

SANKOFAN PREACHING IN PSUEDO POST-RACIAL WORSHIP SPACES

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“Negroes have always been attracted by the religion of success, although previously the success seemed to be relegated to the world beyond this one. Now that black religion may be equated with success in this world it is in danger of becoming enough.”² In his analysis of the historical attitude of the Black church from “folk religion” to the “civil rights era”, Washington suggests that theological malaise was imminent due to the perception of victory in the struggle against white supremacy. Any pastoral theological response to the project of Sankofan homiletic expression must be interpreted through the hazy lens of spiritual malaise to which Washington alludes; for we are squarely in the midst of a kind of spiritual depression in the Black church/community in this so-called post-racial age that is characterized by the perceived “success” inferred by the election of Barack Obama as president of the US. Milestones and symbolic victories are good, but should not to be misinterpreted to represent success.

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² Joseph R. Washington, Jr., *Black Religion: The Negro and Christianity in the US*, Boston: Beacon Press (1964), 21.

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This election of President Obama, along with the rise of the so-called Black middle class and elite, present as diversions from the project of survival and liberation for the masses of poor Black people.³ In this current climate the psycho-spiritual divide and schizophrenic personality tendencies of African descent persons have been exposed like naked mannequins in Macy's main display window. The Duboisian idea of "double-consciousness" quite enduringly and adequately explains the dilemma.⁴ As such, the Sankofan idea may provide an appropriate modality or mechanism for ushering ancestral, communal messages into the current consciousnesses of Black folks through stimulation of the collective unconscious memory.

Black religion is about resistance to the dehumanizing and marginalizing impact of white supremacy and hegemony upon persons who are melanated and poor.⁵ Indeed, white's militating upon non-whites is normative within the North American Protestant Christian context and throughout the world.⁶ Modern history may be described as a continuing narrative of violence and deception perpetrated against people of color by Christian whites; characterized by the usurpation and exploitation of indigenous people's resources and ultimate cooptation of the religious, academic, political,

³ Eugene Robinson, *Disintegration: The Splintering of Black America*. New York: Doubleday (2010), 5.

⁴ W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Signet Classic (1995), 45.

⁵ James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books (1986) 4-5; Alton B. Pollard, III and Love Henry Whelchel, Jr., eds., *"How Long This Road": Race, Religion, and the Legacy of C. Eric Lincoln*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, (2003), 14.

⁶ Lee Butler, Jr., *Liberating Our Dignity, Saving Our Souls*, St. Louis: Chalice Press (2006), 13.

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economic and social underpinnings of non-white persons sense of reality by persons who classify themselves as white. We are essentially resisting cultural annihilation in an attempt to survive assault upon the collective self. African descent persons in the North American Protestant Christian context co-created Black religion out of the vestigial reminders of their African selves as they engaged an alien world controlled by hostile, psychopathic personalities.⁷ Sankofan Black preaching constitutes the reframing of the “nommo” as divine resistance directives for persons for whom survival and liberation are primary concerns. It signifies cohesion within the unified collective memory of persons struggling for humanity and wholeness in the midst of maafa.⁸

What specifically does Sankofan preaching look back toward? What is the significance of the avian subject? Does the egg in the bird’s mouth refer to the yet unborn? If so, does that mean that we must bless our children with the possibilities of forward flight through connecting them to a spiritual and historical past? If not, why look backward?

The sankofa concept implies that we must begin to learn how to place appropriate value on our past collective experience as God’s perfect creation. Symbolically, what is represented is a bird flying forward while looking backwards.

⁷ Sheila A. Walker, ed., *African Roots/American Cultures*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc (2001), 47-49.

⁸ Janheinz Hahn, *Muntu: African Culture and the Western World*, New York: Grove Press, p. 101; Carroll A. Watkins Ali, *Survival and Liberation: Pastoral Theology in African American Context*, St. Louis: Chalice Press, (1999), 2; Marimba Ani, *Let the Circle be Unbroken: The Implications of African Spirituality in the Diaspora*, New York: Nkonimfo Publications (1980), 12-14.

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For us today, this symbol may be indicative of the paradox, irony and/or complexity alluded to within the Duboisian conceptualization of the Black experience. Knowledge or wisdom is the axiological assumption associated with the egg.⁹ African symbology is generally connected to specific proverbs. The proverb revealed within the symbology of the sankofa bird is that there is nothing wrong with going back and securing that which you had lost. It is important to note that the term “sankofa” is part of the Akan cultural linguistic lexicon. The Akan were/are a cultural group who populate(d) the western coastal region of Africa, which is incidentally the region from which the majority of enslaved persons were captured/stolen during the “trans-Atlantic slave trade.” The logical implication is that this symbol is important for us presently because we may generally be presumed to be the off-sprung progeny of those enslaved Africans who were once enslaved persons. Logic would further suggest that our unified collective ancestral memory would include, among many other noteworthy victories and remembrances, the shameful epoch of our mass enslavement, dehumanization and deconstituitization, out of which we continually claw, even in the here and now. Another question that presents then is “how far into antiquity should we search for ancestral matter to inform our current homiletic expression?” “Can relatively recent expressions of “resistance” be integrated into the sankofan homiletic conversation?”

Conceptually, *Zamani* (Past) and *Sasa* (Present) are natural African descriptors of time. ¹⁰ Translated from a

⁹ Internet Article entitled, *Sweet Chariot: The Story of the Spirituals*, <http://ctl.du.edu/spirituals/literature/sankofa.cfm>, 9 July 2012.

¹⁰ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd Edition, Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers (1989), 17-28.

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psychoanalytical perspective this refers to the idea that the past continually impinges upon the present, to the extent that only the “here-and-now” truly exists. Either the past becomes the present so quickly that the transition is imperceptible or it happens so slowly that we don’t pay attention and so it eludes our immediate awareness. The reality of African spirituality and worldview is that the past bleeds and blurs into the here-and-now as does the sacred bleeds and blurs into the profane. It is the European tendency that has been adapted by African descent persons that bifurcates our lived experience. We are naturally able to intuit a sense of continuum within the project of existence. Waves of past reality flood our consciousness and tend to wash over and cover us with wisdom and insight that has proven to be indispensable for the journey.

Prophetic or proleptic conceptualizations of time envisage the future as continually impinging upon the present making continual preparation the imperative, as well. And so, I expostulate that the best practice may be to allow for the collapsing of and integration of the African past into the potentiality of projected proleptic outcomes that allow for the glory of God to be continually revealed and the survival and liberation of “the least of these” to be reified.

How, then, is the reification of is God’s glory revealed through preaching; and deeper still, how does preaching contribute to the survival and liberation of the oppressed? James Cone, the father of modern Black theology has suggested that the preacher’s proclamation is to be rooted in a “Christian” theological perspective which is essentially

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liberative.¹¹ The glory of God becomes real in the midst of the preaching moment as the reality of liberation is articulated in the public space—no longer merely the mental fodder for internal reflection or whispered in cloistered spaces of bondage among silenced sufferers.

As preacher, the theologian is a proclaimer of the Word, the truth of Jesus Christ as the Liberator of the poor and the wretched of the land. Here the theologian recognizes the passionate character of theological language. It is a language of celebration and joy that the freedom promised is already present in the community's struggle for liberation.¹²

God's eternal gift of freedom is wrapped up in the words of the preacher. The words are the instruments that produce liberty because freedom talk produces liberated actions. If the preacher's words are reduced from the lofty heights of divine liberation to the mundane hell of the status quo the wretchedness of marginalized humanity's plight continues unabated. Sankofan preaching is freedom talk that has been spoken for generations and continues to be re-invented to speak to the souls of present day sufferers.

¹¹ James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers (1975), 8-10.

¹² *Ibid.*, 9.

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