

Marisa Villarreal  
“Gullah Bible”

### **Clearing the Hurdles: Gullah Bible of 2005<sup>1</sup>**

---

<sup>1</sup> This essay won 2<sup>nd</sup> place in the Dunham Bible Museum category for the 2017 Piece of the Past Essay Contest.

## **Clearing the Hurdles: Gullah Bible of 2005**

The city of Houston, Texas has an astounding number of languages being spoken on a daily basis—reportedly around 145 languages, making the city the third highest in the country—reflecting the increasingly diverse races and ethnic groups that populate the area (Houston Facts). Languages, not surprisingly, are an incredibly important aspect of people's culture, and unfortunately, a study in 2013 reported that one language disappears every fourteen days (Aulakh). Of course, widely spoken languages such as Chinese or English are not in danger of extinction any time soon, but for a language such as Gullah that has only around 250,000 speakers (Gullah-language), it might not be too far off. However, a great victory for the speakers of Gullah occurred in the year 2005 – the translation of the Bible into their language. There were several obstacles that stood in the way of a Gullah translation of the Bible, but it was ultimately a success that allowed them to reconnect with their roots and create a stronger hold on their interpretation of the Bible.

A stranger's first impression of Gullah has often been one of misunderstanding. Gullah has been known to be labeled as “broken English” and ridiculed for it (Smith). Native speakers often were scorned and seen as uneducated or unintelligent. Soon, mothers were teaching their children not to speak Gullah outside of their home, trying to protect them from that disdain and mistreatment (Simon). Some children grew up denying Gullah altogether because of it. One such example is a man named Emory Campbell. He admits, “...I denied Gullah for so many years, particularly after I moved away and came back to the islands. I didn't want to admit that I knew or spoke Gullah” (‘New Testament’). Little did he know, he would become part of a team of speakers helping to translate one of the world's most popular books into the language he was

determined to abandon.

The process of translating the New Testament into Gullah began way back in 1979, more than a quarter of a century before it was finally completed in 2005 (Smith). The project was initiated by Pat and Claude Sharpe, whose mission was to bring the word of God to peoples of all languages. They had spent years translating the Bible into languages spoken by only a few thousand people, and when they encountered the ashamed and reluctant Gullah speakers in the Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia, they had some convincing to do (Simon).

Gullah is in itself a perfectly legitimate language that had developed amongst the African slaves from different tribes who needed to communicate with one another. A 1949 book by linguist Lorenzo Dow Turner, called “Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect,” proved the evolution of Gullah from a combination of various West African languages and English (Sumpter). However, up until the Sharpes’ arrival to the Sea Islands, the native speakers of Gullah remained unpersuaded and humiliated. Locals even approached the Sharpes, advising them not to go through with the translation, and many natives turned down the request to help (Simon). So, the Sharpes examined Gullah, tracing the roots of words and phrases back to different West African tribes (Simon). They pointed out the fact that English itself had been impacted by Gullah, with derivatives such as “nanny” and “tote.” There are even similarities to the Spanish and Portuguese languages, which is logical, considering the fact that the Spanish and Portuguese had played a huge role in slave trade (Klein). Campbell said, “...They convinced me that it was a language and that we should be proud of it. And that’s why I joined it. And that’s why others joined the team, as well” (‘New Testament’). Eventually, the Sharpes were able to recruit people for their translating group.

Of course, the actual translating presented its own challenges. Gullah is a language that spread only due to word of mouth. There aren't any grammar textbooks or dictionaries that can be consulted. It all depended on the native speakers to remember the details, formulate spellings for the words, and capture the meaning of the decorative language of the King James Version. It was mentally straining work for the team. Any suggestions for translations had to be bounced off of elders and rephrased for better comprehension (Simon). One of the members, Vernetta Canteen, admitted, "Oh, my God, it was hard... It was so mentally draining; I don't think physical work could have been any harder" (Simon).

Roughly twenty-six years after the project started, *De Nyew Testament* was completed. All the hardships that the speakers of Gullah had to endure for this accomplishment was well worth it. Prior to *De Nyew Testament*, the native speakers of Gullah had decided that the Bible wasn't really meant to be understood (Simon). It was something to hold as sacred, but something that was ambiguous and foreign. What *De Nyew Testament* brought to the table was monumental. Native islanders were able to hear the Bible in their first language. "When you read the Bible in Gullah," Canteen said, "it's like you're talking to God one-on-one" (Simon). Hearing and reading the scripture in their own tongue evoked great emotion amongst them. A man named Al Smith said, "I was in tears – and I'm not a crybaby guy" (Simon).

It has been rumored that the translation of the Old Testament will soon be underway, though that process may also take a number of years to come to fruition (Smith). In the meantime, the print and audio versions of *De Nyew Testament* are being used with a goal of hopefully universalizing the language (Smith). As we know, there are a number of endangered languages in the world and Gullah, unfortunately, is among them. However, as awareness of Gullah spreads and as more people pick up a Gullah bible, the more the language becomes

preserved, especially since the English verses are printed in the margins of *De Nyew Testament* (Simon). Campbell said, “People can buy [the audios] and personally own them and I think they have a much better opportunity to study the language” (Gullah-language). The speakers of Gullah will continue to protect and preserve their language and culture and reap the benefits of having a more personal connection with their Bibles and relationship with God.

### Works Cited

Aulakh, Raveena. “Dying Languages: Scientists Fret as One Disappears Every 14 Days.” *Thestar.com*. N.p., 15 Apr. 2013. Web. [https://www.thestar.com/news/world/2013/04/15/dying\\_languages\\_scientists\\_fret\\_as\\_one\\_disappears\\_every\\_14\\_days.html/](https://www.thestar.com/news/world/2013/04/15/dying_languages_scientists_fret_as_one_disappears_every_14_days.html/)

“Houston Facts & Figures | About Houston, Texas.” *Visit Houston*. N.p., n.d. Web. <https://www.visithoustontexas.com/about-houston/facts-and-figures/>

Klein, Thomas B. “African Sounds in Gullah Geechee And On Middle Caicos.” *The Black Scholar* 1 (2011): 22. Academic OneFile. Web. <https://eds-a-ebSCOhost-com.libproxy.hbu.edu/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=0cd83af4-c8ac-4154-9443-25c43240c197@sessionmgr4009&vid=4&hid=4208>

“‘New Testament’ Translated into Gullah.” NPR. NPR, 16 Mar. 2006. Web. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5283230>.

Sumpter, Althea. “Geechee and Gullah Culture.” *New Georgia Encyclopedia*. N.p., 19 Oct. 2016. Web. <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/arts-culture/geechee-and-gullah-culture>

Simon, Stephanie. “Gospel According to Gullah.” *Gospel According to Gullah*. N.p., 29 Dec. 2005. Web. <http://gullahbible.com/latimes.htm>

Smith, Bruce. “The Word, in Their Tongue.” *The Washington Post*. WP Company, 26 Nov. 2005. Web. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/11/25/AR2005112501075.html>

“Gullah-language Bible Now on Audio CDs.” *Access World News – Historical and Current*. *Aiken Standard*, 25 Nov. 2011. Web. <http://infoweb.newsbank.com/resources/doc/nb/news/13B435864C970D90?p=WORLDNEWS>