elders delivers wisdom. The elders have the experience that enhance and verify the knowledge. And as they share that wisdom, they are moving their people forward while looking back at their experiences, utilizing the spirit of Sankofa. Within their work African Wisdom, 365 Days a Year, Wilfred Harris and David Smith introduce Ptahhotep and reconfirm Nelson Mandela.

This study examines how Ptahhotep and Nelson Mandela's verbal strength encourages the majestic magnitude of the oral that brings the wisdom from their elders forward to an acceptance and realization of the ultimate power of the head and heart of The Gullah Bible, De Nyew Testament. Through the sociolinguistic spirit of Sankofa, this study analyzes its language patterning to verify its linkage to its Gullah creole community's history while demonstrating an awakening to respect for the ultimate power of authority within De Nyew Testament.

Keywords: Sankofa, Ptahhotep, Nelson Mandela, Gullah, *The Gullah Bible*, Sea Island Creole

If you talk to a man in a language he
understands, that goes to his head.
If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his
heart.

(Nelson Mandela, *African Wisdom*, 31 October)

Jedus Laan E Ciple How fa Pray (Gullah Lord's Prayer)

2 Jedus tell um say, "Wen oona pray, mus say,
'We Fada [wa dey een heaven,] leh ebrybody hona ya name.
We pray dat soon ya gwine rule oba de wol.

[Wasoneba ting ya wahn, leh um be so een dis wol same like dey een heaben.]

(**De Good Nyews Bout Jedus Christ Wa Luke Write**, Luke 11:2)

Introduction

These head and heart power words were inspired by the proverbial wisdom delivered through *African Wisdom 365 Days A Year*. They represent the word-walk in our lives. To think is one thing. To speak is another. To do involves them both. And when the thinking, the speaking, and the doing are motivated by the learning that comes from a history of experience—that which has been lived, that which has been reported, that which has been studied—all develops into wisdom, the verbal and the nonverbal discourse.

That elder wisdom comes from the authoritative figures in life. Many of these influential sources, as reported in *African Wisdom, 365 Days a Year*, come forward from ancient yet classic world history and continue into the present through Ptahhotep and Nelson Mandela, both authority figures. Both looked to the highest power of authority, the Lord God, whose words of wisdom are reported in the Bible and brought forward into present-day community contexts for *The Gullah Bible: D Nyew Testament*.

1.0: The Head and the Heart of Wisdom. *African Wisdom, 365 Days a Year*, a collection of philosophical, psychological, and practical advice proverbs, was researched and written by Wilfred T. Harris and David Smith, Jr., PhD. They provided a truly inspiring work. Harris and Smith use twelve themes to organize the proverbs, the "for-words"—to speak with and for communities around the world. These sayings express strikingly and enigmatically obvious or profound truths of wisdom, knowledge that is gained through understanding with experience.

These words of wisdom are intended for leading listeners forward to a stronger positive life.

1.1: Life Through Words of Wisdom. The 365 days a year are comparable to the times and experience of growth and development. The first quarter of the year begins as does the beginning of a person's life. People acquire their innate connections to their world, that group or neighborhood people who comprise their society, the heart in the home: "Life" (January), "Family" (February), and "Community" (March). Ptahhotep introduces the head-word advice for life, family, and community: "Man's heart is his life, prosperity, and health" (Ptahhotep, *Life*, January, 18). "Your kindness to your neighbors will be a memorial to you for years, after you satisfy their needs" (Ptahhotep, *Community*, March, 1).

Nelson Mandela carries forward Ptahhotep's head-word advice through the spirit of Sankofa within statements he has made in other sources.

. . . [H]onor the memory of all the sons, the daughters, the mothers, the fathers, the youth, and the children who, by their thoughts and deeds, gave us the rights to assert with pride that we are South Africans, that we are Africans, and that we are citizens of the world. (Mandela, 2003).ⁱ

Within the second quarter of advice for living and being, *African Wisdom* moves the maxims forward into the stages of life that develops invaluable connections between the actions of the physical life and the heart-felt spiritual intentions of the emotional life: "God and Peace" (April), "The Universe"(May), and "Love"(June). "If you are a wise man, train up a son who will be pleasing to God" (Ptahhotep, April 6). "The right Soul is the Soul by which one is sustained"; "He is a Soul who loves to listen" (Ptahhotep, May 2 and May 3).

Developing the second quarter of life introduces advice concerning the internal; the third quarter then introduces the means by which to deal with life in the socio-economic means as well as the personal. The heart of courage connects to the head of knowledge and perseverance: "Work and Leadership" (July), "Success" (August), and "Friendship and Elderly Advice" (September) All of these come together for further encouragement in the Fourth Quarter; that then brings forward the full development in life. The head is at the forefront for comprehension, intelligence, and affirmation, each driven with perseverance by the heart: "Education" (October) with closing words of advice from Nelson Mandela's "language of the head"; that message connects to "Knowledge" (November), and ultimately to that which covers them all, that which we must see and do, "Responsibility" (December).

1.2: The Heart in Acts of Wisdom. The movement within the adages begins with the innate, implicit organization of life and then shows how life transforms successfully with the focal, explicit learning that leads to fruition in wisdom.

"It is what we make out of what we have, not what we are given, that separates one person from another" (Mandela).ⁱⁱ

Both Nelson Mandela and Ptahhotep made from what they had. Their spirited and thought filled pathways through life have been substantiated by the Holy Bible. Most people have not heard of Ptahhotep. Many know of Mandela. And almost everyone has heard about and know about the Bible. But how many have listened to and studied these authoritative figures:

Ptahhotep, Nelson Mandela and the Holy Bible?

That history of elder wisdom is maintained in the words recording the past so that they can be examined and utilized within the context of today and the future, the now and the then when. Albert Einstein substantiated that as he traveled from one mission in several countries in Europe to another mission in America: "Learn from yesterday, live for today, hope for tomorrow. The important thing is to not stop questioning."

1.3: The Head in the Spirit of Sankofa. Transferred through the spirit of Sankofa— moving forward while looking back— that socio-philosophical work, *African Wisdom 365 Days A Year*, provides memorable reflections that express, manifest, and suggest the what, the why, and the how for our lives. It brings the words of wisdom from our cultural past reaching back through Ptahhotep and leading us forward with Nelson Rolihlahla Mandelaⁱⁱⁱ. These two African elders transport the head and the heart of proverbial wisdom through the power of their words and encourage that recorded expression. Their adages carry forward the message to the world through the spirit of Sankofa.

The term *Sankofa* comes from the Akan family of languages in West Africa. "The Akan are a cultural and linguistic grouping of people of the Guinea Coast who speak Akan languages of the subgroup of

the Niger-Congo family: they include Akyem, Amyi, Ashanti, Attie, Baule, Brong, Fanti, and Guang. Most Akan people live in Ghana, where they settled in successive waves of migration between the 11th and 18th centuries; others inhabit the eastern part of the Ivory Coast and parts of Togo. The Akans numbered above 5,000,000 at the latest estimate {[in 1981]."^{iv} One of its *Sankofa* translations, meaning "one must return to the past in order to move forward," is illustrated in the film *Sankofa*, (2003) written, directed, edited, and produced by Haile Gerima. "Gerima and his film are emblematic of how important it is for people of color to tell their own stories." (Gerima Film Commentary).

This West African term *Sankofa* also indicates primary developments from morphemic components that may also have connections to East African and Asian regions. It seems to be a link to the linguistic generative from *Sanskrit*, *san-scrit*, which is literally perfected from, *sam* "together" + *karoti* "he makes," as found in 1696 sources consulted by *Webster's New Encyclopedic Dictionary*. That link would definitely tie to the spirit of Sankofa for Nelson Mandela and Ptahhotep who lived in the eastern (South Africa) and the northern (Egypt) corridors of the African continent. "We must go back and reclaim our past, so we understand why and how we came to be who we are today" (Webb-Johnson, 1)

The term *spirit* applies within multiple contexts. The two very relevant ones define the spirit as "an entity conceived of as that part of a human body that is incorporeal and invisible and is characterized by intelligence, personality, self-consciousness, and will; the mind opposed to the body" and also as "true intent or meaning as opposed to outward, formal, signification" (Funk & Wagnalls). These two definitely apply to a Sankofa spirit for Ptahhotep, Nelson Mandela, and the *Gullah Bible*.

2.0: Word-Voices of African Wisdom

How can Ptahhotep and Nelson Mandela represent, embody, and verify the spirit of Sankofa? Their words and actions of wisdom do just that. Brief expressions or statements that serve to communicate meaning may be specified as *words*. That expression may be oral or written; in both instances a word has voice. It sends utterances that communicate to the mind and represents the person or other agency by which something is expressed or made known (*New World Dictionary*). It goes forward orally; it is carried by the voice in spirit and intent. Smith's "Introduction" defines *wisdom* as embracing "accumulated learning," "knowledge," "good sense," "ability to discern inner qualities and relationships," "insight," "judgment," and "the teachings of the ancient sages." All of these characteristic aspects of wisdom are transported in the spirit of Sankofa within this collection. Smith asserts that it is these teachings that encourage the spirit of their work:

We believe, no, we know, that if people are going to grow and develop to be great individuals, they must have access to the knowledge of their ancestors. (p. 9)

2.1: The Voice of Ptahhotep. Ptahhotep's words of wisdom initiated the guiding force in the purpose and content of *African Wisdom*. Ptahhotep, one of the eldest of our elders, provides messages that introduce each of the monthly themes. As Harris notes in the "Preface," Ptahhotep wrote the oldest book ever known to be written, and it was rediscovered in 1847 in his tomb in Egypt by a French explorer and then taken to Europe. David Smith's "Introduction" gives a background on Ptahhotep and his book *The Instructions of Ptahhotep* dated around 2,388 B.C.E., almost 4,500 years ago, and written in the language of ancient Kemet, ([land of the blacks, a.k.a. Africa]). Ptahhotep, at 110 years of life, references knowledge that he had learned from his ancestors, indicating more than 5,000 years of history: "It is done, from its beginning to its end, as it was found in the writings of the Ancestors and Deity" (10).

The words of friendship and elderly advice, as a focal topic throughout September, devotedly enhanced wisdom. Elderly advice delivers wisdom. The strength of the verbal, the majestic magnitude of the oral bring wisdom to the listeners. It is not just what they say, it is also how they say it and what they do while they say it. Storytelling and one-on-one interactions were appropriate means for elders to impart wisdom. The verbal teachings, however, were not the exclusive means of imparting wisdom. The tone of voice, body language, and special moves during a tribal dance give nonverbal message to the discourse interaction, another means of sharing wisdom. Wisdom also comes with experience. Reading about experience, reading about knowledge are only one means of learning it and learning about it. However, living it, doing it, being it--the first-hand knowledge and experience--bring an acquisition that leads to the development of wisdom. The elders have the experience that enhance and verify the knowledge. And as they share that wisdom, they are moving their people forward while looking back at their experiences, utilizing the spirit of Sankofa.

2.2: The Voice of Nelson Mandela

“We have to forgive the past, but at the same time, ensure that the dignity of the victims is restored, and their plight properly addressed.”^v Nelson R. Mandela.

This message from Mandela provides an additional descriptive characteristic of the spirit of Sankofa. Just as it is carried within the words of wisdom from Ptahhotep, it also is carried forward in Nelson Mandela: throughout his native homeland, throughout his purpose-driven life, and ultimately throughout the world. Growing up in small village communities with close associations with the community elders, Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela listened to and learned from their conversations and their by-the-fire-place story-telling times: “The elders would tell tales about the wars fought by our ancestors in defence of the fatherland, as well as the acts of valour performed by generals and soldiers during those epic days” (Adi: 9). He carried his early learning forward with him when he entered school at age seven. He was the first person in his family to go to school. His father, Gadlla Henry, a village chief, had not had that opportunity, so he could not read nor write in the official language. However, he made sure that Madiba (Nelson) and his other children had access to the wisdom of their ancestors before going to school. In school, Mandela’s teacher gave him the English name *Nelson* because, as he was told, an African name—his *Rolihlahla*—was not to be used in school. Therefore, while Nelson Mandela learned his school language, Afrikaans, and then learned English, he also remained connected to his home community language, maintaining his ancestor's linguistic heritage. Ptahhotep and Nelson Mandela present powerful iconic spirits within the spirit of wisdom. They are authoritative figures for the power of the word. Therefore, they contain and consequently must maintain the spirit of Sankofa in their lives.

3.0: Word Power through Spiritual Authority, The Gullah Bible, *De Nyew Testament*

The heart of the wise is known by his good actions.
[It] matches his or her tongue, and his or her lips are straight
when he or she speaks. (Ptahhotep, *African Wisdom*, December 13)

The good head and the good heart . . .
are a formidable combination” (Mandela,
African Wisdom, September)

These encouraging and enlightening messages speak to the head and to the heart. We need both-the language of the head and the language of the heart!

Connecting the now to the then through the cultural transformation of language across the Atlantic Ocean from the East to the West brings the spirit of Sankofa into America's east coast linguistic heritage. The work of linguists gives voice to unrecognized communities. That is confirmed by Montgomery in his introduction to Turner's *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect*: "Turner's work as a linguist and educator demonstrated what an obscure people's language could reveal to us about human adaptation in general and the development of American English in particular. His work opened a way for Gullah people to reclaim and value their past and made possible a new era of learning about the great continent of Africa and the Spread of African culture" (Montgomery xi) "In the early twentieth century, most Americans had little if any education about Africa, relying more on myths than factual knowledge for their ideas about [Africa]."

Another one of these sources of guidance is provided by our research libraries. One research library, especially devoted to Africana related wisdom and open to all people, is the Auburn Avenue Research Library. This special library of the Atlanta-Fulton Public Library System (AFPLS) and the Digital Library of Georgia (DLG) focuses on African American Culture and History (AARL). The Auburn Avenue Research Library, on Sunday, November 4, 2012, offered a special program on *The Gullah Bible, De Nyew Testament* (2005) for which they invited the public to a discussion on its language background

Through missionary efforts, *The Gullah Bible: De Nyew Testament* was translated into the South Carolina Gullah, Sea Island Creole, based on the original Greek manuscript of the New Testament with a marginal text of the King James Version. The King James Version of the Bible itself had also been translated from the Greek.

The King James translation of the Bible speaks to the head of the Sea Island native, raised and educated in the Christian church. However, when the Gullah people hear the Holy words of power in their language, their hearts are touched. The Gullah Geechee are direct descendants from communities in West Africa's Ivory Coast. Many were from the Akan family of languages in that area and the communities from which the sankofa concept developed. They brought their cultural histories with them to America: their language, their craftsmanship, and their inspirational connections. The creole languages inspired their family connections. They developed while maintaining their connection to their linguistic, sociocultural past while allow them to join together and move forward in their new place and times.

The library presentation gave an opening statement that said "The Gullah, Geechee, Sea Island Creole is the Language of the Heart." The discussion closed with a reworded application of Mandela's wisdom:

Gullah-Geechee— A Language of the Heart

If you talk to a Geechee-Gullah man
in a language he understands,
that goes to his head.

If you talk to that Geechee-Gullah man in his language,
that message goes to his heart.

The spirit of Sankofa was definitely sending Nelson Mandela's message across the diaspora. The Gullah Bible sends word power to the heart of the African American. One major means is through the Lord's Prayer.

Jedus Laan E Ciple How fa Pray (Gullah Lord's Prayer)

Matthew 6:9-13, 7:7-11

2 Jedus tell um say, “Wen oona pray, mus say,
 ‘We Fada [wa dey een heaven,] leh ebrybody hona ya name.
 We pray dat soon ya gwine rule oba de wol.
 [Wasoneba ting ya wahn, leh um be so een dis wol,
 same like dey een heaben.]
 3 Gii we de food wa we need dis day yah an ebry day.
 4 Fagibe we fa we sin, cause we da fagib dem people
 wa do bad ta we.
 Leh we dohn hab haad test
 wen Satan try we.
 [Keep we fom ebil.]”

(De Good Nyews Bout Jedus Christ Wa Luke Write Luke 11:2-4)

This passage delivers Jesus Christ’s guidance to the apostles for how to pray to the ultimate authority figure, God, their Heavenly Father. The *Gullah Bible* translation has the King James (Authorized) Version in the margin. According to its Sea Island Translation Team, this was the preference of the Gullah community. They were reaching back to their past while confirming and developing the strength of their current community. With the two versions side-by-side, the readers could learn and feel at the same time. They could focus on the message to bring the word to their heads and receive the Word-Power delivery to their hearts.

Invigorating Difficulties: Reading this version of word power has multiple effects on the head: How can this *Gullah Bible* be considered a legitimate rendering of respect to God, the highest authoritative power? Why can’t the wisdom learners just use the other versions of the Holy Bible?

Questioning language validity leads to examining the essentials of language components. Can the language used within this African American community have systematic language patterning? What, therefore, is systematic patterning? Can these words from the Gullah Bible be seen as a real language? Word power comes from the origin of the message. What are the components of the message that brings the power?

These language components are the phonology, the morphology, the lexicology, the phraseology, and the discourse source of interaction. The phonology component provides the basic sound system, the systematic patterning of sounds, *phonemes*, within a language, and also the study of these vowel and consonant sounds and that patterning. The spelling system is used to represent the sound system. The consonant patterns in this mostly involve the fricatives and stops.

The voiced fricative converts to a voiced stop /z/ → /d/ as in *Jesus* → *Jedus*; **th** → /d/ as in *Father* → *Fada*, *this* → *dis*; /v/ → b as in *heaven* → *heaben*, *over* → *oba*, *everybody* → *ebrybody*
 -r absence after a vowel: *learn* → *laan*, *honor* → *hona*
 h- absence before a vowel: *He* → *E*, *when* → *wen*

Vowel patterns: *in* → *een* (lengthening, stress); *you*, *your* → *ya* (shortening, unstressed)

Sounds individually are meaningless, but when the sounds come together in order to deliver a message they become a phonological team, one that leads to a meaningful unit, a morpheme. Deletion of an

unstressed initial syllable may occur: *disciple*→*ciple*; deletion of the initial consonant in an unstressed pronoun: *them*→*um* (an unstressed pronoun, “tell um.” They appear to affect the word’s meaning or word choice, the morphology component.

Morphology describes and examines the systematic patterning of the meaningful units within a language. When these meaningful units come together to address or adjust the meaning, they are then affecting the lexical unit, the words or terms that develop the lexicology.

The lexicology, the word patterning, also varies to fit the contact influence of language communities. The plural or singular, 2nd person or neutral pronoun *you*→*oona*; the relative pronoun *who*→*wa*; the first person plural pronoun form *we* which represents the nominative is regularized to also represent the possessive *our father*→*we fada*, and the objective *forgive us*→*give we*.

The phraseology adds to the word power because it may use the same words in multiple ways to deliver additional meaning that may also add emphatic discourse: *how to*→*how fa*, *tell them/him*→*tell um say*, *whatsoever*→*wasoneba ting*, *you are going to/will rule*→*ya gwine rule*, *this day here*, *immediately*, *right now*→*dis dey yah*.

Because word power comes from the origin of the message, in the Gullah Lord’s Prayer, the discourse interaction between *Jedus* and *de postle dem* provides the components of the message that brings the influential strength. That addresses the question of validity. The Gullah creole has been verified as a language variety that has a history of language origins that connects the European and the African trade languages (Turner, Smitherman, Rickford). The maintenance of community language evolves with community interactions among its members and with contact with nonmembers. With *The Gullah Bible, De Nyew Testatment*, community verification is justified and solidified, supporting residential community pride.

Just as the *Gullah Bible* supports community development, other versions of the Holy Bible developed after the Greek translations in order to serve communities for an English speaking world. The oldest to maintain is the *King James Version* (KJV), even though other versions have developed: the *New International Version* (NIV), *Amplified Version*, and *Updated New American Standard Bible* (*Updated NASB*), all translations from the Early Modern English times of King James to the current times. However, *The Original African Heritage Study Bible* (1993) maintains the King James Version while providing notes that link the content to its historic past through notes that provide translations, interpretations, and historic backgrounds.

The head language, that simplified, standardized form of reading and writing, develops through intentional teaching and learning. It is the means of communication taught in schools to be used in multiple environments—professional and public interchanges and transactions—beyond the home and family life. Head language is a primary marker of the language of wider communication, the LWC, and education.

Heart language is community language, “the language system employed within . . . speech communities to communicate that society’s thoughts, feelings, and experiences in their daily interactions. A speech community is a sociolinguistic concept that describes a group of speakers, whether socially or geographically located, who share unique and mutually accepted linguistic norms for communicating understanding, values, and attitudes. A vernacular speech community conveys cultural heritage and maintains linguistic legacy, employing unmonitored everyday speech acquired from family and community networks” (Zeigler).

A good pen can also remind us of the happiest moments in our lives, bring noble ideas into our dens, our blood, and our souls.

It can turn tragedy into hope and victory.

(Mandela, *Notes to the Future*, 1980)^{vi}

Head language effectively and successfully comes with respectful recognition and use of the heart language. A native resident of a South Carolina Gullah Sea Island community, Virginia Mixson Geraty (1915-2004) gave supportive verification of the power of the word within the community language in 1997. Her researched lexical study *Gullah fuh Oonah: A Guide to the Gullah Language* as well as other books and poetry demonstrate an outspoken defense of the Gullah language. Geraty was transmitting the sociolinguistic spirit of Sankofa as communicated by Mandela and recorded in *De Nyew Testament*. When she made the connections between the past heritage and the current usage in the heart language, she was verifying that “the good pen can . . . turn tragedy into hope and victory” for the Gullah people. In his 1999 reporting of the Gullah Festival and its Sea Island history, Llaila says that the Sea Islands are unique because the “Gullah have always demonstrated the meaning of Gullah by being steadfast in their Africanity, and by always standing with God” (*The Gullah, People Blessed by God*, ix).

De postle dem done good wok: Ptahhotep, Nelson Mandela, David Smith, Wilfred Harris, the Gullah Bible Research Translation team. Dem be de postle dem dat bring de spirit of Sankofa fuh de Gullah Bible. (See *De Wok Wa De Postle Dem Done* (The Acts of the Apostles in the *Gullah Bible*.) The professional? Yes! The instructional? Yes! The personal? Definitely! All these components bring together the head and the heart of wisdom. The spirit of Sankofa has transported the acts of de postles dem like Ptahhotep and Nelson Mandela. And Sankofa has carried forward the sociolinguistic power of the word for the Gullah Bible, *De Nyew Testament*.

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ⁱ This selection is from the State of the Nation Address, House of Parliament, Cape Town, 24 May 1994. Recorded in *Nelson Mandela, In His Own Words* 2003: 148.

ⁱⁱ From *Long Walk to Freedom*, 1994, as recorded in *Notes to the Future*.

ⁱⁱⁱ According to Hakim Adi (2000), Rolihlahla is the name given Nelson Mandela by his parents. He was also called by his tribal name Madiba. He was born 18 July 1918 in a Transkei village to his mother Nosekeni and his father Gadla Henry, a chief of the Thembu people who speak the Xhosa language. When he entered school, the first in his family to do so, his teacher gave him the name Nelson because the students were not allowed to use their tribal names.

^{iv} Encyclopaedia Britannica, Micropaedia, Vol I, A-Bib. Chicago, London: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc. 1981.

^v Presented at the Annual Conference of the Methodist Church, Mthatha, South Africa, September 18, 1994; recorded in *Notes to the Future*: p.66.

^{vi} From *Notes to the Future*, within a letter to Zindzi Mandela, Nelson Mandela's daughter, written while Mandela was on Robben Island, February 10, 1980.