

The Erased Quarter: Women, Governance, and What the Record Removed



The Hole That Was Cut

The first essay in this series made a promise: no genuine education can begin until a person recovers who they are. Knowledge of self, it argued, is the ground on which all other learning must stand. But a foundation is only as sound as the record beneath it - and a record can be quarried, hollowed, and reshaped by hands that never wished us whole.

This essay begins where that promise meets its hardest test. If knowledge of self is the beginning, what happens when the archive itself has been built to prevent that knowing? What happens when the very history you are told to recover has a hole cut precisely where your grandmothers used to stand?

Here is the claim that governs everything that follows: **erasure is not omission. It is operation.**

Omission is passive - forgetting, oversight, the natural fading of what no one bothered to write down. Operation is active. It names the gap as something made: carved deliberately, maintained intentionally, defended across centuries. When the missing piece is women's governance, and the absence is wide enough to swallow queen mothers, priestesses, lineage holders, and land stewards, we are right to stop and ask the harder question. Did this hole grow, or was it dug?

I did not arrive at that question alone. I arrived at it through the final lesson in the Universal Zulu Nation's curriculum.

The Closing Lesson

Every other Infinity Lesson carries the organizational seal - attributed collectively, signed by leadership, or presented under Afrika Bambaataa's authorship. This final one is different. It is attributed to Taj Tarik Bey, and it is framed not as policy but as testimony.

It opens with two words drawn from ancient instruction: "Man... Know Thyself." Then it pivots immediately toward absence: "A lack of knowledge about the ancient history of Civilization and the social-orders established upon the Earth-Planet disenfranchises one of a clear understanding..."

The lesson argues that women once held governance roles in ancient African civilization - spiritual authority, land stewardship, judicial power, lineage oversight - and that this governance was suppressed through Inquisition-era policy, papal law, colonial administration, and religious reclassification. We cannot understand present imbalances, it insists, without reckoning with what was taken.

As someone whose life's work lives inside African Diaspora and African American history, I read this and had to pause. The claims were not entirely new to me. The framing was. In my own archival research, I had catalogued gaps for years - missing records, unindexed communities, oral histories filed away as anecdote rather than evidence. I had treated them as failures of documentation. The lesson named something darker: that sometimes the absence itself is the instrument. That is where this essay turns from lament to analysis. Because if the hole was cut, it can be mapped. And what can be mapped can be repaired.

Before the Colonizer Arrived: African Traditions of Women's Authority

Some of what the lesson claims does not require defense against skepticism - only corroboration. And here the wider record confirms it plainly. Across the African continent, women held structures of authority that predate European contact by centuries. They were not exceptions. They were institutional.

In Kemet - often loosely called ancient Egypt - women ruled, owned property, served as high priests, and held independent economic power. Hatshepsut governed as king. Nefertiti shared pharaonic power. Archaeological records document female scribes, physicians, and administrators. When Greek visitors arrived in later centuries, they remarked on the unusual standing of Egyptian women compared with the women of Athens.

West Africa carried parallel traditions. Among the Akan peoples, the queen mother - the Ohemmaa - holds ceremonial weight equal to the chief. She selects rulers, counsels on war and peace, and oversees the lineages of the clan. In Yorubaland, the *iyaloje*, leader of the market women, exercises economic jurisdiction that reaches across trade routes and taxation. These were not decorative titles. They carried real authority, protected by customary law older than any European constitution.

Here the settled scholarship stands firm. Cheikh Anta Diop argued at length for the matrilineal foundations of African civilizations. Ifi Amadiume's *Male Daughters, Female*

Husbands documents Igbo women who occupied roles the West assumed belonged only to men, unsettling the binary altogether. Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch*, though centered on Europe, traces how colonial expansion dismantled women's economic autonomy across the globe. None of this contradicts the lesson. It grounds it. The lesson sees African governance as continuous rather than invented, disrupted rather than naturally diminished. On this point, the record and the lesson agree.

The Mechanism of Removal

If African women's authority was real, its disappearance demands an explanation. The lesson offers one, and here it turns diagnostic. The loss, it argues, was engineered through three tools working in concert: naming, law, and religion. This triad is the analytical heart of the essay. Everything that follows - the Middle Passage, Reconstruction, the present - illustrates how these three instruments did their work.

Naming. The lesson argues that Moors who adopted Inquisitionist Christianity were renamed "Moriscos," and later "Negroes, blacks, and coloreds." This is where scholarship diverges, and I want to mark that clearly. Mainstream historiography debates the specific reclassification narrative vigorously, and I present it as the lesson's claim rather than settled fact. But strip the contested taxonomy away and a durable principle remains: whoever controls naming controls memory. To rename a people is to begin rewriting their history; to reclassify their governance is to strip it of legitimacy before anyone thinks to defend it. Classification is not description. It is administrative control. Once your identity becomes a category, it can be assigned, revoked, and revised by hands that are not your own.

Law. Papal bulls, canon law, Black Codes - each built frameworks in which women's authority grew legally suspect. The lesson names the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed specifically, arguing that Constantine authorized it as a political instrument rather than a theological necessity. Here again scholarship diverges: many historians of the early Church point to complex ecclesiastical processes and would contest a purely political reading, and I hold that motive tentatively. But the legal record itself is not in dispute. Spanish *encomienda* placed indigenous women under male heads of household. British common law imported coverture, making married women legal dependents of their husbands. The French civil code followed. These were not natural developments. They were transplanted systems, engineered to concentrate authority in men's hands and to bar women from contracts, land, and the courts. On the mechanism of law, the wider record confirms the lesson's larger point even where it questions the particulars.

Religion. The lesson accuses Christian converts of denying kinship with their own forefathers, becoming "moriscos" in a kind of inherited denial. Whether one reads that literally or as charged metaphor, it points toward something scholars broadly recognize: conversion as rupture. In many African societies, women held spiritual authority - over ancestor veneration, over healing, over the rituals of birth. When those authorities were demonized and replaced by male clergy, an entire channel of intergenerational transmission went quiet. The knowledge did not merely fall silent. It was silenced.

Across all three tools, one pattern emerges. The erasure was not random violence. It was administrative, systematic, and designed to keep producing its outcomes long after the

conquest itself had ended. That is what it means to call erasure an operation rather than an omission.

The Middle Passage: The Three Tools at Sea

The transatlantic slave trade introduced no new mechanism. It intensified the three already at work.

Consider naming first. Colonial enslavers stripped African names and imposed English ones, but even the renaming mattered less than the classification beneath it: commodity, property, labor unit. The administrative logic that had turned Moors into categories now turned whole peoples into inventory. A queen mother could not transmit her title once she was branded with a number and shackled beside strangers. The name that carried her authority had no place on a ledger of goods.

Law followed the same body across the ocean. The *iyaloje* could not lead a market when her community existed only as plantation assignments, and no legal instrument recognized her jurisdiction. Spiritual healers could not practice openly when their medicine was reclassified as superstition, punishable by the whip or worse. The law that had excluded women from courts in Europe now denied enslaved women any standing at all.

And religion completed the pattern. Practices that once anchored women's spiritual authority became things to hide - passed in whispers, disguised, or lost.

Yet something survived. Not intact. Fractured. But present. Enslaved women held kinship networks together in defiance of prohibition. Midwives delivered generations without recognition, passing their knowledge by mouth because no license would ever be extended to them. Grandmothers became archives, storing the stories that could not safely be written. Mutual aid rose from necessity - pooled resources, shared childcare, quiet protection offered where institutions refused all care.

Deborah Gray White's *Ar'n't I a Woman?* documents how enslaved women built survival strategies that functioned as informal governance. Darlene Clark Hine named the culture of dissemblance, the protective silence women developed to shield an inner life from predatory eyes. Patricia Hill Collins theorized the matrix of domination, yet also showed how Black feminist thought persisted beneath surveillance even when it left no formal trace. These were not restorations of the old structures. They were fragments reaching across generations, keeping alive what the record had officially deleted. The three tools did their work. But they did not finish it.

The Aftermath: Reconstruction and Its Reversal

Emancipation opened a brief window of hope. During Radical Reconstruction, Black women organized in the open. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper addressed national conventions. Mary McLeod Bethune founded schools that educated thousands. Ida B. Wells turned investigative journalism into an instrument of accountability against lynching.

Then Jim Crow hardened. The federal withdrawal of 1877 dissolved federal protection. Southern legislatures rewrote their constitutions to exclude women from the vote

regardless of race. Economic opportunity narrowed again through convict leasing, debt peonage, and wage theft - each upheld by courts willing to enforce all three. The same three tools reappeared, dressed in new law: naming through racial classification, law through disfranchisement, and a moral order that kept women's leadership suspect.

The pattern continues today in softer registers. Historical narratives still center men - the abolitionists, the politicians, the preachers. Women appear as support in the footnotes rather than as leaders of movements that were often theirs. Fewer scholarly articles trace Black women's political organizing than trace white suffrage. Museums display the crowds at the march while rarely capturing the women who organized it. The record remains incomplete - not because the data vanished by accident, but because the criteria for what counted filtered women below the threshold of visibility before anyone ever sat down to archive.

Recovery Without Forgery

So, what now? We have named the erasure. We have mapped its mechanisms. What remains is repair.

Recovery is not nostalgia. It is restoration. It means locating what survived the destruction, then asking how we might rebuild structures in which women's governance can function again. It does not mean forging perfect replicas of ancestral models - those cannot be fully restored after generational trauma, and pretending otherwise would betray the very honesty this work demands. It means carrying enduring principles into contemporary form, where justice still has room to grow.

The seeds already exist, if we know where to look. In Black churches, women increasingly hold pastoral roles, and deaconess boards manage congregational finances with real independence. In mutual aid networks, women-led community funds distribute resources without bureaucratic gatekeeping - the same instinct that once moved through plantation kinship networks, surfacing again in modern form. Oral history projects now gather elder knowledge systematically, treating what was once dismissed as anecdote as the evidence it always was. Archive initiatives digitize collections that place formerly marginalized voices at the center rather than the periphery. None of these recreate the Ohemmaa or the iyaloje. But each restores a fragment of the principle beneath them: that women hold legitimate authority over the life of a community.

The Wisdom Born Archive lives within this recovery framework. Every essay asks what was taken, who carried what survived, and what a community needs now that its institutions have failed it. The People's Ledger extends that inquiry into the open, inviting submissions from those who carry knowledge the official record never gathered. Sovereignty, in this practice, means deciding from within what counts as legitimate rather than waiting for external permission.

The lesson itself does not end at diagnosis. It closes with instruction: "One cannot and will not understand or properly analyze the foul social, economic and political imbalances imposed upon North America's Natural Peoples, if one has no knowledge of the lecherous Inquisition philosophy..." The meaning is plain enough. You cannot repair what you have not first recovered. Understanding precedes transformation.

The Question Returned

Return to where I began. Open the Green Book. Find the final lesson. Read it slowly. Then ask why it comes last.

I want to offer my reading of that placement rather than declare its purpose settled, because the lesson does not announce its own reason. But the placement invites interpretation, and mine is this: to end with the matriarchy is to leave the reader with a warning. If knowledge of self skips over women's governance, nothing rebuilt afterward will stand. Whoever controls memory decides who gets remembered - and remembering women's authority changes everything downstream. A sovereignty that excludes half its people from authorship is not sovereignty. It is a smaller cage with a prouder name.

Read that way, the closing lesson completes the first essay's argument rather than merely following it. Knowledge of self demanded that we recover who we are. This lesson insists we cannot, not fully, until we reckon with what was deliberately cut from the story. To recover the self while leaving the erased quarter buried is to build on half a foundation and call it whole.

So, the education that begins with self must also include knowing who the women were before the colonizers renamed them, which structures stood before the law dismantled them, and which traditions endured despite every attempt to extinguish them.

Know thyself - including who your grandmothers were, what power they held before it was stripped from them, and what wisdom they slipped quietly to daughters who learned to hide it until safer ground appeared. Nothing stands firmly when it is built atop a partial truth. Recover what was removed. Build forward from completion rather than fragment. Knowledge of self includes the courage to name the erasure, to trace its contours, and to return what has lain beneath the silence. Only then can genuine teaching begin.

A Note on Sources

This essay draws primarily on the Universal Zulu Nation's Infinity Lessons, as compiled in the Green Book (1973–2000), specifically the matriarchy lesson attributed to Taj Tarik Bey. Additional sources include Carter G. Woodson's *The Miseducation of the Negro* (1933); Cheikh Anta Diop's *The African Origin of Civilization*; Ifi Amadiume's *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (1987); Deborah Gray White's *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (1985); Darlene Clark Hine's work on the culture of dissemblance; Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* (1990); and Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (2004). It also incorporates published essays from The Wisdom Born Archive, including *Memory as Infrastructure*, *Sacred Blueprint of Community*, and *Who Controls the Calendar*.

These sources represent diverse frameworks: mainstream academic historiography, African-centered scholarship, and community sovereignty discourse. Where frameworks diverge, the essay marks the divergence openly, presenting arguments as they originate rather than collapsing their differences artificially. Rigor requires honoring complexity rather than smoothing contradiction.

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