

**SANKOFAN PREACHING:
LOOKING BACK, SPEAKING FORWARD**

Mark A. "Ogunwale" Lomax¹

Abstract

Sankofa is an Akan word and philosophical idea. The Akan people originate in Ghana, West Africa. Sankofa is imaged as a bird that flies forward while looking backward and simultaneously holding an egg in its mouth. It is symbolic of drawing from the past those lessons and experiences that are important for current and future progress and growth and for assuring that the knowledge and wisdom gleaned from experience are passed on to future generations. Sankofan preaching utilizes the theological, philosophical, cultural and experiential resources received from African ancestors to envision and to proclaim a preferred future while concomitantly addressing public policies, social arrangements, and political covenants that portend toward the oppression and exploitation of God's people. Sankofan preaching forthrightly marries faith to reason, Christ to culture and experience to ancestral memory and prophetic vision. Sankofan preaching reclaims, redresses and sanctifies African and Afrikan American spiritualities and cultures in ways that heal the wounded African soul. This lecture will serve as a philosophical and methodological resource for preachers, teachers, pastors and scholars interested in being and becoming Sankofan preachers and leaders.

¹ Mark Lomax (D.Min) is Associate Professor of Homiletics at Interdenominational Theological Center. This article is a revised lecture of a lecture he gave to celebrate the Charles B. Copher Annual Faculty Lecture Series on March 20, 2012.

SANKOFA

The title of this year's Charles B. Copher Faculty Lecture is, "Sankofan Preaching: Looking Back, Speaking Forward." This title was chosen to capture the Interdenominational Theological Center's (ITC) Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), which is consistent with my work as a pastor and scholar for almost twenty years. "Sankofa," which denotes an African idea that originated with the Akan people of Ghana, West Africa, is represented by a variety of symbols. In spite of its numerous symbolic representations, the most familiar, which is used as part of ITC's QEP is that of a bird whose feet and body are facing forward while its face is looking backward. Apart from the posture of the Sankofa bird, it is depicted with an egg in the bill of its mouth. Ghanaians, regardless of the particular ethnic group to which they belong, explain the Sankofa bird as teaching a lesson to "Go back and fetch it" (i.e., to fetch something that has been left behind or that was in the past).

The "Sankofan"—going back and fetching—is indicative of a worldview, a perspective or way of seeing and perceiving time and experience, which places value on the way information is gathered to acquire knowledge. Sankofa is, therefore, a kind of consciousness suggesting that a backward gaze is essential to both the present and future experiences. In my opinion, since Sankofa seems to privilege the past while valuing the present, Sankofa simultaneously privileges both the present and the future as they impinge on the past. This is depicted by the symbolism of the Sankofa bird, whose head or brain and center of consciousness looks forward while its face looks backward.

In light of the foregoing, the imagery of the Sankofa bird can be metaphorically deployed for human beings, who can be called "Sankofan" persons. Sankofan persons are people

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who are aware of their histories, cultures, social networks, lineage and political situations and who have some understanding of the spiritual traditions and philosophical assumptions and assertions that contributed to their formation. In other words, Sankofan people are aware of the environment in which they live and how that environment has been transformed over time.

The Sankofa bird, like the Sankofan person, is peculiar since apart from looking back, as though living in the past, it also holds an egg in the bill of its mouth. This signifies its belief in and its hope for a delicate future reality, which it needs to handle with great care because that future affects its unborn generation(s). The Sankofa bird's conscious attempt to hold on to the past while looking into the future indicates that there is no real bifurcation between past and future in such a way that both the past and the future constitute necessary dimensions of the present. This lack of bifurcation of past and future, which is similar to that of Sankofa, is portrayed by John S. Mbiti in his use of the Kiswahili terms *Sasa* and *Zamani*, which mean a short future and a long past, respectively. Mbiti asserts that "*Zamani* overlaps with *Sasa* and the two are not separable."² The idea of *Zamani* and *Sasa*, like Sankofa," suggests that rather than separating the past from the future, both the past and future must be seen as necessary for the present. Furthermore, Sankofa provides an alternative notion of time that binds what is familiar in the Christian West, with its obsession with the past and anxiety about the future, which are never fulfilled, with the present reality.

The shape of the Sankofa bird is circular and suggests that rather than thinking of time as chronologically moving

² John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (London: Heinemann International Literature and Textbooks, 1969), 22.

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from the past, to the present and then to the future, time must be seen as cyclical such that the past, present and future are inter-connected, with each phase depending on the others. In other words, the past is so connected to the future that there can be no future without a past and vice versa. As such it is impossible for the former to exist without the latter or the latter without the former. This inter-connectedness or dependence must be considered as so dynamic that the exclusion of any one phase or dimension also excludes the others. This idea is reiterated in Mbiti's assertion that "*Sasa* feeds on or disappears into *Zamani*."³ In light of Mbiti's assertion, Sankofan consciousness with its different perspective and worldview from western Christian consciousness may even be more powerful than the western idea of "faith." This latter idea is possible because Sankofan moves within itself while simultaneously moving beyond itself toward unborn future generations.

LOOKING BACK

The cyclical notion of time described above brings with it a different perspective of knowing, which involves a form of speech that communicates a message from God and, therefore, has implications for preaching using stories or narratives. In such preaching, God communicates with us and we hear the message of God through our conscious left-brain rational processes and we act on God's word through our right brain functions, which include imagination, vision, insight, discernment and intuition.

Faithful preachers, who respond to God's call, spend a great deal of time reading, researching and thinking, using both their physical and mind's eyes to garner knowledge and

³ Ibid., 22.

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ascertain the truth in texts. While doing these, they construe time as chronological with the past gone, the present being here and the future yet to come. This construal of time impacts and circumscribes their thought processes and abilities to “see” and understand what God is saying. As preachers hear God’s message through perception, imagination and/or intuition, they realize that the books they read are not time bound in the “normal” chronological sense, but that they are profoundly vital parts of the present moment. In other words, the preachers do not simply follow the logic in what they read, but they see the setting, characterization, plot, action and conclusion⁴ of stories holistically. When this realization dawns on preachers, the notion of chronological time yields to Sankofan time and they begin to hear God’s word and to interpret it as revelation.

Carl Gustav Jung is worth taking seriously in light of the foregoing. Jung encourages those who listen to and read his theory of psychoanalysis to trust their intuition and imagination arguing that imagination and intuition are “vital to our understanding.”⁵ For Jung, imagination and intuition, “supplement ‘rational’” intellect in their application to problems.⁶ Furthermore, “intuition is almost indispensable in the interpretation of symbols.”⁷ Jung’s idea mirrors that of Sankofan time, which looks back imaginatively to the past and intuits the future, and does not just trust what is seen in the present reality. Reading, research, critical thinking and in addition, dialoging with other people, as mentioned earlier, accomplish this. It is also accomplished through experiences that stir up the imagination and provide a consciousness of

⁴ Austin B. Tucker, *The Preacher as Storyteller: The Power of Narrative in the Pulpit*, (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2008).

⁵ Carl G. Jung, *Man and His Symbols*, (New York: Dell Publishing, 1964), 82.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 82.

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both what is present and what is expected in the future. These accomplishments bring us to the point where we begin to see alternative paths for dealing with the circumstances of the future even if we see them as though “only through a glass dimly.”⁸ As preachers, and with the aid of the Holy Spirit, when intuition and perception stoke our imagination, we discover legitimate ways of knowing how the living, omnipresent, omniscient God speaks to us and in Sankofan time, we also hear the voices of our ancestors, who lived exemplary lives, had progeny, and who transitioned through natural death, and not by some dreadful disease, taboo or cause⁹ into the after-life. Such ancestors who become the “living-dead” remain in the active memory of the community and continue to interact with the living on the terrestrial plane.¹⁰ They communicate with their descendants “through dreams, reincarnation, and visions”¹¹ that are profoundly relevant to present experiences of the living. Just as the voice of God is often treated, the voices of the ancestors are not heeded, are even denigrated and often designated as voices of “non-beings.”

A consideration of Sankofan time and Sankofan persons living in it needs to bring into relationship the notions of sight, hearing, and speech. By this means we do not limit ourselves to the notion that only physical biological processes are connected with sight. Furthermore, we need to understand that though the eyes and voice function differently biologically, each of their functions contribute to the wholeness of the spiritual being or soul.¹² Many African

⁸ 1 Cor 13:12.

⁹ Robert E. Hood, *Must God Remain Greek? Afro-Cultures and God-Talk*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 220.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 221.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 225.

¹² 1 Cor 12:12 ff. Here the Apostle Paul provides the imagery of the body parts and likens them to the body of believers.

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as well as *First world* societies make good on the foregoing idea by considering sight, not only as a mere biological function of *seeing*, but also as *hearing*. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, in her reflections on Christianity in Africa, concludes that the understanding of Christianity involves both a *seeing* and a *hearing*. She, therefore, uses this notion for part of the title of a book, *Hearing and Knowing*.¹³ The Dogon peoples of Mali in West Africa also understand this idea and deploy it in a number of hermeneutical dimensions, which they construe as words or speech but which are in fact, perspectives or ways of seeing. Professor Asa Hilliard III develops the idea of the Dogon peoples in four mental processes. The first, *Giri So* means “word at face value.” The second, *Benne So* is “word at the side.” The third, *Bolo So* means “the word from behind” and the fourth, *So Dayi*, “the clear word”, means “the development of vision.”¹⁴ Each step in the Dogon pedagogical mental process relates word to vision and speech to sight or a perspective. It is evident from Hilliard’s work that the Dogon people have a strong notion about the generative power of words in their spirituality. In this light, sight or hearing precedes speaking and this teaches an important lesson about Sankofan preaching, in which preachers speak what is revealed (i.e., what they have seen, perceived, intuited and imagined) as well as what they think.

¹³ Mercy Amba Oduyoye. *Hearng and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa*. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1986).

¹⁴ Asa G. Hilliard, III, *SBA: The Reawakening of the African Mind*, forward by Wade Nobles, (Gainesville, FL: Markare, 1997), 102.

SPEAKING FORWARD

In light of the foregoing, Sankofan preaching can be construed as beginning with a conversation between creator and creature, through the means of prayer, meditation, reading, study, research, silence, daydreaming and brainstorming. Here the creator speaks to human beings during times of consciousness and unconsciousness and sends women and men, who are called, to preach what they hear or see, which is the message from God. The preacher, who engages God, or at least allows herself or himself to be engaged by God or the ancestors, in conversation, is only responsible for proclaiming the message of God and the ancestors but is not responsible for the impact or outcome of the message she or he has proclaimed.

Professor Jacob Carruthers, in a discussion on epistemology and theology, also mirrors the idea of knowing, which is an idea in Sankofan preaching. According to Carruthers, among the Kemites (Egyptians), "knowing is the result of a divine, universal and intergenerational conversation among God the creator, the cosmos, nature and the creatures of the earth, especially human beings."¹⁵ For Carruthers, the ancient Kemites believe all speech is divine and a gift from the creator, God, who gives both the message and the capacity for proclamation. Furthermore, Carruthers asserts that, while for the Kemites, *Medew Netcher* or Divine Speech deals with origins or metaphysics and subsumes other major divisions of philosophy, especially ontology and epistemology, on the one hand, on the other hand, *Medew Nefer* or Good Speech, deals with matters of governance, and it must be morally and ethically

¹⁵ Jacob H. Carruthers, *MDW NTR Divine Speech: A Historiographical Reflection of African Deep Thought From the Time of the Pharaohs to the Present*, Foreword by John Henrik Clarke, (London: Karnak House, 1995), 43.

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upright to fall in line with divine speech.¹⁶ From the Kemitic point of view, therefore, both divine speech and good speech are generative since knowing comes through speech.¹⁷ The generative power of words can be seen in the entire Hebrew Bible where the generative process of creation is effected by the word of 'Elohim (the gods). In Genesis 1:3ff, for example, God began by saying, "Let there be light" and there was light and kept saying, "Let there be ..." until creation was completed. However, the notion in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament is different from the notion under discussion here. In the former it is God's word that has power; but in the latter it is the word of the people that does.

Janheinz Jahn, in his book, *Muntu: African Culture and the Western World*, introduces two important African concepts, which also emphasize the power of words. These two concepts are *Ubwenge* and *Nommo*. The first concept, *Ubwenge*, according to Jahn, refers to two levels of active human intelligence, one of which has to do with "practical intelligence" and the other with "habitual intelligence." Furthermore, he defines the former, "practical intelligence" as cunning, slyness, or cleverness and the latter, "habitual intelligence" as active knowledge, ability, understanding, wisdom.¹⁸ The second concept, which is *Nommo*, Jahn defines as "the life force that produces all life, that influences 'things' in the shape of the word."¹⁹ Jahn asserts that *Ubwenge* (active human intelligence) combined with *Nommo* (life force) employs the word that penetrates and gives life to everything (i.e., that **causes everything** - emphasis mine). "Since man (*sic*) has power over the word, it is he who

¹⁶ Ibid., 43.

¹⁷ Ibid., 42.

¹⁸ Janheinz Jahn, *Muntu: African Culture and the Western World*, Introduction by Calvin C. Hernton (New York: Grove Weidenfeld Press, 1990), 122.

¹⁹ Ibid., 124.

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directs the life force. Through the word he receives it, shares it with other beings, and so fulfills the meaning of life....²⁰ All the activities of men [and women], and all movement in nature, rests on the productive power of the word, which is water and heat and seed and *Nommo* (i.e., life force itself)."²¹

These foregoing ancient African (including Dogon) notions of the power of the word are different from the Hebrew Bible and New Testament notions. Whereas in Dogon spiritual culture, the word of the human being is endowed with generative power, in the Kemitic (Egyptian) and Judeo-Christian traditions it is God's word that has the power to effect what it declares and human beings only proclaim the word of God. In Ezekiel 37, the prophet is instructed by God to speak to the dry bones strewn about in the valley. When the prophet speaks as God instructs the bones take on form, flesh and vitality. Similarly, in Matthew 21, when Jesus curses the fig tree and it withers, his disciples query him the next day and he answers them that "if you have faith and do not doubt, not only will you do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,' it will be done" (Matthew 21:21, NRSV). These examples confirm that in Jewish and Christian traditional worldview and perception, the real power lies not in the human capacity to speak the word, but in God's. Jahn argues from the foregoing conclusion that *Muntu*, or the being with human intelligence, makes use of *bintu* or 'things', and activates the forces that are asleep in them.²²

²⁰ Ibid., 124.

²¹ Ibid., 126.

²² Ibid., 123.

CONCLUSION

One of the institutional goals of the ITC is “to provide a critique, informed by perspectives of African-American and other global interpretations of Western male-dominated theological education.”²³ Reflection, research, teaching and learning, which adopt and live a Sankofan consciousness and lifestyle manifested through orality and ocularity, is a good way of providing such a critique. The ITC needs to take its stand and boldly embrace its heritage as an ecumenical institution with a prophetic voice for the Black family, community, church, school, the African world and the global community. As people of African descent with European and Asian kin, we must focus our attention, on an oppressed, repressed, suppressed, deeply impoverished, unfairly incriminated, under-educated, and frequently destroyed people, whose skin is black, yellow or brown. Critiquing and deconstructing European, male-dominated, heterosexist and xenophobic scholarship, practices and policies may be good but the time has come to recognize that we have God’s gift of *Medew Neter*, *Ubwenge* and *Nommo* and within us is the capacity to proclaim the creative word, that generates, produces and sustains life, stimulates the mind, liberates the community and rejuvenates institutional outcomes. We also have the ability to see intelligently with imagination a reality that is better than what we live in, not just for ourselves, but like the Sankofa bird, we must see this better future as delicate and handle it carefully for our future and unborn generations.

In order to realize this better future and be able to pass it on, backbiting and petty politics must cease as we focus on the work God has called us to do purposefully in the

²³ Interdenominational Theological Center Academic Catalog (2005-2008), 16.

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present historical moment remembering that our ancestors, who are in the heavenly council and clothed in white, are cheering us on. Furthermore, we must face today as our forebears (ancestors) like Harriet Tubman, who imagined a day when her people would be free; Richard Allen, who imagined a time when his people would have their own church; Henry Highland Garnett, who imagined a United States of America, where people of African descent would have the right of self-determination; Jerena Lee, who imagined a day when women would have full and equal access to the pulpit; and Bishop Henry McNeil Turner, who imagined a time when African believers would see God in their own image, to name a few. Each of these visionaries, in my opinion, was a Sankofan person, who preached and fought for what she or he imagined for the future. Like them, we too must become visionaries, who listen to God's voice and the voices of our ancestors and go forth in the power of God, the Holy Spirit and Jesus Christ to proclaim the word. While standing firmly in the present, we must keep looking back to the past and at the same time facing forward.

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