

Pioneering Yoruba as a Foreign Language at an Historically Black Institution: Cultural, Ideological and Curricular Challenges

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1. Introduction¹

Whereas there has been an appreciable increase in Yoruba language programs in the United States² in the last couple of decades, there has not been a commensurate increase among the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). In fact, an overwhelming number of the African language programs in the US is found in the majority White institutions³. This paper addresses some of the main challenges facing the African language teacher seeking to pioneer an African language program at an HBCU.

Recent experiences of this author indicate that the African language teacher must be well armed and fully prepared for challenges, including both subtle, and, even overt opposition from fellow faculty. It is therefore paramount to have a well-planned strategy before embarking on such a mission. Foremost, the pioneering, or aspiring teacher must work diligently behind the scenes to establish a strong support base among departmental colleagues, most importantly, and administrators, as well as be able to execute a successful publicity effort among students. Second, there must be a well-drafted proposal addressing historical, cultural, linguistic, curricular and global perspectives, all of which must be crafted in such a manner as to answer some of the fears and concerns of critics and those who might be poised to oppose the whole idea. Thirdly, he or she must be determined, strong in purpose and resolute in this pioneering effort. Such a person must not be easily discouraged or dissuaded by opposition, a thing that must be expected, mostly as a result of an entrenched academic culture of fear of change, and of the new, or even as a result of prejudice arising, sometimes, from misinformation. Such obstacles are, of course, to be expected, even in the traditional majority White institutions.

Daunting though this may appear, it is the intention of this paper to show that it is not an impossible task. It is possible to break new grounds and pioneer African language teaching in hitherto uncharted territory. With a well-executed plan, it is possible to plant new programs and continue to advance the teaching of African languages, using as a potent ally the ongoing global war on terror and the renewed interest in foreign language learning it has generated⁴. This must, however, be done with

¹ This paper is dedicated to Dr. Eric Hyman without whose help, support, friendship, open-mindedness and constant prodding this paper would not have been written, because there would probably have been no Yoruba courses to write about.

² Recent internet search for Institutions where Yoruba is taught in the United States put the number at 39. With the addition of the FSU program beginning this Fall the number will add up to 40. Up until the late 70s there were far fewer institutions offering Yoruba, or any African language for that matter. Much of the gains took place in the 80s and 90s (i.e. within the last couple of decades). For more details on the history of African language teaching in the US see, among others, David Dwyer (1999) and Antonia Schleicher (1996). Schleicher's article traced specifically the history of Yoruba studies in the US.

³ Institutions such as Yale, Cornell, Rutgers, Boston, MSU, OSU, Florida, Wisconsin, Iowa, Pennsylvania, UC Berkeley, UCSD and Georgia Southern dominate the list.

⁴ A resolution (S. Res. 28) which came before the first session of the 109th Congress on February 1, 2005 and was passed by the full Senate on February 17, 2005 states in part the following: "Whereas the 2001 Hart-Rudman Report on National Security in the 21st Century names foreign language study and requisite knowledge in languages as vital for the Federal Government to meet 21st Century security challenges properly and effectively; Whereas the American Intelligence community stresses that individuals with proper foreign language expertise are

wit, logic and a good deal of old-fashioned diplomacy. The African language teacher, above all, must be a team player, enthusiastic about his or her mission, and must incur the goodwill of all major players within her or his constituency – faculty, students and administrators alike. The ball is in our court, and we must seize the moment, using the new openness created by the current post-9/11 world events to serve as a springboard to launch new African language programs worldwide⁵.

Although it has taken the recent terrorist attacks on the United States to get the politicians and lawmakers to begin to take the learning of foreign languages seriously, it must be said that there has already been a growing interest in foreign language learning in American Higher Institutions, especially in learning languages other than the traditional Western European ones. Younger Americans, who tend to be more adventurous, have begun to break through the mould and have been venturing into newer and more challenging non-Indo European languages for several reasons. Some are choosing the less commonly taught languages, especially African languages, simply out of curiosity, others because they think these might be less boring and less difficult than say Latin, Spanish or French. Yet for others it is because they need them for either research or heritage reasons. For me, the teacher, the most gratifying reason I ever heard from new students coming to take my class was that they had come because a friend, a course mate or a roommate had encouraged them to sign up for Yoruba, as a result of the positive learning experience they had had while taking the course themselves.

2. Breaking new grounds

After several years teaching as a Graduate Teaching Assistant, Graduate Teaching Associate, and Instructor, I was hired by an HBCU to teach English Composition, and above all, to help with the implementation of an add-on English as a Second Language (ESL) program, as well as infuse African Literature into the curriculum of the English and Foreign Languages Department. Due to unforeseen circumstances, however, the only French-teaching faculty member of the department had to leave just while I was reporting for duty at my new post. Since I also have a strong background in French language and pedagogy, the responsibility fell upon me to teach the only two beginning level French courses offered by the department, along with a couple of Freshman English Composition classes. For a couple of semesters I was stuck with French and English Composition classes, then the following year I was asked to drop one Composition class to make room for the first African Literature class, taught as a Junior Seminar course.

Meanwhile, as I settled in to my new academic environment and had begun my third year, I started to build strong alliances with senior colleagues, particularly those of them who were open to new ideas and did not feel uncomfortable with change. Luckily for me, I found one particularly strong ally with whom I could discuss my vision of how the department could evolve in new directions and my intentions to introduce an African language into the departmental curriculum. Since this colleague is a linguist at heart, and in deed, he naturally jumped at the idea, took it and ran with it. He began to speak enthusiastically to his “Introduction to Linguistics” students and to encourage them to talk to me about the possibility of starting Yoruba. He also began to converse with other faculty members who might be sympathetic to this idea, as well as the department Chair. As the news began to spread among students and faculty and momentum began to build, he invited me into his office to discuss and strategize on how to translate this idea into reality. Together we began to plan and to make some concrete moves in the right direction. Once we realized we had built enough consensus among departmental faculty, especially, and were sure we had enough sympathetic ears to make a proposal pass a vote of confidence at a full departmental meeting, I went to work and began to draft proposals to introduce two Yoruba courses—Elementary Yoruba I and II—into the curriculum.

greatly needed to work on important national security and foreign policy issues, especially in the light of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001; Whereas a shortfall in foreign languages has seriously hampered information gathering analysis within the American intelligence community...[B]e it resolved, That...(2) the Senate—(A) designates the year 2005 as the ‘Year of Foreign Language Study’, during which foreign language study is promoted and expanded in elementary schools, secondary schools, institutions of higher learning...”

⁵ Section (2,B,i) of the above stated Senate resolution requests the President of the United States to issue a proclamation calling upon people of the United States to—“encourage and support initiatives to promote and expand the study of foreign languages.”

Once the proposals were ready, my colleague, and ally, took them to the departmental Curriculum Committee of which he was Chair and got a unanimous vote to approve them and forward them to the full faculty floor for debate and a vote. After a brief debate, we once again got a unanimous vote of approval. Now our proposals were on their way to the College Academic Affairs Committee, of which my friend was also a member. Once more, the proposals were passed unanimously, thanks to the positive energy he brought to the debate. With these three most important hurdles cleared, it was fairly easy for the Dean also to endorse the proposals, although not without some misgiving – she wasn't sure it would be viable. This notwithstanding she endorsed the proposals and sent them to the Senate Academic Affairs Committee of which I am member. It was not too difficult to convince my colleagues on this committee to get another unanimous approval, after answering their questions satisfactorily, especially about the viability of such a course and its ability to withstand a blown out debate on the full Senate floor. Once passed, the proposals were forwarded to the Faculty Senate President who brought them to the full Senate floor for debate and a vote. The debate was fairly heated and there were some objections. However, since I had already done my homework well and the proposals had had unanimous approvals at all levels up to this point in the process, the full Senate, in the final analysis, voted unanimously to pass both proposals. Thus with the full blessing of the Faculty Senate, the proposals were sent to the Chancellor for her signature, which she gladly endorsed, especially since she too had been pushing for the internationalization of the University's curriculum. Both courses appeared in the 2004-2006 Undergraduate Course Catalog.

3. Lessons learnt from the trenches

Although I do not want to leave the illusion that everything is now okay and that the battle is over, I still do realize that a major battle has been won and new ground has been broken with the overwhelming victory at these initial stages of establishing what in the near future could grow into a full-fledged African Language Program, or better still, an African Studies Program or Center at this HBCU, which also happens to be the second oldest Public Institution in the entire state of North Carolina⁶. I am aware that what has been achieved thus far is still far from what one might want to see happen, but it is a beginning, nevertheless, humble and humbling though it may be. Only the future will tell what the full import of these initial victories really mean. However, I believe that a much-needed foundation has been laid, and there is a silver lining on the horizon. However, I have learnt a few important lessons along the way, lessons which, I hope might be helpful, even encouraging to other African language teachers like myself who might be mulling the idea of pioneering new African language courses or programs in their respective institutions in the not too distant future. Here are a few lessons I have learnt from my experiences at my institution.

3.1 It Is Not Impossible to Pioneer new African Language Courses

The experiences described above point to one salient thing: it is possible to break new grounds in African language program establishment, once there is a will, and the aspiring teacher is ready to put in what it takes in terms of time, energy, hard work and motivation. When I first began to speak openly about my desire to propose the teaching of an African language some of my colleagues tried to dissuade me. They felt it was a project that was doomed to fail. I was told some “war stories” in the Institution's past, stories of those who had tried and had failed. I was told of attempted Chinese and Swahili course offerings that never got to the Senate floor for debate, of nasty fights at various levels of the approval process. I was made to know that no student would register for an African language at the expense of the traditional European ones they were already familiar with from High School. The morale of my story is that there will be detractors along the way, but if we are resolute and committed, we can blaze new trails and lead the way for the next generation of would-be African language students and teachers.

⁶ It needs be mentioned that with the establishment of Yoruba in the curriculum, FSU becomes the first higher institution in North Carolina, to my knowledge, to have an African language course among its offerings.

3.2 Do Your Homework

The pioneering African language teacher must be ready to do his or her homework. This “homework” includes, but is not limited to, studying and understanding your environment (i.e. where you are). Know the culture, the mindset of the people within your constituency; do a covert, then gradually an overt feasibility study to determine the needs in your department and college, as well as the willingness among faculty and administration to embrace change and new ideas. Another aspect of this homework is to have a good reputation among your students because you are doing an excellent job at teaching and helping them to learn. My students have been very supportive of my desire to introduce an African language into the curriculum and some are even excited at the very proposition of being able to take an African language course before their graduation. It is this kind of goodwill that gave me the boldness to defend my proposals resolutely before faculty audiences during the various levels of the approval process. Again and again, I had to let my colleagues know that there were many students waiting for an opportunity to take the new language I was proposing to teach. When some had attempted to discourage me with such questions as “Do you think that our students will be interested in taking an African language course when they could easily take the already well established European languages?” I was always quick to respond in the affirmative, telling them that I had many students, including faculty members, waiting for such a rare opportunity. In fact, during some of my defense before the different committees, some of my colleagues declared boldly that they, too, would be willing to take an advantage of such an opportunity if such a course were established. This helped in no small way to silence a lot of critics along the way, and explains the overwhelming unanimous votes my proposals received all the way, for it was no longer a course I, as an individual, was proposing, but rather, it had become a course other faculty members too were willing to see established. It was not a one-man show, but rather a team event. All of these due to the goodwill I was able to garner among fellow faculty and my students. Another element of this homework is to write an award-winning proposal, one that is well researched, well crafted and well grounded in modern linguistic theory. For instance, I used the “rationale” section of my proposal to preempt and to answer questions that I knew some of those who opposed might ask. Some of these questions I had already encountered in informal conversations. These included such questions as “Why another foreign language, and especially why an African language? Why Yoruba in particular? Who will teach it? Since most students already have enough difficulties learning English wouldn’t it be more confusing for them if another foreign language were added to their courses? Will this require the hiring of a new faculty? How will this help our students in particular and the University in general?” When I discovered, during my defense before the various committees, that most of those who were opposed to my proposals had not really taken the time to read them, it was quite easy for me to refer them to the appropriate sections and paragraphs in my proposals. This had the effect of silencing others who would have raised objections, since it exposed their ignorance⁷ of the facts already put forward, and of the larger issues involved.

3.3 Be a Team Player

Get to know your colleagues, be professional, be a team player and get active with the goings on within your constituency. This will include getting involved academically and professionally in your department, college and institution. Right from the onset of my career at my new Institution, I tried to be a team player. I had learnt a lot from my TA and Instructor days, and had learnt the importance of working together with others, even if we disagreed. I learnt that those you support and encourage today will also be there to offer you the same when you need it. I had watched those who liked to be loners and to do their own thing fail woefully whenever they wanted to get something done because no one

⁷ Talking about ignorance, Keith Cothrun, President of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), remarked, with reference to the Senate declaration of 2005 as the Year of Languages, that the aim was to make Americans better citizens in the global market, as well as to work toward increasing their knowledge and understanding of other cultures, and that “If the United States is going to continue to play an important role in the global economy and business world, we must be able to understand and communicate with other cultures around the world.” France’s ambassador, Jean-David Levitte, member of the “2005—Year of Languages” National Honorary Committee also remarked that Language is the United States’ “last barrier, and it comes from ignorance.” These statements are culled from an e-article by Natalie Troyer of *The Washington Times*, published December 8, 2004.

would lend them much needed support when they stepped forward with some new idea. In my concluding remarks, I mention the support and encouragement I have received from my colleague in History. It is all because of being a team player. I had given her moral support while she worked on one project or another, so when my time came she threw her full weight behind me. This aspect of the entire building block cannot be overemphasized. We must realize that we all need each other and that our success, both now and in the future is tied to those of others. It does not pay to be a loner, not if you ever dream of starting something new at some point in your academic career.

3.4 Be Active, Be Visible, Be Available

It is of utmost importance to seize upon little opportunities that come our way to make ourselves visible (not in the negative way, of course) and available by volunteering to serve on occasion. This way our colleagues and immediate supervisors will take note of our esprit de corps. I must mention, at this point, that my then department Chair has been very supportive of me and has been a source of encouragement at every point of this process. What I am saying in essence is simple: sign up to serve on some committees, especially key committees that might enhance your ambitions. For me, it was initially volunteering to be on my department's Composition Committee, then the Curriculum Committee. From there I was appointed to the College International Studies Committee. I later on volunteered to represent my Department at the Faculty Senate and subsequently was appointed to the Senate Academic Affairs Committee. It was a lot of hard work and putting in extra hours to be on these committees, but I believe they gave me much needed experience and visibility, and along with that, credibility among my colleagues and within the administration. Being on these committees helped me a great deal to learn how things worked and functioned at various levels of the institutional ladder. The experience and knowledge garnered at these meetings gave me some advantage during discussions of issues of importance within my immediate constituencies. Thus, when the time was ripe and I began to bring up the idea of infusing African language courses into the curriculum people took me seriously, listened to what I had to say, and took notice, even if they did not necessarily agree with me. When the time came to ask for their support it was much easier to do so, and even when some didn't quite agree with me, they still gave me their support when it was time to vote on my proposals, such that throughout all the levels of the approval process the votes were unanimous. Even those who strongly opposed my ideas during the discussions phase still voted for my proposals, if only for diplomatic reasons. I still remember how I reluctantly volunteered to represent my Department at the Senate during my second year on the job because no one else would then. Little did I know that this would soon come back to help me accomplish one of my goals a year later. My membership in both the Senate and the Senate AA Committee made my job much easier when it came time to defend my Yoruba language proposals before the two important bodies. These were where most of previous proposals had been shot down, even after they had gained approvals at the Departmental and College levels.

3.5 The Implications of the Ongoing Global War on Terror for the Pioneering of African Language Programs in the Academy

The ongoing global war on terror, spurred by the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers in New York, and the subsequent wars it brought about in Afghanistan and Iraq has brought about an unprecedented openness among Americans, and this is especially so among legislators, politicians and other groups of people who, otherwise, would not have cared less about other cultures and languages. Languages such as Farsi, Pashto and Urdu have suddenly become entrenched in day-to-day American vocabulary. Prior to 9/11, even the name Afghanistan would have taken many Americans by surprise. Now it is a household name, along with other far-fetched names such as the Taliban, the Mullahs and, of course, Osama bin Laden. In Iraq, place names such as Tikrit, Mosul, the Sunni Triangle, etc. have made their way into daily American discourse. What could the implication of all of this be for the teaching of African languages? I believe it has created a great deal of curiosity among Americans, curiosity about other languages, cultures and customs. Suddenly politicians, technocrats and the media have begun to talk about how ignorant Americans are about other people and their languages and how important it is to learn about other people, their religions and cultures.

Even Bookstores have begun to register a boost in their sales of books on Geography, Islam, and foreign languages and cultures. I believe the time is ripe to get to work on how to make new inroads into hitherto uncharted territories, as we take advantage of this new openness to push for the establishment of African language courses and programs, not only within the US, but globally. It should, I believe, be much easier now to secure grants toward this end⁸. This door may not be open forever. We must therefore seize the moment, get creative, and begin to plan and to strategize on how to make the best of the current situation.

4. Addressing cultural, ideological and curricular challenges

As mentioned in earlier paragraphs, it is of utmost importance to address some well-entrenched fears and concerns if one must be successful in this endeavor. In my proposals, for instance, I was careful to address these concerns. I made it abundantly clear that it would be a great disservice to deny our young African-American students an opportunity to learn about their historical and cultural roots. I explained that a West-African language such as Yoruba was an excellent way to connect our students to their ancestral homeland. At the ideological level, I argued that African languages were in no way inferior to the well-established and regularly taught European languages in the US. If anything, I stressed, it was indeed advantageous to learn an African language, and especially a West-African language, if Americans were to have a better understanding and appreciation for such American language varieties as African American Vernacular English (a.k.a. Ebonics), Gullah and Geechee. I also addressed curricular concerns that an African language might not be a viable option, given the advantaged position of the popular European ones it will be up in competition against. I emphasized the fact that most students taking these European languages were doing so for lack of a viable and relevant alternative. My argument was that a West-African language, Yoruba in this instance, will provide our students with exactly that – an alternative that is both viable and relevant to their unique experience. To those who argue that introducing an African language will lead to decreased standards in English, I was quick to point their attention to well established linguistic theory which proves that on the contrary, learning a non-Indo European language would actually help strengthen their knowledge and acquisition of English. I contended that the same principle and theory establishing bilingual education programs in the US and other high immigration nations were equally relevant and applicable to the establishment of African languages at HBCUs, and elsewhere.

5. Conclusion

Looking into the future, I am very hopeful that the establishment of a full-fledged African Language program of studies at my current Institution is only a matter of time. Throughout my discussions, thus far I have not mentioned another equally important factor in the building block toward this future, and that is the current availability of African history courses being offered by one of my colleagues in the Department of Government and History. She happens to be one of those who had benefited from a similar program while a graduate student at one of the Title VI African Studies Centers. She was hired at my current Institution three years before me and had also worked hard to introduce African History courses into her department's offerings. She was elated when I broke the good news to her that Yoruba had now appeared in the University's course catalog. She assured me she would announce it to her students and encourage them to sign up for it in the Fall. Although she is neither in my department, nor an African language teacher, she has been very supportive of my efforts right from the onset, and has always supplied an effusion of encouraging words all the way. In fact,

⁸ Most of the remarks made at the first National Language Conference organized by the U.S. Department of Defense and the Center for the Advanced Study of Language on June 22, 2004 point positively in this direction. At that Conference, David S.C. Chu, U.S. Undersecretary of Defense is said to have remarked that America needs a "permanent change in our approach to the peoples and cultures of the rest of the world...our need to understand the world is a prime national security concern." Culled from an e-article by Elizabeth Kellar on ICMA.org, January/February 2005, Volume 87 Number 1, entitled "Wanted: Language and Cultural Competence."

once I had decided to go ahead with plans to write proposals for Yoruba, she was eager to help any way she could and even gave me sample copies of the proposals she had written earlier on to introduce African history courses in her department. I believe that with this kind of esprit de corps and positive energy we can accomplish a great deal together as we march toward the future. We must therefore take up the challenge and begin to plant new African language courses and programs all across this great nation, and throughout the entire global village. We cannot fail; we must not fail. As I write this, it is very heartening to report that thirteen students have already registered for Elementary Yoruba 1 during the pre-registration period at the tail end of the Spring semester. Conservatively, I expect, at least, seven more students to register during the regular registration period at the start of the Fall semester. This should bring my maiden Yoruba class to about twenty, which is a robust number for a pioneering class of a “less commonly taught language.” This, indeed, is good news, and an encouraging development, not only for Yoruba at my Institution, but also for the future of African language teaching in general. Lastly, it is important to emphasize that although the examples and discussions in this paper have been focused on an HBCU, the observations and conclusions drawn, as well as the principles outlined herein, are not limited to such an institution; rather, they could be applied to any other type of institution, including the majority White institutions.

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Selected Proceedings of the 36th Annual Conference on African Linguistics: Shifting the Center of Africanism in Language Politics and Economic Globalization

edited by Olaoba F. Arasanyin
and Michael A. Pemberton

Cascadilla Proceedings Project Somerville, MA 2006

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Selected Proceedings of the 36th Annual Conference on African Linguistics:
Shifting the Center of Africanism in Language Politics and Economic Globalization
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ISBN 1-57473-414-8 library binding

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This paper can be cited as:

Ajani, Timothy T. 2006. Pioneering Yoruba as a Foreign Language at an Historically Black Institution: Cultural, Ideological and Curricular Challenges. In *Selected Proceedings of the 36th Annual Conference on African Linguistics*, ed. Olaoba F. Arasanyin and Michael A. Pemberton, 109-115. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Proceedings Project.

or:

Ajani, Timothy T. 2006. Pioneering Yoruba as a Foreign Language at an Historically Black Institution: Cultural, Ideological and Curricular Challenges. In *Selected Proceedings of the 36th Annual Conference on African Linguistics*, ed. Olaoba F. Arasanyin and Michael A. Pemberton, 109-115. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Proceedings Project. www.lingref.com, document #1413.